



## PHOTO MASTERCLASS PART TWO

# MAMMAL PORTRAITS

in association with  
**TAMRON®**



In our second masterclass, we're tackling mammal portraits – one of the trickier subjects for the amateur (and expert) wildlife photographer. But by knowing your subject intimately, using your imagination and employing our expert tips, you can improve your pictures dramatically.

WITH WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER MARK CARWARDINE

**IT'S HARD TO ESTIMATE** how many mammals have their portraits taken in a typical day. A lot. It's easy to see why: there are literally thousands of potential subjects roaming every corner of the globe and, in theory at least, all they have to be doing is sitting or standing relatively still. The concept is simple. So why do most mammal portraits have little or no impact? Even if they are technically perfect, they are rarely more than mere record shots that lack a sense of immediacy and intimacy and do little more than fill the frame.

The truth is that mammal portraiture is more challenging than it appears. Few forms of nature photography require more lateral and creative thinking, and an imaginative approach is essential to make a mammal portrait really eye-catching. Just take a look at the work of a few top wildlife

photographers to appreciate the infinite number of ways they tackle their subjects to produce images that really stand out.

The trick is to stop and think. By all means fire off a few pictures to get something 'in the bag', but every time you come across an animal posing perfectly for its portrait, let your imagination run wild. Ask yourself 'What if I try this... or this... or this?' and your work will improve overnight.

This month, we're investigating the key ingredients of a great mammal portrait. How do you capture the character or spirit of the subject? Where should the animal be positioned in the frame? We'll be learning how to 'see' a great photograph (you can learn – you don't need an artistic gift) and exploring ways of turning an otherwise ordinary snapshot into something much more compelling.

▲ For more than two decades, Frans Lanting has been documenting wildlife and our relationship with nature in environments from the Amazon to Antarctica. He portrays wild creatures, such as this female black rhino and her calf in Tanzania, as ambassadors for the preservation of complete ecosystems.





## MEET THE EXPERT...

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

### FRANS LANTING USA

Frans Lanting's illustrious career as a wildlife photographer spans more than two decades; he was named Wildlife Photographer of the Year in 1991.



Frans Lanting tackles mammal portraits in many different ways: close-up and wide-angle, in good light and bad, and with or without eye contact. But he has two golden rules.

First, he stresses the importance of attitude. "We are primates and impatient by nature," he says, "but the best advice I can give is to resist the temptation to move around too much. Pick a situation and stick with it." Unlike many other photographers, when photographing mammals Frans likes to work out in the open – in full view of his subjects. "Intimacy is a crucial ingredient in good mammal portraiture and it comes more easily if the animal knows you are there. It does, of course, have to be comfortable with your presence – and that takes time. I like to watch from a distance, observing an animal's behaviour and

**"Intimacy is a crucial ingredient in good mammal portraiture and it comes more easily if the animal knows you are there."**

gauging its mood before attempting to move closer. This helps me to predict its movements and gives me some insight into its personality."

His second rule is to become familiar with your subject. "The best way to improve

your photography is to pick a species and work with it until you feel you've exhausted all the possibilities. Over the years, I've photographed the same animals time and time again, yet I never feel as if I've 'been there and done that'. There is always a new way of looking at a familiar subject," he says as he prepares for another expedition to Africa, "and this challenge forces me to think more creatively."

## Frans Lanting's top mammal portrait photography tips



Elephant at watering hole, Botswana.

### 1 Work your subject

With so many natural and photographic variables – from the quality of light and choice of lens to facial expressions and vantage points – the range of portrait picture-making opportunities is phenomenal. The longer you work with one subject, the wilder your imagination and the better the end result.



Lioness yawning, Kenya.

### 2 Be patient

Ultimately, a great mammal portrait is down to serendipity – one brief moment when all the key ingredients come together in a single shot. Taking time to observe and understand your subject makes it easier to predict such a defining moment. Resist the temptation to snap away and move on too quickly.

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

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

### 1 FOCUS ON THE EYES



- » **The key point of focus** in a mammal portrait should be the eyes. In most award-winning pictures they are pin sharp. Be careful to set your autofocus on the centre of the forehead and not the tip of the snout or beak or the eyes will be out of focus. Strong eye contact is by no means essential, but it can be more revealing and intimate and tends to evoke an immediate emotional response.
- » **Place the eyes off-centre** rather than in the middle of the frame for a more interesting composition, and experiment with different lighting conditions to give them energy and life.

### 2 WATCH THE GAZE



- » **A mammal portrait** without eye contact can also be effective. It works precisely because the subject is looking away, making the viewer curious about what has caught its attention. But this is only successful if there is sufficient space for the animal to look into.
- » **A common mistake** is to photograph the animal looking out of the frame, making the composition feel uncomfortable and crowded against the edge of the picture. The solution is simple. If you are photographing an animal looking left, place it towards the right of the frame and leave plenty of empty space for it to gaze into.

### 3 KEEP IT SIMPLE



- » **A clean and simple composition** will create a more powerful and rewarding image. The trick is to remove anything you find off-putting and inessential to the fundamental concept of the image.
- » **Watch for distractions**, such as twigs, boulders and fence posts, in front, behind and either side of your subject – then eliminate them by moving around for a better camera position.
- » **Alternatively, try throwing the background out of focus** by selecting a wider aperture on your lens. This will also add a sense of depth and a natural quality to your picture.

### 4 EXPERIMENT, EXPERIMENT, EXPERIMENT



- » **Take all kinds of pictures.** Experiment with long exposures, narrow depths of field, different points of focus and tilted branches (diagonal lines often look more dynamic than horizontals and verticals).
- » **Shoot from a low angle** at or below eye-level for intimacy.
- » **Try isolating your subject** with a telephoto lens or by getting up-close with a wide-angle lens – the difference is astonishing. Look for unusual details and minutiae.
- » **Make a concerted effort** to switch your camera to vertical format and think 'in the round' as if you are walking around your subject.





## ESSENTIAL KIT... FLASHGUN

Flash can be invaluable in portraiture. A subtle and controlled amount of flash can fill shadows and reduce contrast in harsh sunlight or put a glint in the eye and add punch in dull light.

### WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

- » **TTL (Through The Lens) exposure** – provides correct flash exposures almost every time (though there should be a manual override facility for fill-flash).
- » **Power** – the flash must be sufficiently powerful to light distant subjects.
- » **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 (much easier without cables).

### CHEAPER ALTERNATIVES:

- » **Collapsible reflector** – in silver, gold and white, this is useful for filling in shadows and reducing contrast in close portraits.
- » **Home-made reflector** – make your own with white paper or aluminium foil wrapped around a sheet of cardboard (crinkle the aluminium first).

## DOS & DON'TS

- » **DO** plan in advance. Seek inspiration from photos in books and magazines.
- » **DO** shoot in early morning, late afternoon or subdued overcast light.
- » **DO** get down low for a 'worm's-eye view'.
- » **DON'T** put your flashgun on the camera hotshoe (the slot on the camera body). To avoid 'red eye', use a connecting cable to position it away from the camera.
- » **DON'T** put pressure on unwilling animals to pose for you.

## In association with TAMRON



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# MASTERCLASS CHALLENGE UK...



British mammals can be quite hard, so photographer **Niall Benvie** explains how to capture some of our most abundant species and sets you a challenge.

## Rabbits (and hares)

Rabbits are always alert. Improve your chances of getting close (for a frame filler, you need to be less than 10m away) by approaching on your stomach into the wind. Find a raised roadside bank to photograph rabbits at their level from the car.

Some rim-light adds colour to ears and gives fur texture, while a ground-level perspective creates intimacy.



## Common (and grey) seals

To avoid getting your gear wet, seek out animals hauled out on rocks at low tide. Wet seals can blend in with the surrounding stone, so get as low as possible and use a blue sky as background. A turbulent, foaming sea creates drama, contrasting with most seals' fixed stares. Be ready for the moment when one yawns and the picture comes to life.



## Red deer

With their size and familiar profile, deer are perfect for informative habitat shots. Compose a picture around the animal that draws in shapes from its environment. Shoot around dawn and dusk for attractive light. Modern autofocus makes it easy to track a running deer, but for a sense of speed, slow your shutter down to 1/4 or 1/8 second and pan as it runs.



## Red & grey squirrels

Red and grey squirrels can be attracted with peanuts. But be quick as they feverishly stash them. Be ready for two photo-moments – when they have a nut and are about to leave (one second) and when they have finished eating and look around (two seconds). Squirrel tails are attractive backlit and a catchlight created by flash or sunlight adds sparkle to the eye.



## MASTERCLASS READER PHOTO OF THE MONTH

Now it's your turn. Use all our experts' hints and tips to take the portraits recommended by Niall Benvie. Upload them on our website and they could be published in *BBC Wildlife*. You don't have to replicate Niall's images, just use your new skills to take a picture of a rabbit, hare, seal, red deer or squirrel.

### 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: Friday 14 April.

**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.



Niall Benvie

### THIS COULD BE YOUR WINNING PICTURE

Next month, we will reveal the winner of our first masterclass challenge (Wild Places) right here and explain why their photograph won. Don't miss it.