

Chimpanzee with his hand out in the rain, Monkey World ape rescue centre, UK.



WILD AT HEART

Renowned around the world for his spectacular wildlife images, books and exhibitions, **STEVE BLOOM** is taking his photography into new directions. He tells **Keith Wilson** how he is responding to declining stock prices, the demand for HD movies and the perils of e-books



Less than twenty years ago Steve Bloom went on a safari holiday in South Africa and tried his hand at wildlife photography. The open spaces, brilliant light, clean air and spectacular animals served to reinforce a growing feeling that this was how he wanted to live, not by

commuting to central London each day on the infamous Northern Line.

“If I’m honest about it, the mid-life crisis had kicked in,” says Steve. “I had just turned 40 and after making that initial trip to South Africa, I spoke to my wife, Kathy, and said: ‘I really like the idea of being a photographer full-time’. We discussed it; I was finding what I was doing really stressful and we thought photography was a much better outlet for my creativity.” It was 1993 and Steve was a partner in a business on Oxford Street, Jones Bloom, that specialised in

image retouching. They were one of the first to use computer technology for this purpose and gaining a growing reputation for the quality of their work, which included contributing to the official poster design of the 1992 Barcelona Olympics.

“Tony Stone was also a client of ours and we were preparing images for their early stock photo catalogues,” Steve explains. “He recognised that in a market full of poor quality stock, if he were to run incredibly good quality images and put a lot of effort into each image, that would be his great selling point.” It was a strategy that worked; Tony Stone became synonymous with prime stock imagery at a time when most customers viewed it as a second rate product. Taking his first steps as a professional, Steve thought it was a path worth following. “I realised I could make my living from supplying images for ▶

stock photography and not treat it as a market for the outtakes, which is what a lot of photographers were doing,” he says. “Instead, I was going to shoot for stock and only keep the best and only show the best. So I ended up with a very small portfolio, which I then put with the Telegraph Colour Library to generate an income.”

ANTI-APARTHEID PHOTOGRAPHER

That safari holiday in 1993 resulted in Steve persuading a café owner near his home in east Finchley to display some of the prints. One of the café regulars,

“What people forget is that one of the most important things with book publishing is the marketing, distribution and getting them into the bookshops... we are completely bombarded with self-published books, which makes it harder for the professional ones to be seen.” Steve Bloom

a journalist on *Amateur Photographer*, was so impressed by what she saw that an interview and publication in the magazine soon followed. Steve felt encouraged to continue on his new career path: “It was an inspiration to me and meant a hell of a lot because I had only just started.”

In truth, he may have been starting out as a professional, but he wasn’t new to wielding a camera with purpose. Back in the 1970s, the young Steve Bloom, a son of Johannesburg, was a fervent street photographer in Cape Town documenting the brutal realities faced by the black community living under apartheid. The pictures were used by the Anti-Apartheid Movement to help raise support for the cause, and ultimately led to his exile from the country.

On 23 September 1977, the 24-year-old dissident boarded an overnight flight to London with a suitcase of clothes, photos and a Canon FTb camera with standard lens. In doing so Steve was following in his father’s footsteps, the barrister, activist and novelist, Harry Bloom, who fled South Africa in the wake of the 1960 Sharpeville massacre.



This summer, Steve’s photographs from 1970s apartheid South Africa formed the centrepiece exhibition *Beneath the Surface* at the London Festival of Photography, in partnership with *The Guardian* and the Steve Biko Foundation. Biko was the leader of the Black Consciousness Movement who died in police custody less than two weeks before Steve fled South Africa. These stark black and white documentary photographs of street

life in a segregated city are far removed from the sumptuous colour compositions of wildlife for which he has gained international recognition. But he is both grateful and relieved for their recognition, however belated it may now seem: “One of the things I’ve really not wanted to be is someone who is stereotyped into just doing one genre of photography.” It was with that objective in mind that he set about compiling the book that he now regards as the most satisfying of the eight he has done so far: *Living Africa*, published by Thames & Hudson in 2008.

“I put together 14 years of work and made several trips to Africa for that book,” he explains, getting up from the sofa in the living room of his Kent home to retrieve the magnum opus from one of the floor-to-ceiling bookcases that occupy three corners of the room. Handing it over to me, Steve answers questions while I spend the rest of the interview turning page after page, marvelling at the juxtaposition of images of human life with wildlife and open landscapes with crowded shanty towns. “I wanted to go back to Africa with a very positive book. In a sense it’s a tribute to the continent, so I went to several different African countries. It’s a mixture of people and wildlife.” Although published only four years ago, Steve says *Living Africa* includes areas of the continent that would be too risky to revisit. He explains: “Parts of Mali are Al Qaeda strongholds now, whereas just a short time ago I was able to go there and take photos. As for the wildlife, you can go and take photographs and then a short time later it can be a no-go area because of fires, civil disturbances or an environmental catastrophe. It really does remind me of the transient nature of everything and how you have really got to seize whatever opportunities you can.”

Left: Snow monkey shaking off water, Jigokudani National Park, Japan.
Opposite page: Karo tribesmen dancing, wearing white chalk body paint, Omo Delta, Ethiopia.



STEVE BLOOM / STEVEBLOOM.COM

PUBLISHING SUCCESS

Steve’s first book *In Praise of Primates*, was a publishing phenomenon for a hardback photography title, selling more than 250,000 copies in ten languages. Since then a new Steve Bloom book has been a major publishing event: *Untamed* (2004), *Elephant!* (2006) *Spirit of the Wild* (2006), *Living Africa* (2008) and *Trading Places* (2009), have reaped numerous awards, rapturous reviews and those all-important copy sales for their publisher. But even a photographer as successful as Steve Bloom is not immune to the upheaval that the book trade has experienced with the growth in e-publishing.

“It’s been a storm, not just in photography but in publishing as well,” he says. “My first book was published in 1998, *In Praise of Primates*, and the publisher then said ‘I’ll do a quarter of a million copies in 10 languages’. I’d never done a book before! Now, it’s a much tougher market and we’re in a situation where anyone can publish a book because you can very easily put everything together and self-publish. But what happens when everyone in the world is producing two books each? There are too many to get to market.

“What people forget is that one of the most important things with book publishing is the marketing, distribution and getting them into the bookshops

then getting them seen, that’s where the professional publisher’s expertise is needed. And the other is the editing. But we’re in a situation where we are completely bombarded with self-published books, which makes it harder for the professional ones to be seen.”

As well as diversifying his subject matter – publishing reportage and portraits as well as wildlife – Steve has also sought to broaden his audience appeal by producing a series of children’s books using his photographs to tell a wildlife story. “I’ve had four children’s books published for Thames & Hudson. What I’m trying to do is get children interested in both the environment, wildlife and photography. So the two books I’ve had published this year – *My Big Cat Journal* and *My Polar Animal Journal* – are written as a photographer’s journal, so I give tips about photography. The polar book is also about cold ▶

weather photography, the big cats book is about how to photograph on safari.

“Obviously, not all children will be able to go on these sorts of trips, but it gives them an understanding of how the whole thing works, and then encourages them to go out into their garden or to the local park and photograph the city wildlife and encourage them to develop an interest. My adult books such as *Spirit of the Wild* or *Untamed* tend to be more geared to the environment and very strongly driven from the aesthetics point of view. For me, I’m trying to use the art of photography as a way and means of connecting with people.”

FLICKR, STOCK AND TABLETS

Twenty years after giving up the stress of the Northern Line, Steve knows he made the right decision and considers himself privileged and honoured to still be working successfully as a professional photographer. He has also proven himself to be adaptable to the market and technology changes of the last two decades. As well as authoring books for the children’s market, six years ago he and Kathy set up Steve Bloom Images, a picture library for his and other photographers’ work, including Nick Garbutt, the award-winning wildlife photographer. Being involved directly at this end of the business makes him even more aware of the challenges photographers face to make a living.

“It’s tough to turn wildlife photography into an income, especially in the current environment where stock photographs don’t sell for the kind of prices they used to,” he explains. “It’s because there’s been an over supply and a downward pressure on prices, which means you have to work that much harder to make every sale. It’s become really difficult to keep the prices at a level that can work for us and the photographers we represent.”

The rise of free stock image libraries and image sharing sites are his main competition and he doesn’t see any signs of it abating. “Supply continues increasing at a much greater rate than demand. You go on Flickr and there’s 3000 pictures uploaded every minute – probably more than that now. So the challenge is how do you get the good pictures seen?” Steve believes one of the answers is effective marketing through established contacts who value the reputation of his and the other photographers’ images. As we speak, Garbutt is in the Brazilian Pantanal photographing jaguars and other wildlife, new images that will be edited and placed with the library soon after his return. “One of the things we do is put out stories with pictures every now and then and the press will run the stories. Certainly, 10 or 15 years ago people would just be coming to us all the time, but now there are more players in the game so we have to work harder.”

The arrival of the iPad and other tablet computers means he is also looking at producing content for these devices, but not in a way that is simply an electronic page-turning version of a printed book. “I’m aware that it’s very easy to put something on a tablet, but it’s very difficult to put something on a tablet that will really catch peoples’ eyes and encourage them to spend money on it,” he says. “One of the perceptions, especially with the internet, is that it should be free. People don’t like to pay for anything. Copyright illegal downloads have savaged the music industry and the film industry.”

As well as producing something that people will pay to download, Steve

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knows he has to devise an effective marketing strategy if he is to achieve with tablet publishing just a fraction of the success attained with his books. “It’s one thing to say ‘OK, you’ll use social media’, but everyone is using social media and if there are millions of people on Twitter at the same time nobody can hear anything, so it’s not easy to get that kind of thing right. I think everyone is shouting on Twitter but no one is listening.”

DIGITAL CHOICES

It is because of the brief and transient life of disseminating information by social media and digital devices that Steve believes there is still a future for the printed book. Sales of iPads, Kindles and tablets may be growing exponentially, but that doesn’t mean image on paper isn’t without a distinct advantage: “The difference with the physical book is that it has a presence that doesn’t exist on a tablet,” he says. “When you switch off a tablet it’s gone. When you have a bookcase and you walk into a room it’s always there. That book you’ve got on your lap and you’re looking at now will disappear into some kind of space until you go looking for it in a device. I think there is still a place in the future for the physicality of books.”

This isn’t the spoken belief of someone who is slow to adapt to the digital age. Steve was working with digital imaging before most photographers and picture editors understood the term. He chuckles quietly at the memory of asking the Telegraph Colour Library in the early 1990s if he could submit his images digitally: “Before I left my company we had all the equipment to store images digitally and this guy at the library said ‘What’s that? We only deal with transparencies!’ So we were ahead of the game even then.”

A lifetime Canon user, he switched to digital in 2002, convinced that the quality of the electronic image was as good as film. While saving on film and processing costs made sound business sense, he soon realised that having that cost to consider when out shooting had a profound (and even a positive) influence on his working methodology. He explains: “I find with digital that a lot of people aren’t considered about what they’re shooting in the same way that photographers were when they had to pay for every frame of film. Digital people say ‘Well, I can throw it away later’, so a lot don’t put the same kind of effort in. There’s also this temptation to be looking at the back of the camera all the ▶

Opposite page top clockwise: Indian elephant swimming underwater, seen from below, India; People watching a parade from a designated dog toilet, Sea Point, Cape Town, 1976; Green Point is a residential suburb close to the city centre. The effect of apartheid was to engender feelings of indifference across the colour line, Green Point, Cape Town 1977.



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Bozo fisherman using a net on the River Niger, Mopti, Mali.

time. With film you can't do that and you're concentrating on what can be seen through the viewfinder, so I think you need quite a lot of self discipline in the way that you approach digital."

Like many of his peers, Steve has tried shooting video but fears that attempting both disciplines will compromise the standard of his work. "If you want to focus on perfecting something then you have to give it your all. Nothing can be sacrificed, but if you chop and change at what point do you decide I'm going to stop doing stills and start doing video?" That doesn't mean he has failed to comprehend the degree to which photographers need to adjust in order to meet the demands of a multi-media world. He merely thinks that by using these technologies there is more potential to be developed out of the still image that most of us have yet to realise.

"I recognise that we are very much in a multi-media world where so much is moving off the printed page onto devices where people will want to look at photographs, and they will want to touch them and they will want things to happen. I'm looking at ways in which I can give an enhanced user experience by looking at still pictures on tablets. I'm doing a lot of experimenting at the moment but they've got a long way to go."

So, there is more to expect from the camera of Steve Bloom, and with 2013 marking his 20th anniversary as a professional photographer, the chances are that it will be a highlight of the publishing year. ■

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www.stevebloom.com
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Leopard walking, Masai Mara, Kenya.

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OUTDOOR SHOWS

Probably the most effective way Steve has succeeded in getting his wildlife photography seen by all generations, and around the world, is through his series of Spirit of the Wild outdoor exhibitions. These displays of 100 large format prints in weather-sealed panels are open free to the public, usually 24 hours a day. Spirit of the Wild opened in 2005 at Centenary Square, Birmingham, where it stayed for 11 months. In April this year, it was the turn of Abbeville, France, but it was in Copenhagen in 2006 where the exhibition literally captured the imagination of an entire nation: 1.4 million people – a quarter of the population of Denmark – saw Spirit of the Wild in just three months.

"It was in the main square and it was a lovely warm summer. At times you could hardly move," Steve recalls. "We've managed to have 12 of them now in big cities like Moscow, Stockholm, Oslo, Tokyo and Barcelona and a lot of interest for more, but we haven't always managed to get the funding." He concedes that these exhibitions, although hugely popular, are expensive to implement, yet remains confident of finding further sponsors to stage future showings in major cities that have yet to experience Spirit of the Wild. "I love doing the exhibitions but in the current economic climate funding is the enemy of the arts, which is a pity because I feel it's a very good way of sponsors getting their product mentioned."



Homeless people, often addicted to methylated spirits, were known as 'bergies', derived from the Afrikaans word 'mountain' because they originally found shelter wherever they could on the slopes of Table Mountain, Bergie, Cape Town 1976.