

Top 10 African Wildlife Photography Tips

If there's one thing that makes a safari unsurpassed, it is the ability to capture amazing scenes and portraits of the rich wildlife. Unfortunately, for the average vacationer, professional wildlife photography is not a natural gift, and our wildlife snaps can resemble photos taken in a rush – all thumbs, shadows and harsh light.

To help you get the most out of your safari and make sure that the moments you capture stand the test and can be proudly displayed on your mantelpiece at home, we've gathered the best African wildlife photography tips from our resident experts. Here's what they have to say:

#1: Get out early and stay out late

- Roelof Schutte, Naboisho Camp Manager and Walking Guide

Get out early and stay out late! It's all about the early morning and late afternoon light – the so called “golden hour”!



About this shot:

Herd of wildebeest on the move at sunset – Taken in Mara Naboisho Conservancy. This image was taken very late, long after sunset and I had to wait for the still standing wildebeest to maybe run: And that they did, with dust flying up from their hooves... You have to be patient and stay out late! The herd is moving out of the darkness into the light with a dark sky looming and a treacherous night awaiting them with lions on the prowl.

#2: The lower the better

- Pietro Luraschi, Asilia Tanzania Head Guide & Head Guide Trainer

When taking pictures of wildlife, it is important to be as close to the ground as possible. An eye to eye angle will give the image a much more dramatic impact and will give the right perspective, helping to show the dimension of the animal. The other big advantage of shooting at a lower angle is that the background of the picture will be what is behind the animals and not what is below, and whatever you are taking a picture of will stand out much more.



About this shot:

I tried to find this leopard for an entire afternoon, I could hear the bush hyraxes alarming, but he would not come out. We waited and waited. Finally, he came out, walking slowly on an elephant path. After positioning my car as best as I could, I got as low as possible (not having the door helps) and took this and other pictures until the leopard moved away, just before my entire body started cramping from the uncomfortable position! Regardless, little cramps are not a big price for a good picture.

#3: Put your subject on the side and leave the centre to a detail

- Lorenzo Rossi, Head Guide and Walking Guide and Kwihala Camp

When you try to take a picture of something that looks perfect to your naked eye, but boring on camera, try to rethink and recompose the photo. Focus on a small detail and put it in the centre of the photo and leave the main subject on the side, preferably choosing it in a way the subject is facing the detail. By doing this, you will give “space” to your main subject which in turn will enhance of the detail. Using the same subject but different composition will change your photography.



About this shot:

I find it very difficult to take interesting photos when lions are feasting on a big kill, as everything looks too confusing. The “wakali” pride killed a giraffe in the night and we had been with them the whole day waiting for the perfect late afternoon light. This lioness was popping up from the other side of the giraffe carcass when I was trying to take a pic of another beautiful lioness, then the big paw of another one came up from nowhere... I simply recomposed the shot and that's it.

#4: Look for the eye

- Tony Reumerman, Group Training Manager at Asilia Africa

Portrait photos are often one of our top shots as wildlife photographers and when an opportunity arises we make sure that we 'look for the eye'. The eye of an animal is the key to the soul; they eye depicts the mood, the focus and the intent. For this reason, it is vital that the eye of your subject is sharply in focus.

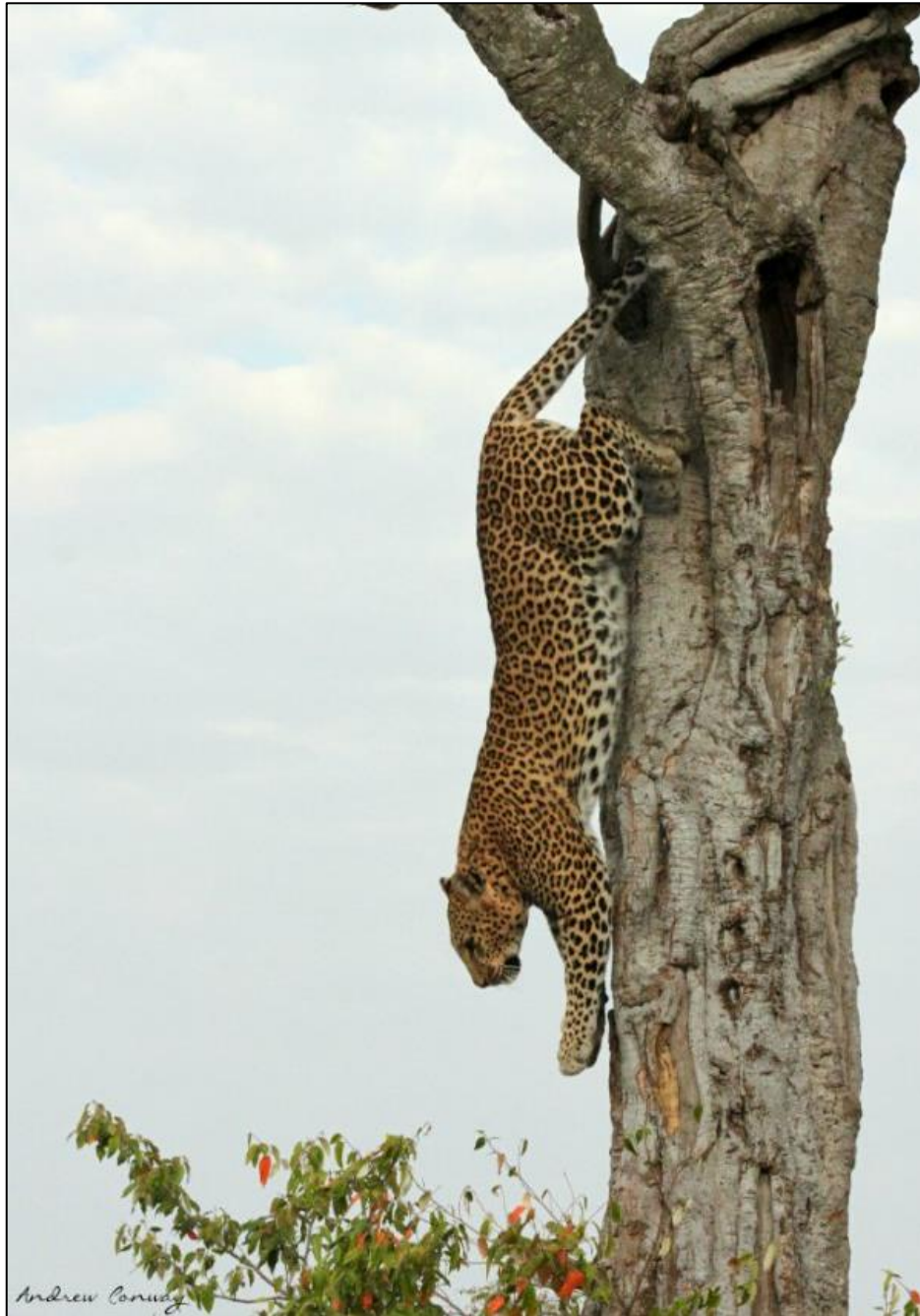
- Look at the animal, look at what it is doing and look for the eye
- Take control of your camera's autofocus and make sure that you focus on the eye; not the nose or the ear or the cheek
- Ensure that your camera is on 'one-shot' autofocus mode for portraits and not on 'AI servo' mode as it can create focussing chaos
- Look at the animal and understand what it's looking at. This will enhance your image
- If the animal is looking in a certain direction, don't cut out the space that it's looking into. Space has a lot of meaning and if included, will enhance the photo and the story



#5: Action! Choose the correct shutter speed

- Andrew Conway, Guest Experience Manager, Encounter Mara

When trying to capture wildlife in action, choosing the correct shutter speed is key! If the shutter speed is not high enough, the image will come out blurry and you have missed your perfect shot.



About this shot:

I took this photo with a shutter speed of 1/1000 of a second, ISO 1600, 100mm f/14.

#6: Be prepared for the perfect moment

- Edward Selfe, Specialist Photographic Guide

As wildlife photographers, we often sit and wait for that perfect moment, sometimes inviting ridicule from traditional safari-goers who have long since moved on! Be sure to use that waiting time to best effect: take a shot of the scene and see how it looks on your camera's screen. It doesn't matter that the image is not the one you really want (it's free to take a photo anyway!) and it will allow you to adjust your exposure settings so that the shot is exactly how you want it when the action happens – a few minutes spent 'practicing' always pays off.



About this shot:

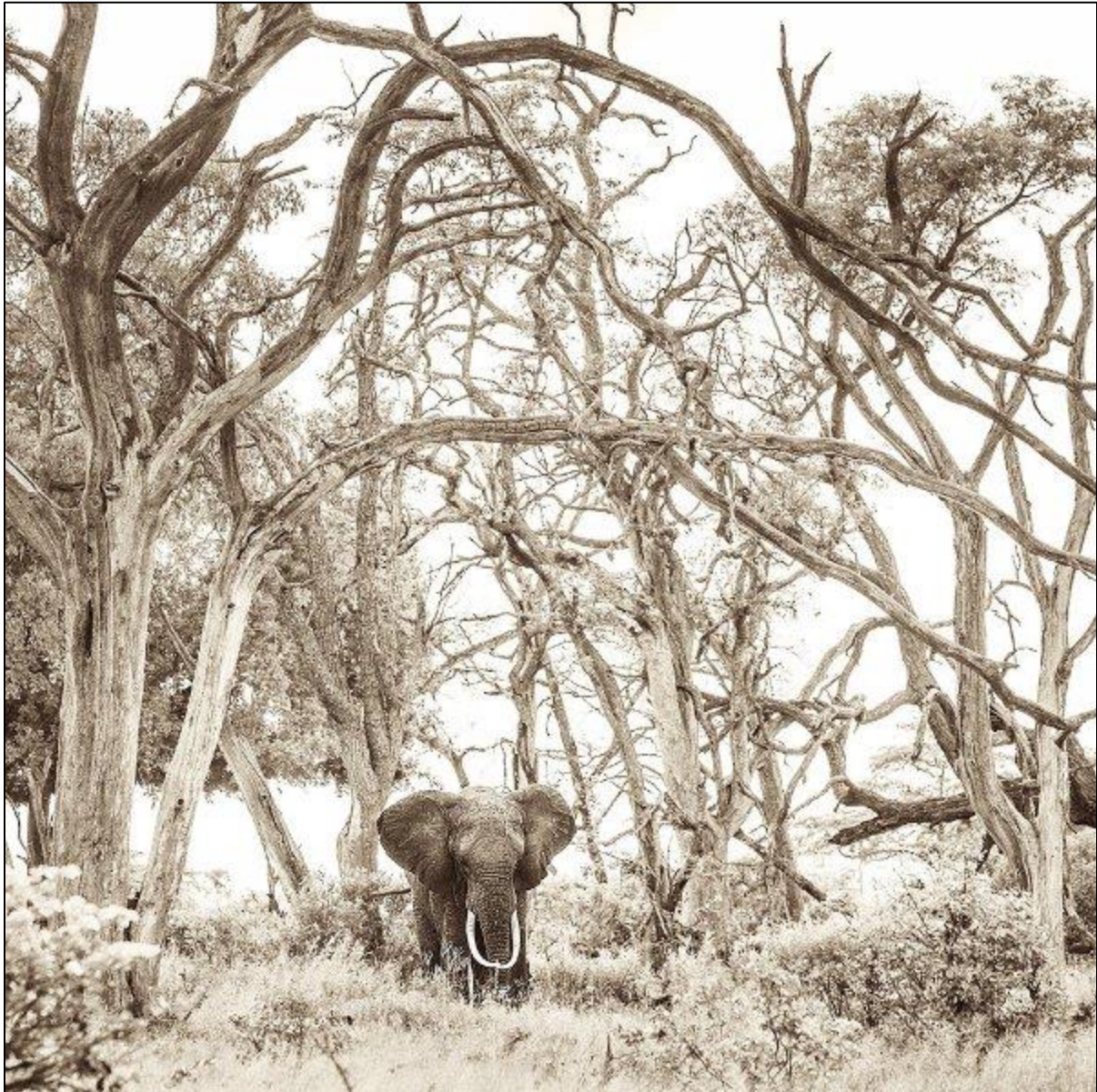
I waited for over two hours for this leopard to descend the branches and start his evening of hunting. Hoping that he would pause for a while on this comfortable horizontal branch, I positioned my vehicle and waited. While I waited, I took repeated shots of the dark Ebony branch (without the leopard!), adjusting the exposure to compensate for the very dark bark and background. I'm glad I did because this image required heavy under exposure to ensure the leopard subject was not too bright.

#7: Look for frames with the frame

- Graham Springer, Photographic Artist and Documentary Cameraman

Using environmental elements to frame your subject can add an interesting compositional aspect to an image. This can serve to place the subject in the context of the environment in a creative way and can give a slightly more detached, voyeuristic feel to your image.

Sharp focus is not negotiable

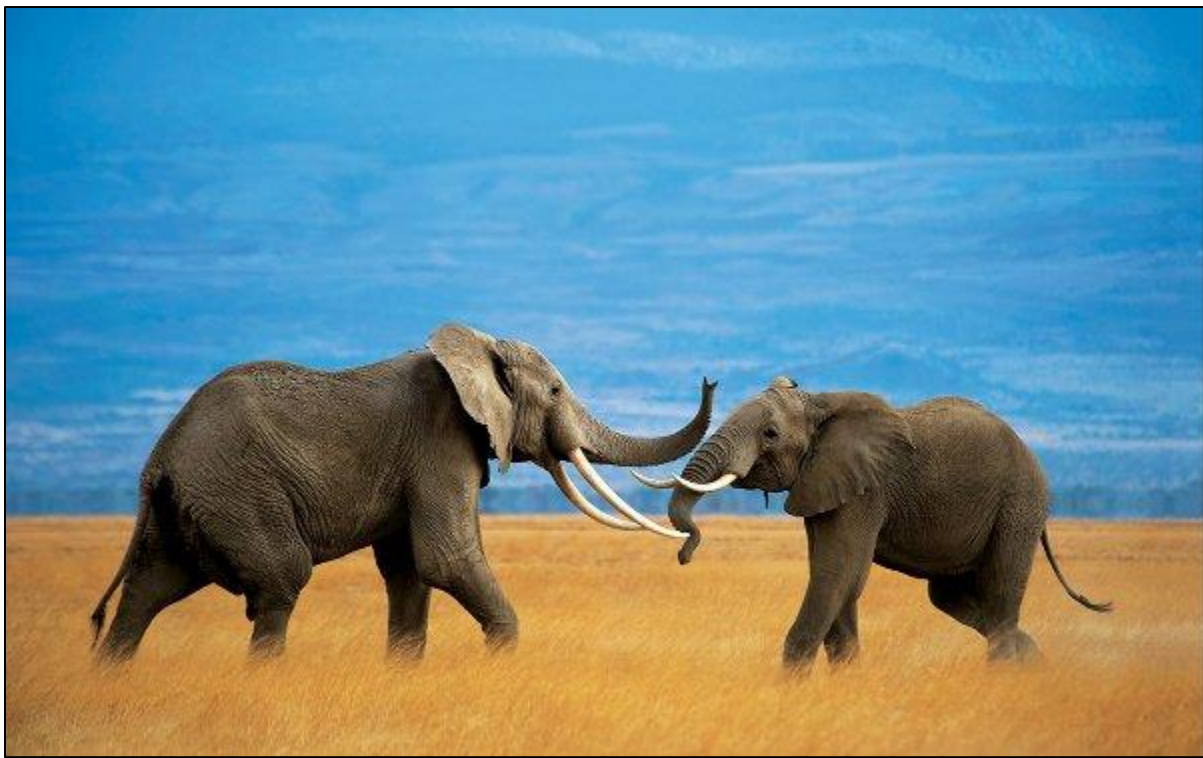


#8: How to capture moving subjects

- Greg du Toit, African Wildlife Photographer and Nikon Ambassador

If your subject is moving, it is critical to change the autofocus setting from 'AF-S' to 'AF-C' for Nikon, or from 'One Shot' to 'Servo' for Canon. Other camera manufacturers will have the same setting to change, but each will have slightly different terminology, so check your manual.

Keeping your moving subject in your viewfinder, pan with it while trying to keep the centre focus selector on its head. For as long as you have the finger depressing the shutter button halfway, your camera's focus will track and even predict your subject's movement. Every few seconds, it is important to remove your finger completely from the shutter button and to refocus your subject.



#9: Panning a shot

- Paul Joynson-Hicks, Wildlife Photographer

My personal favourite, and not entirely mainstream is the 'panning' shot. Technically it's very easy and it's also great fun and you can have many weird and wonderful results.

How to Pan: You need a long exposure – I tend to start around 10/s (10th of a second) and to make your life easier put the camera onto 'A' mode, or Aperture Priority, so you set an aperture which will give you that low shutter speed. Then, as an animal is moving alongside you, simply take a bunch of photos following the animal as it is moving i.e. 'panning' with the camera. The effect you are looking for is movement and here is a pic I particularly love which hopefully gives that impression!

Problems: There is one small problem you might encounter if you try and 'pan' during the middle of the day when it's very bright. You may well find that your highest aperture and lowest ISO still gives you too high a shutter speed.

Two things to do here:

1. Go and have a siesta and don't worry about it, or
2. Put on a ND filter (neutral density) which removes light if you have one.



#10: Work with the environment

- Markus Coerlin, Safari Guide and Camp Manager

I find that a lot of people are always trying to find that clean picture environment where there are no branches in the way, no leaves and no shadows. It is of course true that the crystal-clear image where the subject is bathed in perfect light are the images where one screams a "halleluliah" to the heavens, but more often the conditions are not all that great. More often I find it is the imperfections that are the things that make an image beautiful. Shadows are to animals what mascara is to models. Dust and rain create atmosphere. It is the branches and the leaves, the glare and the dust that often give the emotions to an image. Why not play around with them a little more?

