

CREATING IMAGES WITH IMPACT

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Today, more than ever, it is important to go a step further and create dynamic images with impact. Wildlife photography is one of the most exciting genera of photography. The subjects are fascinating, unpredictable, and with your heart racing you have only a second to press the shutter and capture that amazing moment.

The difficulty of photographing such exciting subjects is that it is too easy to take an average photograph of an exotic subject. Take the Masai Mara, the mecca of Africa, with the highest concentration of predators and wildlife anywhere in the world. This is a number one destination for most wildlife photographers.

Dropping into the Mara during the height of the migration season is just about the most action-packed exciting adventure a person can experience.

You wake before dawn to grab some biscuits and coffee and head for the Land Rovers to be the first out of the gate, excited by what the day will bring. Your first destination is the Marsh Pride. Last night you were told there was a sighting of their six lion cubs only a month old. On the way, you stumble across a cheetah with her young cubs and stop to grab some shots before continuing on. You arrive where the lion cubs are now out of the ravine and playing in the morning sun. The radio begins to crackle with the news of an extremely large

herd gathering. There is sure to be a crossing soon, so the race is on to make it to the river in time and get into position.

The next two weeks fly by with your adrenaline rushing. What you saw was so great! Yet, when you review your images, they just don't seem to have the impact of what you experienced. When going to a place for the first time, especially one as exciting as Kenya, you are so thrilled by what you are witnessing you just snap away at the action. Forgotten are all the skills of what makes an image stand out.

You would be surprised at how often I hear a photographer say, "I just transfer my files and don't look at them until I get home. I don't want to have to lug my laptop." That is the biggest mistake a serious photographer can make! At the very least you should spend 15-20 minutes scanning the hundreds of shots taken. Check to see what is happening in your backgrounds. Are all your shots horizontal and are most of your shots really tight with your subjects filling the frame? What is happening with the lighting in the majority of the images, are numerous images over- or underexposed? You do not need to do any editing or post processing, but you are doing yourself a great disservice by not reviewing what is happening with your shooting style. Taking just 15 minutes to check through your images will allow you to make any corrections and improvements in your shooting technique.

To demonstrate how a few tips, simple skills and ideas can create more variety and impact to your photographs, I have put together a series of images of wildebeest, generally a very boring animal that is quite drab in color. This is to help illustrate how light, mood, and motion can bring powerful visual impact to your images. The first image is chosen in the off chance you do not know what a wildebeest looks like and to remind you that simplicity is also powerful.



Wildebeest, Masai Mara, Kenya, Africa, by Piper Mackay. Canon EOS 5D Mark II, Canon EF70-200mm F2.8L IS lens, focal length 200mm, f/11 at 1/1250 second, evaluative metering mode, auto exposure mode, ISO equivalent 400.

Plan to go at the best time. Many species migrate or give birth at a particular time in a particular location. Plan your trip around these extraordinary events. This was photographed during the annual wildebeest migration crossing the Mara River in Kenya. It has been said to be the greatest wildlife show on earth. Remember to pull back and capture the whole story. The mass of the animals and the dust kicking up gives big impact to this image. Large numbers of any species will add impact.



Wildebeest migration crossing the Mara River in Kenya, Africa, by Piper Mackay. Nikon D4, AF-S VR Zoom-Nikkor 200-400mm F4G IF-ED lens, focal length 550mm, f/8 at 1/800 second, center-weighted metering mode, auto exposure mode, ISO equivalent 200.

Remember to go in tight but also shoot some verticals. Watch for great compositional lines. In this photograph the herd goes all the way across the top. The action is coming diagonal from left to right with the herd crossing along the bottom of the image. This keeps the view in the photograph longer and makes for an interesting image.



Wildebeest migration crossing the Mara River in Kenya, Africa, by Piper Mackay. Nikon D4, AF-S VR Zoom-Nikkor 200-400mm F4G IF-ED lens, focal length 550mm, f/11 at 1/1000 second, center-weighted metering mode, auto exposure mode, ISO equivalent 1000.

Backlighting and side lighting. It is natural to want the beautiful golden light on a wildlife subject as you see in the first photograph, so take the safe shot and then get creative. To make the image more dramatic, try side lighting as shown in the image below it. Side lighting works great on the wildebeest beards and it also creates some rim lighting. Rim light is when side lighting creates a lit edge around the subject. Side lighting also allows you to still capture the details in the subject.



Wildebeest, Masai Mara, Kenya, Africa, by Piper Mackay.

Above: Canon EOS 5D Mark II, Canon EF500mm F4L IS lens, focal length 700mm, f/5.6 at 1/500 second, evaluative metering mode, auto exposure mode, ISO equivalent 640.

Below: Canon EOS 5D Mark II, Canon EF500mm F4L IS lens, focal length 700mm, f/5.6 at 1/640 second, evaluative metering mode, auto exposure mode, ISO equivalent 640.



Backlighting generally creates a silhouette. You expose for the sky and the foreground will go black. You want to be lower than your subjects to be able to separate them from the ground. Otherwise, the horizon line will run through the middle of your subject and your subject will look like big blobs with no legs. Usually you want to separate the animals, nothing touching each other, or again they will look like one big blob. However, I loved the dramatic sky and how the line of wildebeest was perfectly framed between the horizon and dark clouds.



Wildebeest, Masai Mara, Kenya, Africa, by Piper Mackay.

Above: Canon EOS-1D Mark II, focal length 200mm, f/11 at 1/320 second, spot metering mode, auto exposure mode, ISO equivalent 1250.

Below: Canon EOS 5D Mark II, Canon EF70-200mm F2.8L IS lens with 1.4x teleconverter, focal length 215mm, f/4.5 at 1/2000 second, evaluative metering mode, auto exposure mode, ISO equivalent 200.



Look for moody elements such as dust and fog. Animals in the dust with great lighting make a very impactful image. This is another great time to add backlighting or side lighting. Backlighting will generally create a silhouette so I frequently prefer to use side lighting in these situations. The light filters through the elements for dramatic light but you can still make out some details in your subject.

Add motion to your image with a pan blur. In the first image you can see the animals are in motion; notice I have a little side lighting going for added impact. However, by panning with the animals to create a blur in the background it shows a more dramatic sense of speed and motion. To shoot a pan blur you need to slow down your shutter speed, 1/60-1/30 generally works, depending on the speed of your subject. You need to focus on the eye/shoulder of your subject while panning at the same speed as your subject, and holding down the shutter. Yes, this takes lots of practice and you will delete hundreds of images, but when you get one that works it is very exciting. This is something you can practice anywhere so when the opportunity comes you are ready.



Wildebeest, Masai Mara, Kenya, Africa, by Piper Mackay.

Above: Canon EOS-1D Mark III, Canon EF500mm F4L IS lens, focal length 700mm, f/6.3 at 1/400 second, evaluative metering mode, auto exposure mode, ISO equivalent 200.

Below: Canon EOS-1D Mark III, Canon EF500mm F4L IS lens, focal length 215mm, f/16 at 1/60 second, partial metering mode, auto exposure mode, ISO equivalent 100.



Here is another set of images to show the impact and difference between a fast shutter speed stopping the action and a pan blur to show motion. Notice in the second image the front wildebeest are in focus while the rest of the image has a slight blur giving the viewer a more powerful sense of motion.



Wildebeest, Masai Mara, Kenya, Africa, by Piper Mackay.
 Above: Nikon D4, AF-S VR Zoom-Nikkor 200-400mm F4G IF-ED lens, focal length 550mm, f/11 at 1/800 second, center-weighted metering mode, auto exposure mode, ISO equivalent 1000.
 Below: Canon EOS-1D Mark III, Canon EF500mm F4L IS lens, focal length 215mm, f/14 at 1/40 second, partial metering mode, auto exposure mode, ISO equivalent 63.



Slow down your shutter speed. Stopping the action of animals running through water with a high shutter speed makes a dramatic image, but slowing down the shutter speed will add a fresh impact and variety to the story. Different from a pan blur, here you hold the camera still and slow down the shutter. This allows for the moving subject to create the effect of motion. Water works great as well as tall grass that is blowing or branches moving in a tree. In the first image my shutter speed was very high to stop the action and the explosion of water. In the second I slowed down the shutter to create a different mood and show the spray of the water. In the third I slowed down the shutter even more to really show the blast of the water.

Right: Wildebeest, Masai Mara, Kenya, Africa, by Piper Mackay. Canon EOS-1D Mark III, Canon EOS-1D Mark III lens, focal length 200mm, f/7.1 at 1/1600, evaluative metering mode, auto exposure mode, ISO equivalent 540.



Left: Wildebeest, Masai Mara, Kenya, Africa, by Piper Mackay. Canon EOS-1D Mark III, Canon EOS-1D Mark III lens, focal length 200mm, f/40 at 1/40, evaluative metering mode, auto exposure mode, ISO equivalent 540.

Right: Wildebeest, Masai Mara, Kenya, Africa, by Piper Mackay. Canon EOS-1D Mark III, Canon EOS-1D Mark III lens, focal length 200mm, f/40 at 1/30 second, evaluative metering mode, auto exposure mode, ISO equivalent 640.



These simple tips will not only add impact and variety to your images, but will make them stand out in a sea of imagery. NP