



## PHOTO MASTERCLASS PART 10

in association with  
**TAMRON**

# REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS



Don't ignore reptiles and amphibians – they can be the most rewarding photographic subjects you'll ever encounter. They occur in a huge variety of unusual forms and colours, but you need a bit of old-fashioned fieldwork and plenty of patience to capture a really special image.

WITH WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER MARK CARWARDINE

**REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS** aren't top of the must-shoot list for many wildlife photographers, but they make remarkably photogenic subjects. The zig-zag markings of an adder basking in early morning sun, a cloud of translucent frogspawn, the wonderful feet of a climbing gecko, the startling colours of a panther chameleon... the range of potential pictures is staggering.

Some species are relatively easy to approach and photograph. These are the sun-worshippers, such as turtles and alligators, and the species that are slow-moving by nature. But the vast majority of amphibians and reptiles are more challenging. Merely finding them is hard. Some live in swamps, under rocks and stones, among thick foliage or in other habitats that make

them difficult to locate, let alone shoot in-situ. Many are nocturnal. They are often well camouflaged and tend to be shy. They require endless patience – for example, after long periods of inactivity, doing little but basking, hiding or waiting, a lizard will scuttle off into the bushes, a frog will hop back into the water or a snake will strike with little or no warning. And finally, just to make things more interesting, some species are venomous.

But photographing amphibians and reptiles need not be as frustrating as it may sound and, as we show this month, the challenge is all part of the fun. Best of all, since herps (a useful colloquialism!) are overlooked by many photographers, just a little effort can produce really unusual and eye-catching results.

▲ Some reptiles cannot be ignored, such as this Komodo dragon by Joe McDonald. This majestic lizard can grow to over three metres long and is a powerful predator on the Indonesian islands it inhabits. A reptile this size should be treated with caution – as you would a large mammal.



## MEET THE EXPERT...

Every issue, our world famous photographers share their knowledge and skills.

### JOE MCDONALD USA

Joe McDonald celebrates 40 years as a wildlife photographer this year. Author of seven books, his work has appeared in every natural history publication in the US.



I caught up with Joe McDonald in Yellowstone National Park, where he was photographing wolves and bears. "But I can't resist turning over the odd stone in search of frogs and snakes," he laughs.

Joe has been photographing amphibians and reptiles for more years than he cares to remember. "When I was a kid, I wanted to be a herpetologist," he says, "and have been fascinated by these captivating and misunderstood animals ever since.

"The challenge is to shoot something out of the ordinary," he explains. "Make an effort to show a blue-tongued skink's blue tongue or a gaboon viper's record-breaking fangs, of course, but then go a step further and capture the essence of the animals, too."

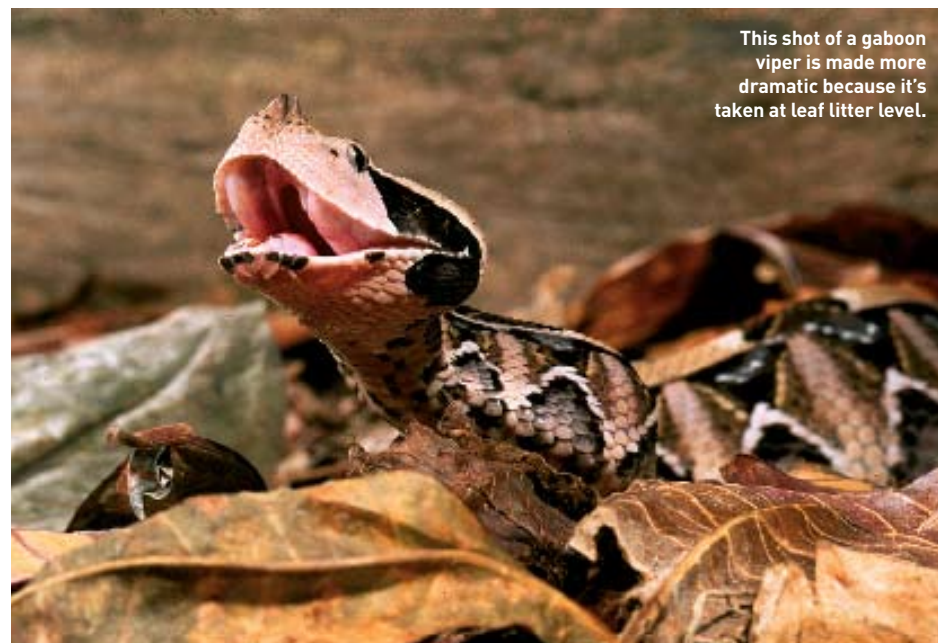
Amphibians and reptiles are often ignored or vilified, but Joe strongly sympathises with them – "which is why I try to show them in the best possible light," he says.

**"I abhor the way some photographers cut corners by cooling animals down in a fridge."**

This requires patience. "I abhor the way some photographers cut corners by cooling animals down in a fridge to make them less active. I believe in as little disturbance as possible – in old-fashioned fieldcraft and patience."

Over the years, Joe has photographed countless frogs, lizards, snakes, turtles, crocodiles and their relatives. But one species had eluded him – the Komodo dragon. It had been top of his wishlist for many years. "But I achieved my ambition recently, in Indonesia, and the dragons exceeded my expectations," he enthuses. "Now I have a new goal – to photograph all the world's sea turtles. There's certainly no shortage of subjects."

## Joe's top tips for reptile and amphibian photography



This shot of a gaboon viper is made more dramatic because it's taken at leaf litter level.

### 1 Establish a degree of intimacy

Looking down on animals from human-height gives them less importance, so it is vital to treat your subjects as equals by getting down to their eye-level or even lower. Most people view amphibians and reptiles from above, so looking them straight in the eye immediately establishes a degree of intimacy and offers a fresh perspective.



Species such as this lesser grey tree frog inhabit dark, damp corners. You may need light to do the animal justice.

### 2 Don't be afraid to use flash

Many wildlife photographers shy away from flash, but when photographing amphibians and reptiles, even in bright sunlight, it's often necessary to use one or two flashguns. These help to fill in the shadows and, by increasing depth of field, enhance the sharpness of the entire image. The trick is to balance your flash with the ambient light to make it look natural.

## YOUR STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE...

Mark Carwardine shows you how to apply the theory to get the perfect picture.

### 1 WATCH THE EYES



- » **Make the eyes** the point of focus. Few close-up pictures of reptiles and amphibians work if at least one of the eyes isn't pin sharp.
- » **Experiment with different lighting** conditions to give the eyes energy and soul. Highlights make them look alive – eyes without highlights can look lifeless. The sun or a well-positioned flashgun will produce the necessary white spot (but if you use more than one flashgun, try not to get more than one highlight – it looks odd).
- » **Place the eyes off-centre**, rather than in the middle of the frame, for a more interesting composition.

### 2 WORK WITH DEPTH OF FIELD



- » **Don't worry** about the limited depth of field (the amount of an image that is acceptably sharp) in close-up photography.
- » **Experiment** with shallow depths of field. It is possible to throw distracting backgrounds and clutter out of focus, for example, or to focus on the eyes alone to make them 'pop' (visually – not literally).
- » **Try working** with a greater depth of field to ensure that the entire head, and even the whole body, is in sharp focus. Bear in mind that depth of field extends one third in front and two thirds behind the point of focus.

### 3 DO SOME RESEARCH



- » **Understand your subjects.** A little natural history know-how is as important as photographic knowledge when shooting reptiles and amphibians. You need to know where (and when) to look for a particular species, or you'll be limited to photographing the occasional animals you stumble upon by chance.
- » **Seek out animals** that are, to some extent, habituated to people, such as in gardens or along nature trails.
- » **Be aware** of venomous species in the areas you are working and make sure you can identify the ones that are potentially dangerous.

### 4 CAPTURE THE ESSENCE



- » **Show the features** that distinguish the animals you are photographing: a cobra with its hood wide open, for example, or a Komodo dragon dribbling saliva.
- » **Wait for the right moment.** A picture of a snake with its tongue out or an alligator with its mouth open is far more interesting than a run-of-the-mill portrait with no real point of interest.
- » **Don't focus exclusively** on frame-filling portraits. Pull back to include some of the animal's habitat as well. This reveals more about your subject and adds a new dimension to your work.



## ESSENTIAL KIT... FLASHGUN

A reptile and amphibian photographer needs a flashgun. In harsh sunlight, flash fills shadows and reduces contrast, in dull light it can put a glint in the eye and add punch, while at night it is the only source of illumination. Flashguns can also be used to freeze fast-moving subjects at speeds of up to 1/40,000 second.

### WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

- » **TTL (Through The Lens) exposure** – this provides correct flash exposures.
- » **Manual override facility** – for fill-flash and high-speed flash.
- » **Recycling time** – the flashgun must charge quickly between shots.
- » **Wireless multiple-flash capability** – not essential, but two or more flashguns can create a more natural-looking portrait (and it's much easier without cables).

### CHEAPER ALTERNATIVES:

- » **Collapsible reflector** – available in silver, gold and white. This is useful for filling in shadows and reducing contrast in close portraits. You could make one yourself with white paper or aluminium foil.

## DOS & DON'TS

- » **DO be patient** – waiting for the right moment can transform an ordinary shot into something more spectacular.
- » **DON'T get too close to venomous snakes** – work with someone who can ensure you are outside their striking distance.
- » **DON'T manhandle your subjects** – only relaxed animals exhibit natural behaviour.
- » **DON'T be tempted to cool animals in the fridge** – a method used by unscrupulous people to make subjects less active.

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## MASTERCLASS CHALLENGE UK...



Britain's reptiles and amphibians can be an elusive bunch. **Geoff Simpson** shows you how to get close to them – and show them in their best light.

### Common toad

Common toads will happily pose, remaining still for long periods. This offers excellent opportunities to capture the essence of 'warty'. Use a lens with a close-up facility for tight, frame-filling portraits or pull back to incorporate your subject in its surroundings to capture unique images of the animal in its environment.



### Common frog

Found in the smallest of garden ponds, frogs offer unending photo opportunities. Use diffused light on bright yet overcast days to prevent harsh shadows and burnt-out highlights. Look for simple, uncluttered compositions that will add impact to your images. If your frog sits still long enough, try using a polarising filter to reduce glare.



### Common lizard

Most lizards rely on speed and agility to survive. Being quick, they will undoubtedly test your skills as a photographer – you will need patience and persistence. Pre-set everything in advance and approach slowly – once you find your subject, you probably won't have time to adjust anything as lizards tend not to stay still for long.



### Grass snake

Knowing where to look is half the battle in photographing any snake species. The other half is controlling depth of field with a creature that often exceeds 60cm in length. Grass snakes move quickly, so increase your chances of success by looking for them on cool days in early summer, when they'll often be basking near garden compost heaps or water.



## MASTERCLASS READER PHOTO OF THE MONTH

Now it's your turn. Use our experts' hints and tips to take portraits of any British reptile or amphibian – many will still be active this month, though most will be looking to hibernate soon, so act quickly. Upload your best images to our website and they could be published in *BBC Wildlife*.

### HOW TO ENTER

Log on to [www.bbcwildlifemagazine.com](http://www.bbcwildlifemagazine.com) and click on Photo Masterclass, then follow the instructions to upload your images. Closing date: Wed 22 November.

**RULES** 1) The competition is open only to amateur photographers. 2) Up to two entries only per category. 3) Entry of a picture constitutes a grant to BBC Worldwide to publish it in all media. 4) Entries will be judged by *BBC Wildlife*. 5) The winning image will be published in the January 07 issue. 6) No correspondence will be entered into and winners will not be notified. 7) Entries will not be accepted by post or email.



### 'ANIMALS IN THEIR ENVIRONMENT'

**WINNER: Philip Naylor**

This is an exceptional image in a very competitive class. The beautifully lit rippling surface emphasises the constant movement of the jellyfish's world.