



PHOTO MASTERCLASS PART 14

BLACK AND WHITE PHOTOGRAPHY



Strip away the colour and a well-composed photograph will often increase in power. The very best black and white photos have a pure graphic quality that oozes emotion and energy. This month, learn to think creatively and take photographs of wildlife that really tell a story.

WITH WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER MARK CARWARDINE

LITTLE MORE THAN a century ago, a photographic safari meant a strenuous expedition with an entourage of porters manhandling enormous brass-bound cameras, heavy lenses, glass plates and plate-holders, cumbersome tripods and even a portable darkroom complete with developing chemicals in large glass containers. And all that just to take a few black and white pictures.

But while black and white may be the oldest form of photography, its power will never fade. In the fine-art world, monochrome prints tend to command the highest prices – though perhaps this isn't surprising when you consider those wonderful historic images of California's Yosemite Valley by Ansel Adams, for example, or the gritty realism of certain iconic black and white news pictures.

Yet many people still view black and white photography as old-fashioned and insignificant. If we no longer watch black and white tv, why should we shoot in black and white? The answer is simple: there's much more to shooting monochrome than merely snapping without colour. Unable to hide behind a splash of colour, the impact of a black and white photograph depends on other key ingredients, such as powerful composition, dynamic perspective, graphic design and a striking play of light and shade. In other words, you have to think more creatively to shoot great black and white pictures.

Far from being a poor-man's colour, black and white offers its own special challenges and rewards. There is no better way to hone your photographic skills.

▲ *Clashing Elephants* was the runner-up in the Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2005 (Nature in Black and White category) and is Martyn Colbeck's all-time favourite photo. He used a slow-shutter speed to convey the sheer energy and power of the battling bulls. The same image in colour would simply not have had the same impact.



MEET THE EXPERT...

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

MARTYN COLBECK UK

Martyn Colbeck is an award-winning film-maker and photographer. Working mainly for the BBC, he has contributed to many of the best known blockbuster wildlife series.



Martyn Colbeck's eyes light up when he talks about black and white photography. "I have loved black and white since I first started taking pictures in 1980," he explains. "Colour just doesn't have its pure, graphic quality."

He always shoots on film, producing black and white negatives that are processed in London. "Then they are printed by hand at great expense," he laughs.

Martyn sees the world in black and white. "All day I am looking at everything around me," he admits, "wondering if it could work as a black and white image." He stresses that the essence of good black and white photography is simplicity. "Pick your subject carefully, concentrate on the graphic qualities and keep it simple."

In 2005, Martyn successfully combined his passion for black and white photography with his other great love – elephants – when

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he won the Nature in Black and White category of the Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition. "I'll never forget taking that picture of elephants in the shadow of Mount Kilimanjaro," he reminisces,

"because it was taken on my birthday. But I don't think it would have had anything like the same impact in colour."

One of Martyn's next ideas is to photograph humpback whales in black and white. "They remind me so much of elephants," he says, "because they have a very similar spirit." So, after working on a film about meerkats during the summer, Martyn is hoping he may be able to make it to Tonga to explore the possibilities.

Martyn Colbeck's top black and white photography tips



Black and white picks out every fold of this elephant's skin. Printing on a high-quality medium will keep the image sharp.

1 Understand the technical side of black and white

It's important to appreciate the fabulous opportunities available when printing black and white. The tones in a monochrome print can be infinite and it takes a lot of practice to visualise how they will look in the final image. Martyn himself favours fine art fibre-based prints, which last for decades.



Maribou storks make a stark, graphic image against the light rising above Mount Kilimanjaro.

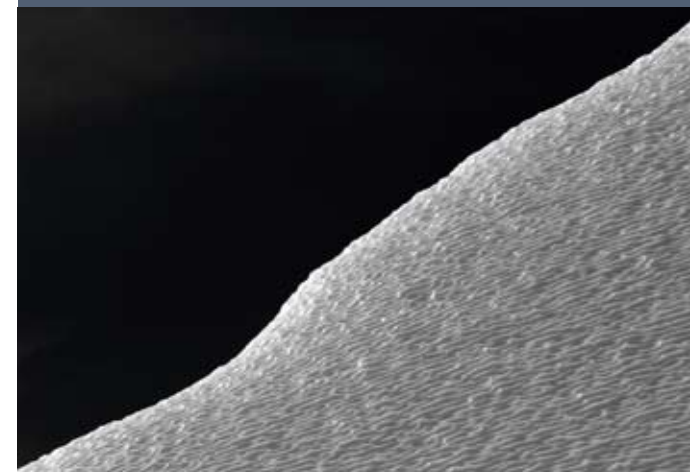
2 Don't forget the light

Black and white photographers need beautiful light as much as photographers shooting in colour. Dusk and dawn are good times to work because the low sun highlights detail in textures. But, perhaps most of all, the essential lighting ingredient for black and white is contrast, which is something many colour photographers try to avoid.

YOUR STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE...

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

1 SHOOT DIFFERENT KINDS OF BLACK & WHITE



- » **Don't just rely on film** for black and white – try shooting digital black and white as well.
- » **Ignore the setting** on your digital camera that allows you to select whether your image is taken in colour or black and white. Shooting in black and white is an irreversible process – you can never go back to colour – and converting a colour image to monochrome on your computer will give you more control over the finished product.
- » **Experiment with different ways** of converting colour to monochrome digitally.

2 MAKE IT NOISY



- » **Select a high-speed film** (or high ISO sensitivity on your digital camera) to increase the amount of grain or digital noise in the picture. These are little specks, likened to the hiss and crackle in a poor sound broadcast. Usually unwanted in colour images, they can add an interesting effect in black and white.
- » **Try enlarging** a small part of a picture to show more obvious grain or noise (most of which will appear in the mid-tone grey areas).
- » **Experiment** – grain and noise works better with some subjects than others, and certainly doesn't work all the time.

3 THINK IN BLACK AND WHITE



- » **Remember the importance of losing colour.** What might appear distinct and obvious in colour often becomes ambiguous once the colour is removed, so thinking in black and white is crucial.
- » **Keep it simple** – think graphically and artistically to design each picture specifically with black and white in mind.
- » **Look for strong lines,** bold and simple shapes, dynamic perspectives, distinctive outlines, dramatic shafts of light, interesting textures and the kind of contrasty lighting conditions normally avoided by colour photographers.

4 SEE TONES RATHER THAN COLOURS



- » **Anticipate** how the scene in front of your camera will translate into shades of grey. This takes experience because some colours, such as reds and greens, reproduce as nearly identical greys.
- » **Look for simple tones** – ultimately there could be just two (pure black and pure white) with no shades of grey in between. Keeping it simple encourages you to concentrate on composition.
- » **Look for a range of tones** – the number of intermediary shades of grey is almost limitless, so look for potential images with rich tonal contrast (as many distinctive greys as possible).



ESSENTIAL KIT... COLOURED FILTERS

Black and white pictures convert different colours into shades of grey. The exact shades depend on the darkness or lightness of those colours, but also on their wavelength. This is why many black and white photographers use strongly coloured filters. These don't produce colour, of course, but instead alter the rendition of those greys.

As a general rule, a filter lightens its own colour and darkens others (a red filter, for example, will make red roses appear lighter and blue sky appear darker). And by doing so, it increases the contrast of the image. Without using a coloured filter, there's a risk that colours of the same intensity appear as the same tone of grey, and the picture will be lifeless.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

- » **Strong colours** – a basic set of filters might include yellow, orange, red, blue and green. Red filters are particularly useful in landscape photography for dramatising the sky – they make clouds stand out.
- » **Filter strength** – coloured filters come in different strengths so it will be necessary to experiment to get an idea of their effects.

CHEAPER ALTERNATIVES:

- » **Shoot in digital** – dispense with filters altogether and get a similar effect by making all the necessary adjustments on your computer.

DOS & DON'TS

- » **DO hold a coloured filter** to your eye to see what effect it will have.
- » **DO look for scenes** with lots of contrast and good tonal gradations from white through to black.
- » **DO aim for rich blacks and luminous whites** to make your pictures 'pop'.
- » **DON'T forget that sometimes it is the colour that makes a picture work** – the same picture won't necessarily work in black and white.

MASTERCLASS CHALLENGE UK...



From your garden to your nearest nature reserve, there are endless opportunities for great black and white photos. Expert **David Hosking** offers some pointers.

Marsh harrier

Image-stabilising lenses have made the photography of birds in flight much easier. Position yourself so your shooting angle is above or below the horizon to avoid a distracting line through your image. The tree hide at RSPB Minsmere gives a lovely downward angle, with reeds creating a mottled tone behind the dark shape of this harrier.



Frosty leaves

While bright sunlight often helps make a picture, it can burn out whites, so seek misty mornings where the defused light will enhance detail in the whites while retaining a good range of grey tones. Under-exposing by half or even a full stop can help retain detail. Depth of field is much more important on close-up images, so work with higher apertures.



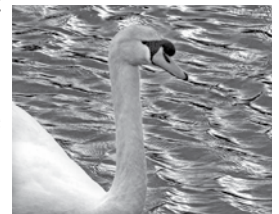
Blackbird

Dark coloured birds, such as this male blackbird, always look good in black and white – it's the surrounding environment that affects the end result. Soft, low-contrast light will keep a good tonal range in leaf litter as well as still showing detail in the bird's black plumage. Don't forget to look for a highlight in the eye and a more pleasing side view of the head.



Mute swan

With almost no colour in this scene, it works well in black and white. The bright reflections from the rippling water can be emphasized by increasing the contrast before printing. The swan's white plumage stands out well against the greyish water, and by zooming in on the bird's neck, the image benefits from some strong straight lines.



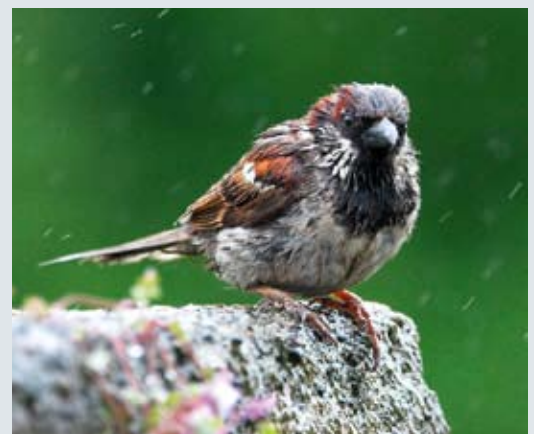
MASTERCLASS READER PHOTO OF THE MONTH

Now it's your turn. Use all our experts' hints and tips to take great black and white photos of British wildlife. Use David's ideas for inspiration, though you don't have to photograph the same subjects. Upload up to eight images on our website and the winning shot will be published in *BBC Wildlife*.

HOW TO ENTER

Log on to www.bbcwildlifemagazine.com and click on Photo Masterclass, then follow the instructions to upload your images. Closing date: Friday 16 March.

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 June issue. 6) No correspondence will be entered into and winners will not be notified. 7) Entries will not be accepted by post or email. 8) Image file names must include your full name.



'WET WEATHER WILDLIFE' WINNER: Paul Flackett
Paul's image of a soggy house sparrow is full of character. The bird is nice and sharp, and a long exposure has perfectly 'streaked' the falling rain.