

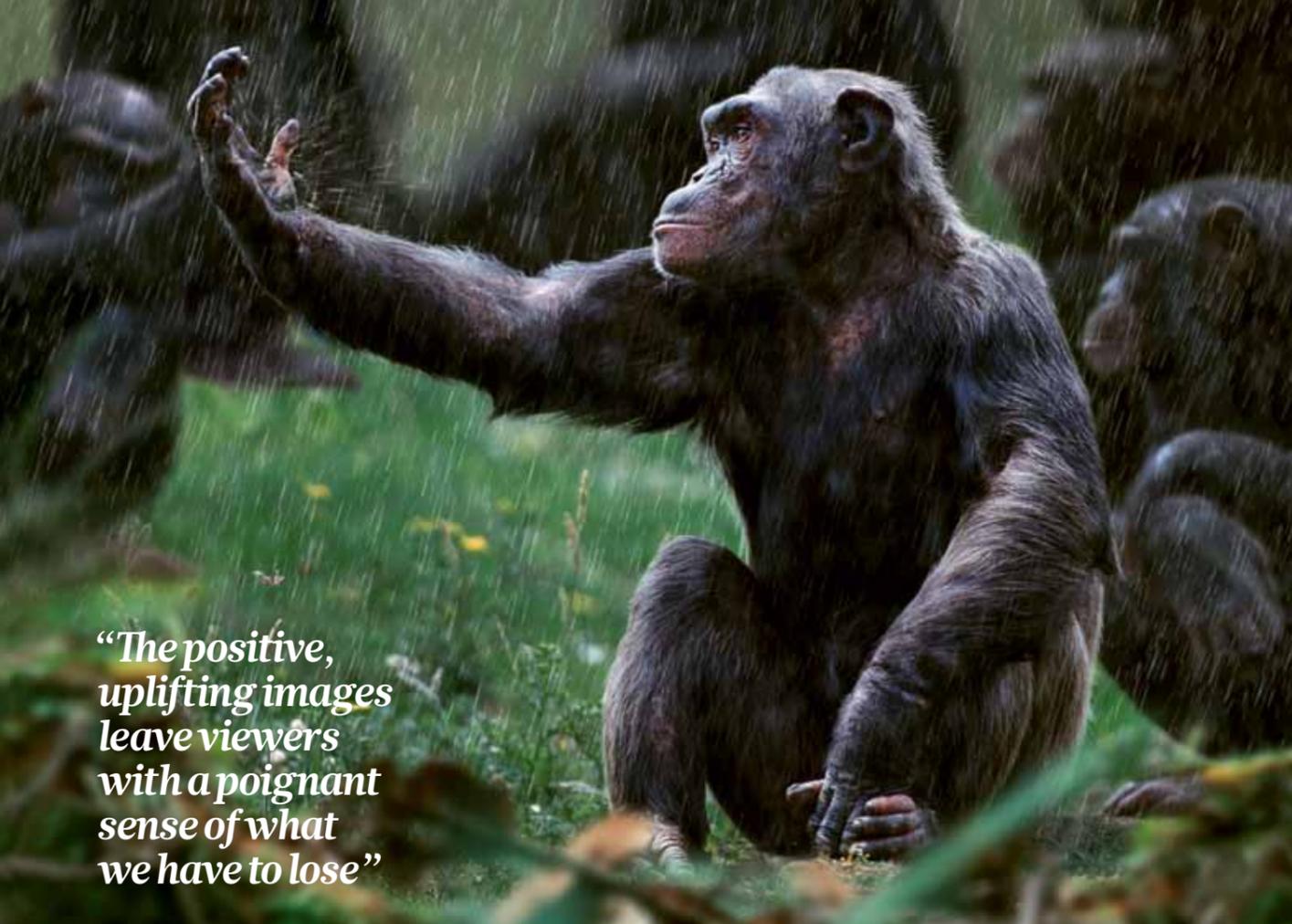
CALL — of the — WILD

FROM THE URBAN TO THE AFRICAN JUNGLE, STEVE BLOOM
RECOUNTS HIS LAST TWO DECADES AS A WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER
AND WHAT IT'S TAKEN TO THRIVE IN AN ADAPT-OR-DIE INDUSTRY

Words: CAROLINE SCHMIDT

“IT ALL CHANGED EARLY 1993: I had a photo lab and digital special effects studio in central London and I took my first trip back to South Africa in almost 16 years to go on a safari holiday. It was a life-changing experience. I took a camera with me and hoped to get a few wildlife photographs that I could give to a picture library. I got absolutely hooked and came back with 21 pictures that went into the Planet Earth Pictures library catalogue. When they began to sell, I realised it was possible to make a living doing this,” says Steve. That was more than 20 years ago and now Steve Bloom is perhaps the most highly regarded and prolific wildlife photographer of his generation, author of 15 books in more than 21 languages, winner of incredible awards such as The Lucie and most recently he’s taken to authoring children’s books to introduce them to photography and conservation. ➔





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IT WAS THE AFRICAN safari that moved him to make it his mission to document endangered species, but not in a picture-perfect sense. “Wildlife photography often depicts a clichéd utopian world filled with peaceful animals, but life in the wild is fraught with stress and danger. Animals fight for survival: it’s a case of kill or be killed. The safari made me realise there was a world beyond the city’s pavements and a life of restaurants and the London Underground. It was a very different world from what I lived in and I felt compelled to document it. I also wanted to do something that would leave more of a legacy and that’s what set me off on the journey.”

Shortly after returning to the UK, Steve went to Monkey World in Dorset, which rescues and rehabilitates abused primates, putting him on the two-year track towards his first book, *In Praise of Primates*, which had him photographing the three great apes – orangutans, chimpanzees and gorillas – in Africa and Borneo. “I watched a chimp put his hand out to the rain and looked at the raindrops bouncing off his hand and it made me really think about evolution. So many people see animals as the ‘other’: something that’s not feeling, of any consequence that can be snuffed out. Seeing the chimp with those raindrops made me realise how we all suffer and experience joy, animals too. We’re not that different.” *In Praise of Primates* was published in 1999, in ten different languages and 250,000 copies. It was followed by a

ten-year project culminating in a 4.5kg coffee-table book called *Untamed* featuring all the animals he’s ever photographed, but it’s *Spirit of the Wild* that I think stands him above other wildlife photographers. The free record-breaking outdoor exhibition showcases 100 of Steve’s photographs. The exhibition has been running for the last seven years, across 13 European countries, with the latest show having just closed in Madrid. “The positive, uplifting images leave viewers with a poignant sense of what we have to lose,” says Steve. “A photograph with no audience has no value. When we take photographs the joy is to show people, and I get to do that with a huge audience: 1,400,000 people saw the exhibition in Copenhagen, Denmark, alone. Then there are the stories behind the pictures and the aesthetics that move people. It’s that tinge of excitement when you produce an image that is able to resonate with other people, that’s what motivates me.”

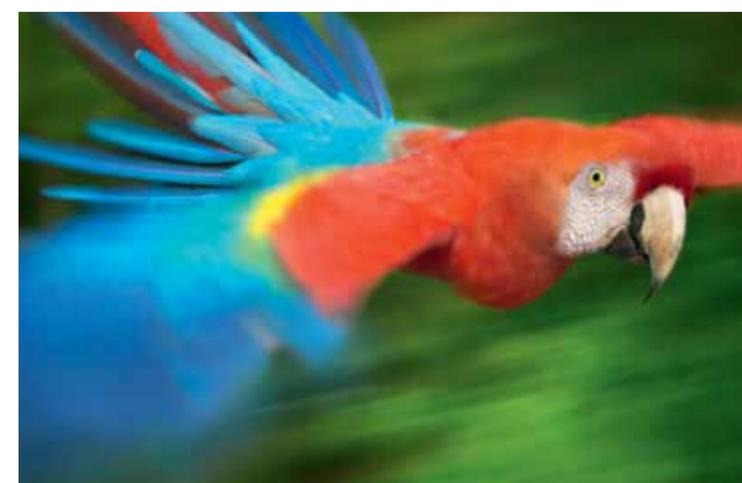
While Steve’s start in the industry seems rather romantic – packing in the drudgery of London’s Underground for the sunset plains of the Serengeti – his journey to full-time photography didn’t begin in 1993 but earlier in the 1970s, and it was far from romantic. Born in Johannesburg, South Africa, his love of photography grew as he documented raw moments of suffering during the Apartheid in 1976, and his passion for communicating the truth about the African people and country is still as strong as ever.

Clockwise from left: “A chimpanzee with his hand out catching the rain at MonkeyWorld ape rescue centre in Dorset; Lionesses fighting in the Masai Mara, Africa; Wild Scarlet Macaw in flight, Tambopata River, in Peru; Camargue horses running through water in France.”

Risky business

Steve jokes that it was probably a midlife crisis that spurred his daring change in career at aged 40, but it’s clear from speaking to him it wasn’t a decision taken lightly. “Everyone said I was absolutely crazy to go out photographing wildlife when I had a family to support, but we sat down together and decided it was something we’d make work as a business. I wanted to make images that were beautiful and moved people, but I also kept my feet on the ground and knew we had to sell them to eat and care for our kids.” In 1996, Steve turned full-time pro after securing a contract with the Telegraph Colour Library, later bought by Getty Images, just prior to the internet becoming a way of selling images. “In those days it was all colour transparencies being sent as slides by couriers, so there were very few people around producing wildlife images of a quality that were saleable. There wasn’t much competition: it was very different from what it’s like now.”

Not much of the industry is the same as it was ten years ago, let alone two decades ago. The epic coffee-table books that Steve authored are no longer the trademarks of a successful professional photographer,



analogue is now digital and slides have been substituted for downloads – and this has meant adapt or die from a business point of view. “One of the biggest ways we’ve had to adapt over the years is how we sell images. When the internet came along, we all expected it to be a place of democracy, where everyone would have an equal piece of the pie. It’s not worked out like that: look at Amazon and the huge blow it’s had on independent book stores and retailers, that’s what’s happening to picture sales. At the beginning it was really easy to reach a wider market but it’s become more and more difficult as there are fewer and fewer dominant players. The internet is a bucket

where billions of pictures are poured everyday, which is very different from the world I started out in where there were very few good wildlife images and the demand far exceeded the supply. Now it’s the other way around,” says Steve. To make it easier for clients to find his images in the digital bucket, Steve set up his own agency to represent himself and a few other photographers. He has no current plans to publish more coffee-table books but instead is focusing on his children’s books and an interactive e-book for the iPad, exploring ways to bring his images alive to interact with users.

“The real change that’s affected everybody, though, is the drop in prices,”

he says. “There was a time when you could sell an image individually for several thousand pounds for single usage, that’s come right down as more and more new players come on who sell images for amateur photographers for £1 or £2. Which is okay if you’re not relying on it for a living but you have to become more and more adaptable and creative at what markets you look to sell your pictures in when it’s your profession.

“You have to also reinvent yourself as a photographer. Lots of young people come to me wanting to be wildlife photographers and they don’t immediately realise it’s not just this romantic trip out into the wild having a wonderful time photographing rare and ➔



“You need that hunger, drive and slight desperation to produce good images”

endangered animals. You have to know about marketing and be a businessperson to make a living from it. If you have the luxury of a lot of money that lets you indulge in the pleasure, that’s great but interestingly enough I’ve found people who are not driven by a hunger don’t produce as good pictures. You need that hunger, drive and slight desperation to produce good images,” believes Steve.

Despite the challenges, Steve is still managing to sustain a thriving business, but how can new pro photographers stand a chance against pound-saver clients? “Quality is important. I’m a great believer that less is more and I’m sticking to this in a world of excess,” says Steve. “I think in the end, though, if someone sees a good picture, it taps into their emotions. A photograph needs to appeal and tug at the heart strings, which means putting some extra time and effort in to taking that photograph and making sure that any enhancement is done sensitively and to make a picture

aesthetically strong. If you see an image that’s good and one that’s not so, you’ll generally go for what’s good and there are still clients who respect and understand the value of a good image. They know the difference between images snapped on a mobile phone and one that involved travel halfway across the world, staying in a tent for two weeks and is an enormously difficult and rare image to get. When you explain that, clients do understand it. It’s like a hamburger being considered the same as a meal at a Michelin-starred restaurant.”

Now in his sixties, Steve spends more time selling the shots he’s already got built up than travelling. He is, however, starting to do group photography tours, with one in October and December. “It’s something I started doing last year and I’d never done before. I’ve always travelled on my own with my own guides but last year I was asked by a Danish company called Better Moments if I would do a tour for them – it was a great

Clockwise from left: “An aerial view of a zebra herd running through a swamp, shot from a helicopter while flying over Okavango Delta, in Botswana, Africa; An Indian elephant swimming underwater in China; Siberian Tigers Fighting in China; Two Brown Bears fishing for salmon at Brooks Falls in Alaska.”

success – I’ve another one in October in Tanzania. I’ve also a migration and gorilla trek in the northern Serengeti with Steppes Discovery in December. I enjoyed being with the people, talking about photography and advising them.” Steve is also spending time doing lectures and public talks around the UK about his work and techniques.

One of the stories that comes up again and again at his talks are his images of elephants underwater, shot for his book *Elephant!* “I had photographed elephants from the air and wanted a complete visual contrast, so decided on a swimming elephant. Some elephants are good swimmers and, after much searching, I found an elephant in the Andaman Islands who swam in the ocean.

I made three trips to the islands before I had images I was satisfied with. Because water is dense and the elephant stirred up a lot of sand and turbulence while swimming, it was difficult to get those moments when the water was clear. The size of the elephant necessitated me being a certain distance away in order to get him in the frame, but I also needed to be as close as possible because of the denseness of the water. I had little experience of scuba diving, so needed an instructor with me at all times. I used a 16mm lens for the picture and shot at ISO 800. Water has optical qualities that make a wide-angle image look less wide angle, so I was closer than it appears in the photograph.”

One of Steve’s greatest joys is aerial photography over Africa, with his favourite place being the Okavango Delta in Botswana. It’s given him beautiful images of giraffe casting shadows, stampeding buffalo and zebra. He always shoots with the helicopter door removed as the thick glass

softens the image and uses a 70–200mm f/2.8 zoom with a shutter speed in excess of 1/1500sec. Steve says he puts aesthetics before technique, but I think the two are intrinsically linked. He has a way of capturing beauty in the raw truth – whether it’s life or death – and he communicates that through considered but instinctive camera technique and knowing how to approach the images within the boundaries of different animals. How he chooses to capture the speed of a running cheetah, the majesty of an elephant or the dramatic death of an impala all provide that emotional intensity that he calls the aesthetic. For a photographer who’s made it his personal mission to document life in the wild, I was keen to know if there are still places he’d like his journey to take him: “I never got to go to the Galápagos; I’ve been to all the continents. I still feel like the world is a beach but I’ve only played with a few grains of sand.” www.stevebloomphoto.com

From film to digital

“The biggest thing I did when I changed to digital is turn off the motor drive. Sometimes I’d have a machine-gun approach to shooting and I wasn’t being very creative. When I decided to make my own intellectual decisions on when to press the shutter, the images worked better. Too many people spend far too long looking at the back of their camera and while they do that, they’re disengaging from their environment. You should be concentrating on what’s around you. Sometimes you have to check, but it should be kept to a minimum. Digital has made people lazy photographers; there was a time when I’d spend £3,000 per trip on film and processing, therefore I had to get it right. Now, film is effectively free: the cost of CompactFlash is negligible. More time and effort needs to be put into getting the picture right. It’s good practice to actually say to yourself, ‘I’m only going to take ten frames today’. Improving self-discipline will yield greater images.”