



TEN THINGS YOU CAN DO
RIGHT NOW
TO IMPROVE YOUR
WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY



Burrard-Lucas
Photography

WILL BURRARD-LUCAS



Preface

Wildlife photography takes a long time to master. In order to consistently take photographs that capture people's attention, you need to know your equipment inside out, have an intimate understanding of your subjects and have started to develop your own vision and style. However, there are some things that you can start doing **right now** that will have an instant positive impact on your images. Here are my top ten...

Get low

1

A good wildlife photograph is rarely taken looking down at the subject. The camera is almost always on the same level as the subject or lower.

This is important for two reasons:

- 1) It gives the subject greater presence and helps the viewer connect with the animal.
- 2) It increases the distance between the subject and the background, which helps throw the background out of focus and draw attention to the subject.

If possible, lie on the ground to get as low as possible. If you are on safari, then shoot out of the window rather than from the roof of your vehicle. I often sit in the footwell of the vehicle to get down lower!



Keep your shutter speed up

2

Most of the time, wildlife is photographed with a telephoto lens. Long lenses exaggerate camera shake because a small movement of the camera results in a large movement of the picture frame. Therefore, you need to use a faster shutter speed to get sharp shots. The longer the lens, the faster the shutter speed needs to be.

Nowadays, many cameras and lenses have Image Stabilisation, enabling you to push the boundaries further. However, a good rule of thumb is to keep your shutter speed faster than 1 over the the focal length of the lens. For example, with a 400mm lens, you should keep your shutter speed faster than 1/400th second. With a 200mm lens then 1/200s should be fine. Generally with wide-angle lenses, I tend to use 1/50s or faster.



Focus on the eyes

You've probably already heard that you should focus on the eyes. If the eyes aren't sharp, it is very hard for the viewer to connect with the subject. Sometimes, for portraits, you may also want to try to get the tip of the nose in focus too.

Eye contact can help the viewer to connect with the subject. However, it is not always necessary. I also like candid photographs where the animal is looking off into the distance or focused on another subject in the frame.

If the animal isn't looking at the camera, you should aim to have it facing and/or looking towards the centre of the frame. For example, if the animal is looking to the right then place the animal on the left-hand side of the picture. See the image on the "Preface" page for an example.



Shoot in RAW & understand your histogram

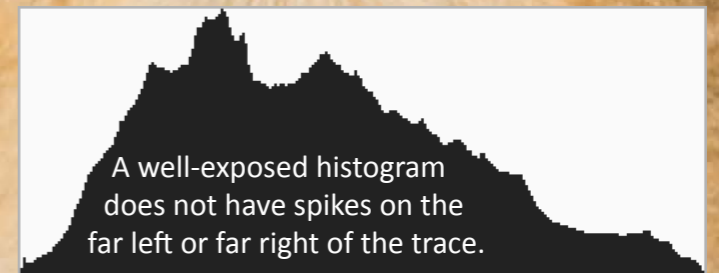
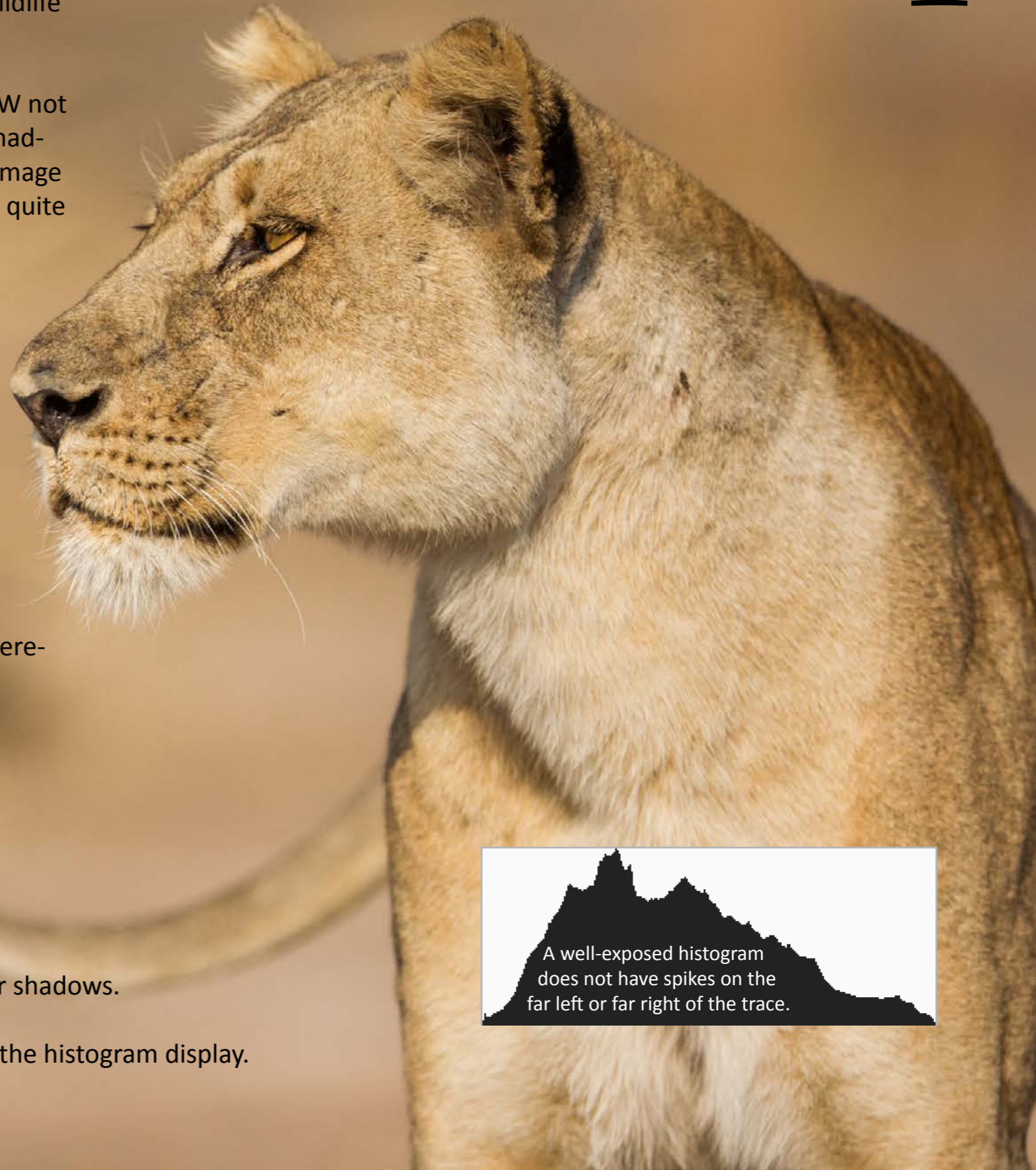
It is important to get your exposure correct because with wildlife you may not get a second chance if you mess it up!

One of the most important things you can do is shoot in RAW not JPG. This will ensure your camera maintains details in the shadows and highlights, so that you can darken or brighten the image later if necessary. This gives you more flexibility if you don't quite perfect the exposure in-camera.

When you are out shooting, it can be hard to see if the image is well exposed on your camera screen, particularly if you are in bright sunlight. This is where your histogram is useful. The histogram is a graphical representation of the brightness of the pixels in your image. The graph shows dark pixels on the left and bright pixels on the right. The height of the trace shows how many pixels are present at each brightness level.

If you have a spike of pixels at the black-end of the histogram, you will not be exposing detail in the shadows and therefore you won't have much leeway to brighten the image on the computer. Likewise, if pixels are bunched at the right of the histogram, you will probably be losing detail in the highlights. You should aim to expose your image so that the majority of the pixels fall in the middle zone of the histogram and you aren't clipping details in the highlights or shadows.

Check your camera manual if you are not sure how to view the histogram display.



Light is key

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Good light can turn an average photo into an extraordinary photo.

The best time for photographing wildlife is around sunrise and sunset. The light is most beautiful in the ten minutes after sunrise and before sunset. The light rapidly becomes cooler and harsher as the sun moves up in the sky, however, it is still very good for at least an hour or so at the beginning and end of the day. Good light is so important that I aim never to miss a sunrise or sunset whilst out in the field.

There are two ways to use beautiful sunrise and sunset light. Usually, photographers will shoot with the sun behind them, so that their subject is bathed in lovely warm light. However, you can also experiment with back-lighting your subjects, particularly if the light is low and strong (for example, when heavy rain has washed all of the dust out of the air).



Consider the background

The background can often make or break a photo. First and foremost, you want to make sure it is clear of any distractions such as bright spots or messy foliage. You also should ensure your subject stands out from the background and is attractively framed if possible.

Often just moving slightly to the left, right, up or down can shift the subject in relation to the background and completely change the composition and framing. Always take a moment to consider if your shot could be improved by adjusting your position.



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Leave space around your subject

Tight portraits certainly have their place but they are just one type of photograph you can take. Sometimes it is possible to be more creative, and make a more interesting image, by leaving space around your subject. This allows you to:

- Use elements of the landscape to frame your subject.
- Show the animal in its environment.
- Perfect your composition by cropping later.

Try experimenting with different focal lengths. Once you have a frame-filling portrait, why not switch to a medium range zoom or wide-angle to capture more of the environment?



Spend longer with your subject

I used to stay with an animal until I got a shot I was happy with and then move on to the next subject. This resulted in a number of good shots of varied subject matter. However, I've now found that sticking with one subject for longer and really working it has made a big difference to the quality of my images.

The longer you spend with an animal, the more chance you have of witnessing (and capturing on camera) something special. In addition, once you have taken the obvious shots, you will become more creative as you try to find new photographs to take. Ultimately this is what leads to achieving truly notable images.

Be prepared

Being prepared will increase the odds of you capturing great images. This starts with knowing your gear. You should understand the main features of your camera and how they work so that in the field you can adjust your settings without having to think about them.

You also should research your location and your subject. If you have a good understanding of these, you will be able to start predicting behaviour and your chances of being in the right place at the right time will improve.

Finally, you should also try to envisage the shots you want to take. If you have an idea for a few unique images then you can make sure you have the necessary equipment and have thought about your camera settings in advance. This is the process I went through for many of my most “original” images.



Process your images

Unfortunately, in reality, the images you get straight out of your camera are not as good as they could be. You really need to tweak aspects such as saturation, colours, brightness and contrast in order to get them to “pop”.

I use Lightroom to process my images and I highly recommend it.



As with many things, practice helps when it comes to image processing. It used to take me ages to process my images and even then they didn't turn out very well. Now, after years of practice, I am much quicker and know more instinctively what adjustments I need to make. The best way to learn and improve is to dive in and experiment.

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