

# FEDERICO VERONESI

With the publication of his first book, Federico Veronesi's wildlife images are gaining wider attention. Keith Wilson hears how his childhood passion became a life-long addiction



## Profile

### FEDERICO IS PASSIONATE ABOUT AFRICAN WILDLIFE

- Based full-time in Kenya, Federico Veronesi is a much-admired photographer of African wildlife, as well as a highly regarded safari guide through his company Image Safaris.
- In 2011 he won the Grand Prize at the Nature's Best Windland Smith Rice Award.
- He also contributes images to several conservation groups, including the African Wildlife Foundation and Cheetah Conservation Fund.
- Federico's first book, *Light and Dust*, is the culmination of 12 years of wildlife photography in East Africa.

All images: © Federico Veronesi





**F**ederico Veronesi spends most days in the African bush, often driving alone with his camera by his side. However, in 2016 he also made time to visit Europe and the UK to promote his new book. Tracking him down for this interview involved several stops, but every meeting revealed something more about this quietly spoken safari guide with an eye and reflexes as keen as those of many of the subjects he photographs...

**You were born and raised in Italy. When did you first go to Kenya?**  
I was a kid. It was a family holiday and I was just six years old. I was so in love with African animals that my parents had to take me there! They also liked animals a lot and were photographers, but for me it was the trip of my dreams.

**When did you next go back?**  
The next time was after university in 2000. I returned on an internship

organised by the Italian embassy. One of the destinations they offered was Nairobi. I thought, 'Okay, let's see what it will be like living there for three months.' So I moved and I just loved it.

**Have you been there ever since?**  
No, I had to come back to Italy for the civil service, that's compulsory. For me it was ten months. I did civil service, not military service. You can postpone it until after university. Then through the contacts I had made in Nairobi I found a job in an NGO in Kenya. I studied economics, so I didn't work in photography, but for an NGO on the financial side. That was in 2002. I worked for four and a half years for this NGO and went on safari for holidays. Every weekend, every holiday, I was in the bush taking photos, and it was such a pain on a Sunday having to leave.

**It sounds like an addiction...**  
It was a total addiction! So at one point I said, 'Okay, let's move here. Let's

← **Previous page**  
**LIONESS**  
Nikon D800,  
Nikon 24-70mm  
f/2.8, 1/500 sec,  
f/10, ISO280

↑ **LIONS MATING**  
Nikon D300,  
Nikon 600mm f/4,  
1/320 sec, f/6.3,  
ISO500

move to the Mara!' I had to find a place to stay in the Mara and just be there all the time. That's how it started. I used to always drive myself, I never went with a guide, so I got to know the park really well, finding the animals myself and following them day after day.

**What sort of camera gear were you using then?**  
I started with a secondhand 300mm f/2.8. It was actually a manual lens, so I wasn't using autofocus at all, it was all manual for me. I was shooting slides then too. It was only when I went to digital that I realised you could also autofocus! After the work with the NGO I had saved some money and that enabled me to move into photography and guiding.

**Which lenses do you use now and how do you decide which ones to use at any given moment?**  
For me, when I approach a subject or situation I immediately know which camera and lens I'm going to use. It's

an instinct, but I have only three lenses at the moment: 24-70mm, 70-200mm and 400mm, all f/2.8. I used to have a 600mm but it was a bit too tight, too limiting. The 400mm is really good and still gives the possibility of adding converters. That's what I'm doing now. With a small choice of lenses I find choosing the right one is an easy thing to do. I have three camera bodies, one for each lens.

**Are they the same bodies?**  
I have D800 and D810 only, so the same body on each lens, the same settings. You don't want to fumble around and change and change. Also, I'm driving so I have to be ready. I have the cameras in the bag at the bottom of the seat, just an arm's length away.

**Your first book has been widely acclaimed. Why did you call it *Light and Dust*?**  
*Light and Dust* is a title I had in my mind for a long time. I've always liked it. Whenever I am in the field I like the

combination of light and dust, animals coming through the dust with the light shining through the dust from behind.

**So the dust contributes to the quality of the light that you like?**  
Absolutely. Some of the most dramatic images come from dust, in my opinion. It gives so much drama and cleans up the background. It leaves only the relevant shapes visible, especially with the light coming from certain angles. It's one of things I am always looking for when I'm photographing. It is evocative of an African atmosphere: there's light, there's sun, there's dust.

**Which species is your favourite subject to photograph?**  
Since I was three years old it has been elephants. Back then, even the cats didn't really excite me that much.

**So what was it like to see elephants in the wild for the first time?**  
Well, the first time was on that trip

↑ **ELEPHANTS AND THUNDERCLOUDS**  
Nikon D70s,  
Nikon 24-70 f/2.8,  
1/400 sec, f/8,  
ISO200

when I was six years old. I was in Meru National Park, in north-eastern Kenya, and there was this lodge and a swamp. We arrived there about lunchtime and there was a terrace overlooking the swamp, and the swamp was completely filled with elephants. I couldn't believe it. There must have been about three or four hundred elephants, it was elephants like wildebeest in the Mara! It was unbelievable. It was 1982 and that was just before the poaching crisis of the 1980s and 1990s.

**Would you see the same profusion of elephants at Meru now?**  
No, nothing like it. There are still elephants but nothing compared to what it was. They are very nervous now, they are so fearful, especially in Meru National Park, which is one of the places in Kenya that has been most affected by poaching. When it happens now, those herds are still one of the most exciting things to see in Africa. It doesn't happen so much in



“Some of the most dramatic images come from dust, in my opinion. It gives so much drama and cleans up the background. It leaves only the relevant shapes visible”



the Mara, but in Tsavo and Amboseli you can still encounter hundreds of elephants together at the same time. Elephants are still my favourite animals, along with big cats. I can now say I have developed a strong feeling for cats!

## I assume you do most of your photography first thing in the morning and in the last light of the day?

Yes, I do. And when it's cloudy. Paradoxically, you get more sightings when it's cloudy than when it's sunny. When it's sunny, yes, I shoot in the morning and evening and very seldom in the middle of the day, unless it's the wildebeest migration when it can be very interesting in the middle of the day as well – with dust around, you can still get very nice images.

When it's sunny, photography can be very difficult, but when it's cloudy things happen throughout the day. The animals become more active, especially the cats. The action becomes very spread out at different moments. A lot of the images from the book were taken when it was cloudy.

## And as cloudy light is more diffused, does that make it easier for photography?

Absolutely. There is not one image in this book that is taken with standard frontal lighting. Not one image. These days, I prefer to shoot in uniform light with clouds, with these skies and active animals. I work with side lighting and backlighting.

## Being out in the field so much, how do you manage your workflow when in camp?

It's tricky. I don't do much in terms of processing when I'm out in the bush because the time is so limited. I stay out shooting about 13 hours a day, either with the guests or just by myself, so I don't really have time to do any processing.

After two or three days, when my memory cards get full, I download the photos to my computer or an external hard drive, so then when I'm in Nairobi or back home I can go through them properly. If I have a bit of time while I'm in camp I might focus on a few images that I feel are really worthwhile, otherwise I edit my shots when I have a bit of time at home.

## How many memory cards do you take and what sort of capacity?

I have 32GB and one 64GB. I have about six or seven cards in total, mostly 32GB, on three cameras.

## Do you delete any images when you're in the field?

I hardly have time because I'm driving when I'm by myself and I'm guiding when I have guests, so I cannot do my own thing. In the evening I might go through the cards and do a bit of deletion of the obviously wrong ones, but that's not much really. I try not to shoot too much, I try to focus on what I really think could turn into a nice photograph, especially having been there so long.

## You're becoming more discerning with experience...

Absolutely, otherwise you get just flooded with images which are of no use. The time is very limited. Interestingly, when I started seven or eight years ago the internet connection in the Mara was much better.

## Really?

Yes, particularly in the camps down close to the river and surrounded by trees. There the network is weak, so I can't do much. In the first few years when I was in the Mara I kept an online diary of what I was seeing throughout the day, so in the evening I would find the time to process a few images and put them on the website with a bit of text, and that went on until about 2012, when I was unable to do it any more because the internet in the park became totally unreliable. The connection is good when you're out in the field because maybe you're at an elevated place, but back in camp it has become very weak, so I don't keep my diary any more.

## The D5 was released earlier this year. Is this a camera you're likely to switch to?

I have the D810 and D800. I think for now I'm not going to go for the D5 because I prefer to have files with beautiful dynamic range and very large megapixel counts that can be turned into huge prints rather than have a very fast camera. Of course, the price is relevant too, so if I should feel the need to switch to a sportier camera I would probably go back to a



Paradoxically you get more sightings when it's cloudy than when it's sunny... The animals become more active



## COMPETITIONS & FESTIVALS

### PHOTO FESTIVALS AND COMPETITIONS ARE BECOMING MORE INFLUENTIAL IN RAISING PHOTOGRAPHERS' PROFILES

#### How important are photo festivals to you?

They're quite important because they get you to know people and people to know you. At the beginning it was very good being in Kenya, but then I had all these images and I realised I wasn't getting them across to people. I'm starting to spend a bit more time in Europe to participate in this kind of thing.

#### Do you enter competitions on a regular basis?

Only the major ones. I have entered Nature's Best, which I won overall in 2011. I've entered the Wildlife Photographer of the Year and this year I have entered the GDT European Wildlife Photographer of the Year. Generally, I don't like to enter competitions too much, but I understand it's another way to get better known.



**WILD DOG PACK**  
Nikon D810,  
Nikon 70-200mm  
f/2.8, 1/640 sec,  
f/5.6, ISO220



**MASAI GIRAFFE DRINKING**  
Nikon D700,  
Nikon 600mm f/4,  
1/1250 sec, f/4,  
ISO400







secondhand D4 or D4s. I have to calculate the benefits against the cost and I think I prefer to stick to a super-high resolution camera.

If a replacement for the D810 came out with more megapixels and greater sensitivity I would go for that. The cameras I use are fast enough already at five frames per second. In my photography I try to do more animals in the environment, showing animals in their setting with beautiful light and beautiful skies and landscape, so speed is not that crucial. It's more the detail and the dynamic range.

#### Was your first camera a Nikon?

My first camera came from my grandpa, a Minolta camera and lenses, an SLR. Then in 1997 I bought my first Nikon, an F70, and that stayed with me until I bought my first digital SLR.

#### Do you have a particularly memorable experience from one of your safaris that has produced a photograph that you treasure?

There have been many. Some in the early days of being surrounded by elephants – elephants fighting, elephants playing – these have been some of my favourite memories. And

probably following the caracals, certain moments with the caracals, realising that I was witnessing something that no-one had seen before, let alone photographed. Some days on the Serengeti kopjes, being surrounded by this wonderful landscape with the light coming through the clouds... it's not a specific moment, but let's say of reaching a moment of complete satisfaction and complete immersion in the wild, especially when no other people are around. For example, when photographing the caracal I was always alone, there was no other car with me, so I was working on this completely on my own. It was magical, finding them day after day.

#### What are the most common mistakes photographers make when they go on safari?

Giving in to anxiety and impatience. You have to accept that today you might not see anything, and not become obsessed by what you expect to see. You have to let nature take its course. Sometimes with radio communications you can rush everywhere – see a leopard there, a cheetah here, a lion there and then

back. Some people are so happy with this because they think, 'I've seen so much in one day.' Sometimes you get lucky and take fantastic pictures of all these, but to me you don't really develop a sense of the animals you're looking at. I much prefer to just stay with one or two animals for the whole safari; sometimes you just struggle to see leopards because there are periods where they are not seen, they're not very conspicuous, and then you come six months later and all you see is leopards! So, for people who come it's good to just see what's there and take in what's there. Don't be obsessed with seeing everything and seeing it all in one day.

#### So going on safari is about enjoying the bigger picture?

Exactly. As you focus on one animal you get so much into its rhythms and its life and you develop such a strong connection with the animal, which you just don't develop when you're rushing everywhere.

**See more of Federico's work and buy his book at [www.federicoveronesi.com](http://www.federicoveronesi.com). Find out about Image Safaris at [www.imagesafaris.com](http://www.imagesafaris.com)**



**GREAT MIGRATION**  
Nikon D300,  
Nikon 17-55mm  
f/2.8, 1/200 sec,  
f/8, ISO200

**CARACAL**  
Nikon D700,  
Nikon 600mm f/4,  
1/250 sec, f/4,  
ISO3200

## THE LURE OF BLACK & WHITE

### IT'S NOT JUST HIS COLOUR IMAGES THAT ATTRACT PRINT BUYERS – FEDERICO IS DEVOTING MORE TIME TO MONOCHROME

#### Your book is a mixture of colour and black and white. Are you becoming more attracted to black and white?

Yeah, I like black and white a lot. I don't prefer one or the other, but now black and white is about half of what I do.

#### When did you start making black and white prints?

I didn't start with black and white until I went to digital in

2005 and 2006. Then I did an exhibition in Nairobi in 2007 and half the images were black and white! I think I have improved a lot in the way I handle black and white.

#### So, will you do a book that contains just black and white photographs in the future?

Yes! It was one of the things I was considering when I was creating *Light and Dust*, but at the same time I didn't want to leave out all my colour stuff. I think for the future, yes. My idea for a second book is to do one on elephants, definitely, maybe three years down the line. I already have so many photographs of elephants.

I sell a lot of prints, so this book (*Light and Dust*) introduces people to my prints.



**LIGHT AND DUST**  
Federico Veronesi's first book features 140 images over 240 pages, with text telling the stories behind the photos. Available in English and Italian editions, RRP £40.

NEXT MONTH: CREATURE FEATURES WITH BRITTA JASCHINSKI