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Categories

- Magazine Subscription Offers (2)
- Advertise with us (1)
- Digital Darkroom (4)
- Film School (5)
- Camera Clubs 2010 (6)
- Photo Zone (14)
- Test Zone (5)
- F Stop (2)
- Downloads (8)
- 2009 (16)
- 2010 (26)
- Emily's People (6)

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Professional photographer STEVE BLOOM is known the world over for his stunning wildlife images. Here he explains how he creates atmosphere in his images and brings his subjects to life, plus what it is like to capture animals in the wild. By SEAN SAMUELS.

The eye of Steve Bloom is drawn to the aesthetics of drama. He isn't interested in the biology of the animal he is photographing or the technical process behind taking pictures. What he wants to capture is raw emotion that the viewer can understand in a way that reveals how all living creatures share these feelings. By deliberately trying to acknowledge sentience in animals, he can show how at a root level, they behave, think and feel just like us.

Often he pre-visualises the images he wants and is delighted when he is able to get what he first saw. On other occasions there are surprises along the way and he has to adapt, which he likens to musicians improvising. There isn't a right or wrong image to be made, only one that feels right. In these moments he has to think very quickly about his position and what might be the best angle from which to shoot. A long lens and a close-up shot aren't always the best combination. The image might not have the same impact as one with the animal in context with its environment, so when shooting it's not just a case of watching the animal, but also looking all around that makes for an exciting image.

With the image of a lone elephant walking through a wood on the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal, Steve had first noticed how the sunlight broke through the trees. He then planned to make an image with an Indian elephant walking towards him. "However, the following morning when I got up, the light was terrible and the beams

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were'n't shining through so I started to walk away, but as I turned around, in seconds everything changed and came together. I shot it on a 50mm lens so I could get everything in."

Steve chose to shoot wildlife as an antidote to city life. For him it was like delving into another world, another culture, and he became hooked after making a 10-day safari in 1993. This was an undiscovered world for him and he became very curious about it. He trained and worked as a printer in the 1970s in South Africa, where he also photographed people living under apartheid. After he left for the UK in 1977, his images were used by the anti-apartheid movement to make people aware of what was going on and Steve wasn't able to return until after apartheid had been abolished. While in the UK he set up his own professional photo lab in London servicing advertising agencies and photographers. He was constantly looking at images being used in adverts and what was being sold, which gave him a good grounding in what worked in photographs and, more importantly, what sold.

Then came the safari that changed his life. With a portfolio of 20 pictures from that first trip, Steve placed the images with Planet Earth Pictures. He was in luck. At the time the agency was bringing out the first-ever wildlife stock photography catalogue. Stock photography was a huge growth industry and his pictures really caught on. This was the first time that he realised it was possible to earn money from photography. So at the age of 40, with a family and a mortgage, he decided to go full time. His decision horrified a lot of people close to him, but his wife Kathy was very supportive.

Trips to Monkey World in Dorset and a primate park in Holland made him realise he needed to go and shoot monkeys and apes in action in the wild. This led to his first big project, a book called *In Praise of Primates*. Nearly a quarter of a million copies were printed in 10 languages. This gave Steve the confidence to go ahead with a second book, but with photo shoots proving expensive he needed a way to make regular money from his images. The answer was to create his own picture library, which he still runs today with Kathy. She is in charge of the library and builds up a network of potential picture buyers and clients while Steve is out writing books or looking for different subjects to photograph and new ways to capture them.

"In a world where billions of photographs are taken every single day, I want to contribute to moving photography in a new direction. I know I don't have the answer, but that's the challenge. It is about learning how to see everything and anything. When seeing we experience different viewpoints and the challenge of making a photograph is to get past the point of where you are looking at something for a split-second, and on to thinking how you can use long exposures, perhaps to give different aspects and different viewpoints. I probably learn more from somebody like Picasso than I do from photographers. He really understood how people see, how to break that down and reconstruct it. He understood how the brain works and how we perceive things."

When attempting to capture atmosphere, Steve goes out every day, early in the morning and late in the afternoon when the sun is low for a greater saturation of colours and longer shadows. He shoots on a Canon EOS-1Ds MkIII because it is sealed very well against the elements and dust. In a tough environment you need a tough camera and while image quality on less expensive cameras may be just as good, Steve believes they aren't as robustly built. For his shoots he takes at least two camera bodies and a range of lenses from fisheye to 500mm. He backs up every night and misses the old days when he could just label his films and then look up at the stars.

"These days I find I'm fiddling around with computer screens at night when I should be doing other things. It's a nuisance but on the other hand it allows you to assess what you have been taking." Steve's sources for inspiration come from everywhere. He might be watching a documentary on television and think the subject is interesting. He will then try to find out where the pictures were taken before researching guides that might be able to help him.

"I usually hire locals who know the land, know the ropes and know what can and can't be done, rather than bringing people from the UK. It's also less expensive to do it this way. For local knowledge I might contact the producers of television programmes to ask if they know of any fixers, because usually there will be people whose job it is to provide film crews and photographers with assistance. It gets you over language problems, it gets you over the cultural difficulties and they can advise you on what you can and can't do. In terms of the wildlife they will tell you how you



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can or can't approach an animal. For example, when you get near to grizzly bears, it's best to make a loud noise so they know you are there. They don't like being surprised. With other animals it's the opposite. With gorillas you adopt a submissive approach with a slightly bowed head so the gorilla doesn't feel threatened and want to have a fight with you."

With improved cultural knowledge, Steve might have been better prepared for the shot of a panda at the Wolong breeding centre in the Sichuan region of China. It was winter and freezing cold, but the doors to his shelter had to be left open. Steve tried to close them, but was told off. Closing the doors meant bad spirits could not be blown away. He caught a really bad cold that night.

Local knowledge can also help to avoid costly mistakes. If you are planning to photograph an event, it's important to get the seasons right. Steve wanted to photograph macaws in the Amazon because they visited a particular wall of clay to find the minerals they needed. It would have provided a beautiful image of the brightly coloured birds together. Steve was just about to leave when he realised he had booked his trip for the wrong season. Steve funds every project himself. He supports his family entirely from his photography – a challenge in the current environment. He is able to do so via a number of channels such as books, the photo library (which is a primary source), talks and after-dinner speeches, print sales and exhibitions such as his Spirit of the Wild outdoor installation, which is shown all over the world.

The installation is free to the public, but does help to get across his environmental message and make people aware of his work. A recent exhibition in Copenhagen attracted 1.4million visitors. This may sound like an enormous number of people potentially willing to invest in images, but it is extremely tough for photographers of all levels to make money today, and Steve believes the internet is causing an oversupply of pictures. Cameras continue to go up in quality, but down in price, making it easier for somebody with an interest in wildlife photography to have a go. However, he recommends that people also have an alternative job. "I would not advise anyone to give up everything they have to go out and photograph wildlife. There has to be an economic net for them to be able to survive. That said, I do think they should go in at the deep end and get stuck into photographing animals in the wild. I find capturing animals in activity to be the most difficult photography of all if what you are trying to do is catch the spirit of an animal. To photograph a tiger in captivity and then to see one in the wild are two completely different experiences."

Many photographers will tell you the best images reveal something hidden about the subject or, at the very least, raise questions in the viewer's mind. Steve Bloom's images do both. To look at his images is to be transported to the continent on which they were taken. He captures pivotal moments in the lives of the animals he photographs and in doing so offers the viewer the chance to form a relationship with the subject that is both empathic and dramatic. The emotion may vary from happiness to sadness, anger or fear, but these are experiences common to us all. It is this factor, combined with a beautiful aesthetic, that makes his work stand out.

BIOGRAPHY

Steve's work has been featured in magazines such as LIFE, Time and National Geographic. His own books have been published internationally and he has lectured at events for the Royal Geographical Society, Natural History Museum and Edinburgh Book Festival. He has won international prizes for his work, including the Power of Photography award, and the Golden Eye of Russia and Lucie awards.

www.stevebloomphoto.com

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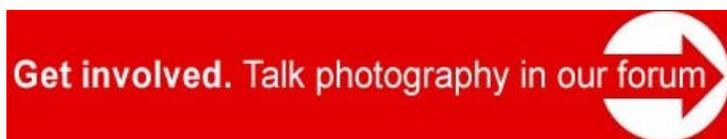
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