

MAGICAL MOMENTS

Article and Photography
by Piper Mackay, Editor

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Images by Piper Mackay.

Below: Cheetah mother Singo and her cubs, Masai Mara, Africa. Canon EOS 5D Mark II, focal length 500mm, f/10 at 1/1250 second, evaluative metering mode, auto exposure mode, ISO equivalent 1000.

Left Top: Cheetah mother and young, Kenya, Africa. Canon EOS 1D Mark III, focal length 500mm, f/7.1 at 1/1600 second, evaluative metering mode, auto exposure mode, ISO equivalent 100.





Cheetah mother Singo's cubs, Masai Mara, Africa, by Piper Mackay. Canon EOS 1D Mark III, focal length 700mm, f/13 at 1/2500 second, evaluative metering mode, auto exposure mode, ISO equivalent 2000.

As nature photographers and artists, we are enthralled with the world. Though most of us shoot a rich variety of scenes, we each have a special place—a favorite locale that always spikes our creative juice. A close friend of mine excels at shooting wild horses; another colleague revels in capturing the beauty of Washington's vineyards; other friends visit certain mountain areas year after year for the rush of capturing alpine beauty.

For me, magic happens in Africa. It is a place that I fell in love with from the minute my feet touched its rich red soil back in 2004. I now spend about three to four months a year in Eastern Africa surrounded by its renowned wildlife and rich cultural experiences. Africa is a tapestry and a teaching experience—both in photography and in life.

Too many times we arrive at a new destination with preconceived notions of a place, filled with expectations of what we think our experience will be and even what our images will look like when we return. That's not a bad thing as these expectations can drive our passion to get through the jet lag and race to the heart of the action. Firing off frames as soon as we find our first subject seldom results in those magical award-winning moments.

Rushing through a magical place with preconceived expectations leads to missing the deep experience of a place—what might be the trip of a lifetime. So when I arrive in Africa, rather than flying from the city into a reserve, I drive. This gives me time to decompress from modern life and sink into the ambience and beauty, the rhythm of Africa. Slowing

down allows me to experience the photograph and photograph the experience. It's a way of letting go of the mental images I've built up on the long trans-Atlantic flight and start to hone in on the magic of what I'm seeing.

Year after year I return to Kenya for the great migration with the expectation of sitting along the Mara River to get that stunning image of a massive crossing. And I do have many images of large crossings but not of the massive crossings I have seen photographs of and also read about. The reason for this is that every year there seems to be an event more extraordinary than the crossing I know will happen again next year.

Magic Moment #1: Such was the case in 2010 when I arrived in the Mara. I had formed a pretty aggressive eight-day agenda of images I hoped to capture. But then it all changed. Near my camp lived Singo, a beautiful cheetah, proud mother of six cubs just under two months old. The cheetah mortality rate is 95 percent, one of the highest among the big cats in Africa and I knew I was witnessing a miracle in the Mara. The agenda went to the wayside and I spent the bulk of my eight days observing and photographing Singo and her brood. Over that next week I photographed this mother hunting for game and feeding the cubs. I watched them crossing rivers and at play—climbing trees, jumping on mom and each other. At one point, five of the cubs climbed a log and they all looked at me with the sixth cub peeking over the top of the log—pure magic. By the end of my eight days, I had a complete story and an experience of a lifetime.



Cheetah mother Singo and her cubs, Masai Mara, Africa, by Piper Mackay.

Above: Canon EOS 1D Mark III, focal length 700mm, f/13 at 1/2000 second, evaluative metering mode, auto exposure mode, ISO equivalent 2000.

Below: Canon EOS 1D Mark III, focal length 700mm, f/13 at 1/2000 second, evaluative metering mode, auto exposure mode, ISO equivalent 2000.





Cheetah mother Singo and her cubs, Masai Mara, Africa, by Piper Mackay.

Above: Canon EOS 5D Mark II, focal length 120mm, f/17 at 1/640 second, evaluative metering mode, auto exposure mode, ISO equivalent 500.

Below: Canon EOS 1D Mark III, focal length 160mm, f/18 at 1/500 second, evaluative metering mode, auto exposure mode, ISO equivalent 800.



Photographic instinct—especially in a place like the Masai Mara so lush with exotic wildlife—tells us to race from lions to cheetahs to leopard cubs filling our CF card. Driven by our excitement and expectations, too many times we come upon a great subject—cubs at play—and saturation shoot in a short period of time. When we have enough, off we race—after all, time is short and the light is going. Lost is the opportunity to put down the camera, watch the interaction and patiently wait for that special moment. This is the difference between a reactionary photograph and a beautiful photograph you create that reflects the experience of what you see. Taking the time to check the light, the background, and composition can be the difference between photographing an extraordinary subject and creating an extraordinary photograph.

Magic Moment #2: One of the reasons I enjoy returning to a location over and over again is learning not only the behavior of the subject but the behavior conducive to that environment. It is a real advantage to be able to predict behavior, then properly prepare for the experience (and hope luck accommodates them both). Once in Samburu, I drove along the river hoping to get a group of elephants crossing the river. From experience, I knew the herd came down from the foothills every morning as the temperatures rise. Waiting on the elephants, I spotted a group of giraffes in the distance heading toward the river. I anticipated they would come to the edge to drink and lined up the vehicle for the perfect shot. It turned out to be a group of 19 giraffes! Some of them did drink but they all crossed the river heading directly towards me. Just before reaching the edge of the river some of the group gathered together deciding which way they should go. They were so close I switched to my 24-70mm lens. It was an incredible moment captured and experienced.

Magic Moment #3: During a visit to Amboseli, I was fairly confident that a herd of zebras were going to cross my path on their way back to the foothills for the night. I set up, patiently waited and was rewarded with the herd kicking up the dust back-lit against the beauty of an African sunset. The brilliance in the oranges was almost unbelievable even when seeing it with my own eyes. Investing the time to become familiar with an area and learning animal behavior can be extremely rewarding.

Magic Moment #4: Even in your special place, things will go wrong. During another trip in the Masai Mara, I had visions of large herds of elephants and zebras crossing over the dusty plains and decided to make a run to Amboseli. It had been a long day driving directly from the Mara; tired, I grabbed too much stuff and my 500mm attached to my 7D Canon body (thankfully it was not the Mark III) slipped from my hands and crashed onto the stone-paved parkway. I took a deep breath, picked it up and said positive affirmations. Nothing was rattling, a good sign, but my intuition was that I had knocked it out of calibration. I headed to my room to take some test shots and troubleshoot. Alas, I was right; though things appeared sharp through the lens, they downloaded soft as the view on my laptop confirmed.

My goal was to photograph the herds through the dust for a moody artistic look, and generally when shooting through mist, dust or fog, you are not going to get a sharp focus on your subject anyway. I was prepared and had two other bodies with me, the 5D Mark II and the 1D Mark III. I put my 500 on my 5D and my 70-200 with the 1.4 teleconverter on my Mark III and decided I was good to go. Given this situation I looked upon it positively as a way to keep me focused on my vision. Granted, I had images that were painful to examine,

knowing if they had been sharp, they would have been keepers, but the images captured with my soft focusing 500mm lens of the herds in the dust were stunning and artistic.

So what do you do when you drop your 500? Keep shooting, unless of course the glass shatters or it fails completely. Things like this happen in the field. Don't let it ruin your trip. Take a deep breath, regroup, and think outside the box.

Photographing in Africa is exhilarating, and at the end of the day you just want to drop off your gear and relax with a sundowner and share the excitement of what you saw. But first and foremost, download and review your images. Look at your exposure, backgrounds and composition. Are they distracting? Are safari vehicles in the background that you did not notice because you were too excited about the lion hunting? Could the shot have been more magical if you had moved the vehicle to sidelight or backlight your subject? Did you shoot mostly tight portraits or horizontal images? Taking just a half an hour to quickly view your work from that day can allow you to change course and improve your image quality.

So when does magic happen? My experience over and over again shows that it's when you slow down. A large quantity of images only counts if they are snapshots documenting everything you saw and did on your vacation. Learn a place or go with someone who does know the place. Separate the ordinary from the extraordinary. First experience what you photograph; you'll find it will lead you to more compelling imagery.

Then the magic begins.

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Piper's web site: <http://www.pipermackayphotography.com/>

In the event you are also a reader of our Apple iPad app or the PDF that we sell on our web site at www.naturephotographermag.com, you will find a slide show of additional images by Piper Mackay which appeared in the Winter 2012 edition of our electronic magazine.

Images in Africa, by Piper Mackay.

Facing Page Top: Zebras at sunset, Amboseli. Canon EOS 5D Mark II, focal length 500mm, f/5 at 1/400 second, evaluative metering mode, auto exposure mode, ISO equivalent 100.

Facing Page Left: Giraffes, Samburu National Reserve, Kenya. Canon EOS 1D Mark III, focal length 150mm, f/8 at 1/800 second, evaluative metering mode, auto exposure mode, ISO equivalent 400.

Facing Page Right: Elephant baby and mother, Masai Mara. Canon EOS 5D Mark II, focal length 500mm, f/6.3 at 1/250 second, evaluative metering mode, auto exposure mode, ISO equivalent 1000.

*"Magic is believing in yourself,
if you can do that,
you can make anything happen."
Johann Wolfgang*

