



HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR
**ADVICE WILDLIFE
& NATURE**
PHOTOGRAPHY

By John Rowell



J O H N R O W E L L
P H O T O G R A P H Y

PREFACE

I do not want to regurgitate second hand information, and I am not going to go into deep discussions into gear, settings, or much technical aspects of photography. This information is available in abundance on the Internet. There are literally 1000's of communities, videos, ebooks, blogs and websites dedicated to nature and wildlife photography. Most of which are extremely useful and filled with valuable and detailed information.

I will, however, give you some general advice that I have gathered, and I think is the best bits of advice I could give anyone who wants to start or improve their Nature and Wildlife Photography. It is impossible to tell you what to do in every possible eventuality, but I can make suggestions of things that you should consider before you hit that shutter button, and that will make your final images better.

I have accumulated these opinions over 8 years of being a photographer, the last 4 of which being almost exclusively documenting Indian wildlife. I hope you find them useful, but if not, I hope you enjoy the photographs at least!

ABOUT ME

I am a Scientist, Photographer, and a Papa, and not particularly in that order! I have a PhD in Biochemistry, but have always loved art. The combination of my inner geek and artist meant that I was naturally drawn to photography (which is composed of both factors in my opinion). 2009 I started in Paris, France, shooting portraits, travel and street photography. However, it was not until September 2012, when I moved to Bangalore, India with my wife Jenifer, that I started wildlife and nature photography. Since then, I have spent the last 4 years shooting and documenting life in India, both wild and human.

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The eyes are the key

We instinctually look at eyes, so if there is an eye or eyes in the image, that is what we will look at, so they need to look good! The eye should be in sharp focus, so make sure that that is where you are focusing on with your camera. They also need to have a catch light or light reflection in the eye. Without one, the subject looks odd, even dead, so it is a very important aspect that can make or break an image. To get the catch light, be patient, wait for the subject to turn its head in such a way that there is light reflecting off of it. It is worth it!



A leopard with a distinctive spotted coat is lying down on a dark, textured rock. The leopard is facing right, with its head slightly turned towards the camera. The background is a blurred forest scene with green foliage and tree trunks. The lighting is soft, suggesting a shaded forest environment.


Don't be afraid of high ISO

We all want to use a low ISO as possible and the lower the ISO the better the image quality. It is one of the main ways to keep your shutter speed high enough to freeze the action and get sharp images. I see many enthusiasts having blurry images because they are afraid to increase your ISO to get the shutter speed they need. Noise in the image due to a high ISO can be easily dealt with in post-processing, blurry images can not. I would rather have an image with noise, than no image at all. So don't be afraid to push your camera to its limits, this image was taken at ISO 12,800!

Shoot level

Keep your camera level to the ground; try to avoid shooting upwards or downwards as these images are rarely as compelling. This often means you have to lay down on the ground, or climb up something to get to the right level, and the right level is almost always eye level.



A black panther is perched on a thick, horizontal tree branch in a dense, sun-dappled forest. The panther is facing left, its dark fur contrasting with the vibrant green leaves. The background is filled with a thick canopy of trees, with sunlight filtering through the leaves, creating a soft, dappled light effect. The overall scene is a naturalistic depiction of a predator in its habitat.

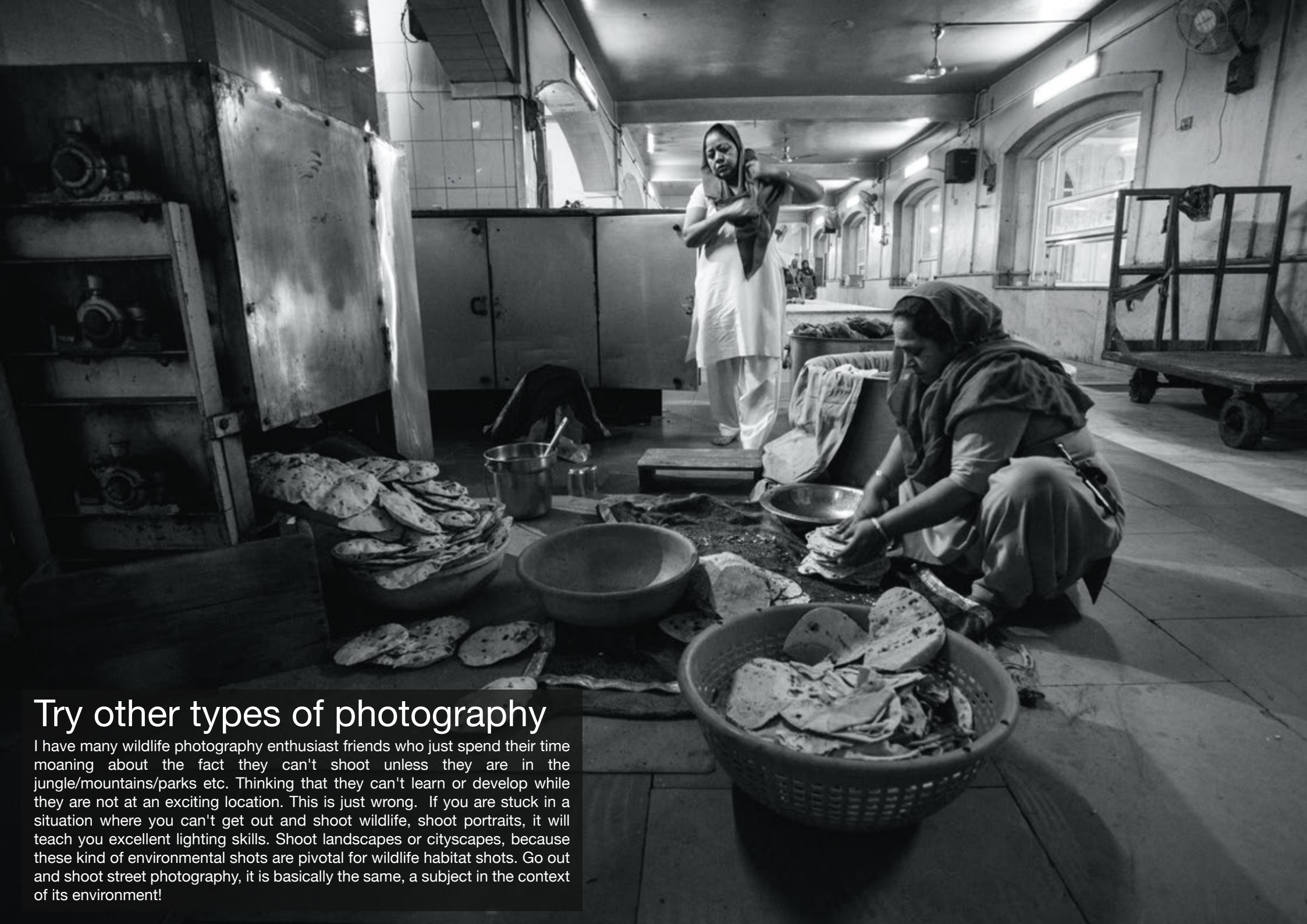
Shoot the conditions

Your camera does not know what it is shooting, and will try to make every picture a standard brightness. However, this is not true for real life. Sometimes a scene is dark (think deep in a forest), and sometimes it is light (think snow). You need to tell your camera if you are shooting a dark scene or a light scene. So in dark situations, you need to underexpose your image and in bright situations you need to overexpose it! :) This will produce the most realistic images. This image was underexposed to get the correct lighting of the situation.

Be aware of the background

Distracting objects in a background can ruin an image, so move around as much as possible to get the background how you want it. If you want to encompass an aspect of your background into your image, make sure you use a narrow aperture (high f-number). Inversely, if you want to blur out the background, use a wide aperture (low f-number). Either way, just pay attention to the background, as it can make or break an image.





Try other types of photography

I have many wildlife photography enthusiast friends who just spend their time moaning about the fact they can't shoot unless they are in the jungle/mountains/parks etc. Thinking that they can't learn or develop while they are not at an exciting location. This is just wrong. If you are stuck in a situation where you can't get out and shoot wildlife, shoot portraits, it will teach you excellent lighting skills. Shoot landscapes or cityscapes, because these kind of environmental shots are pivotal for wildlife habitat shots. Go out and shoot street photography, it is basically the same, a subject in the context of its environment!

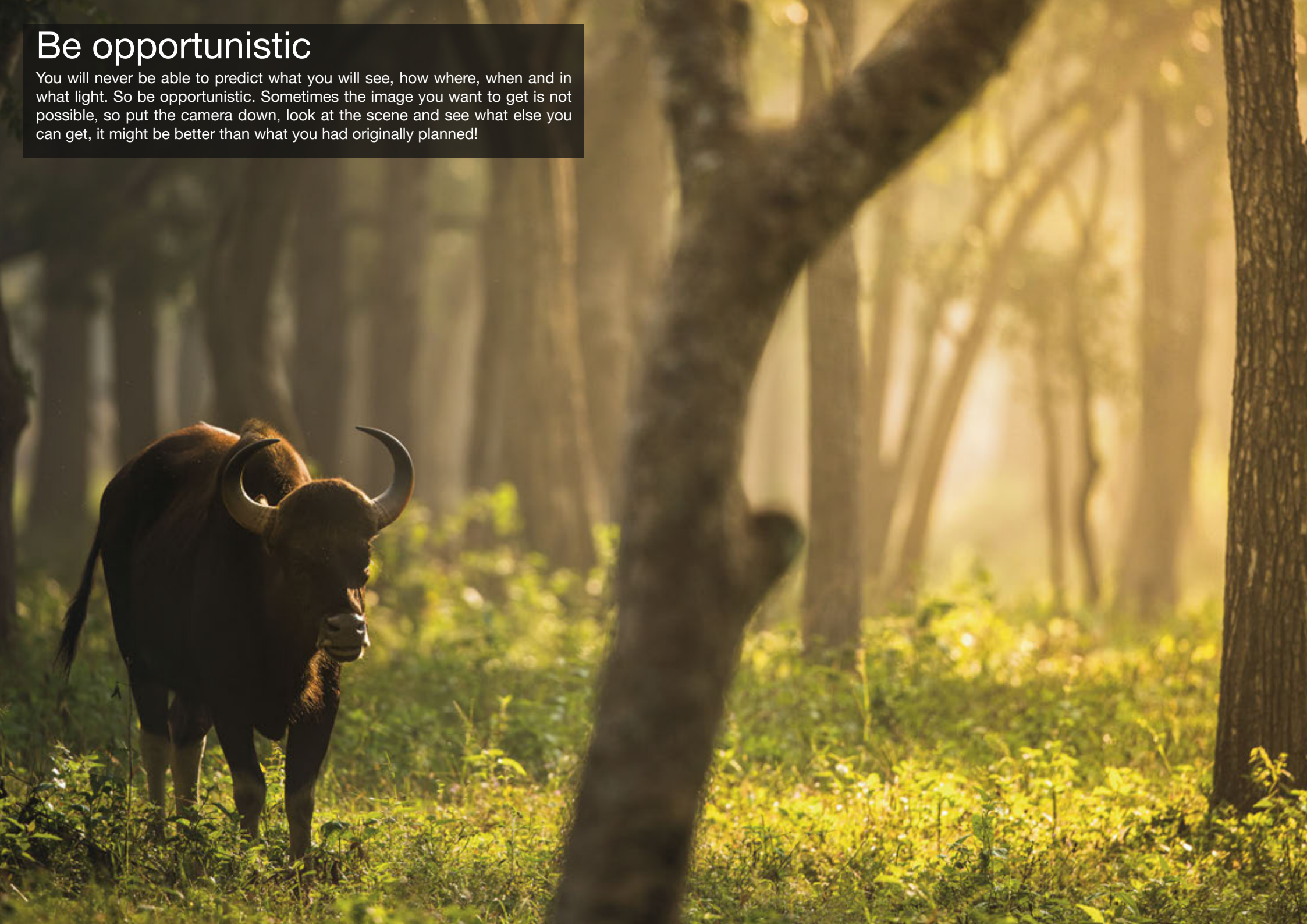
Learn lighting

Unlike other kinds of photography we have almost no control over the light and often it is not ideal. So we need to make do with what we have. The best way to do this is to learn to see how light is affecting the subject. Backlighting, hard or soft. Each has different consequences for your images, so use them to their best. Once you understand this, you can look at a scene and see what kind of image suits that particular lighting situation. It also doubles as something you can do at home, when you can't get into the wilds!



Be opportunistic

You will never be able to predict what you will see, how where, when and in what light. So be opportunistic. Sometimes the image you want to get is not possible, so put the camera down, look at the scene and see what else you can get, it might be better than what you had originally planned!





Tell a story

An image has a shelf life; a story can last forever. Make your images the narrative for a story. In my opinion a good photograph isn't just a moment in time captured, it is the story that the image captures. So look for the story in your scene, or use several images to make a story. It will give more meaning to your images.



Planning

This means breaking the idea down into its constitutive parts and seeing how you can have them all happen simultaneous. E.g. If you want to shoot a bird taking off, have your frame and camera settings ready and get in position ready for that moment.

Take pictures for you

Make what you want to make, shoot what you want to shoot. Don't just take the same shot as everyone else, you find what you think is the most interesting scene to capture. Your passion will show in your images, and that is what will make them stand out and great. Experiment (aka break the rules), ignore everything and go do something different!



Prepare to be spontaneous

It is an oxymoron, but in terms of photography it extremely poignant! As a photographer, we have to be ready for the moment, often not knowing what that moment will be. For example, when photographing wildlife, you have about 3 seconds to take your first image before the subject notices you can potentially runs up. If you are not prepared you miss the shot. So, it is basically saying if you are not ready for any potential eventuality, you will probably miss it. So always be ready. Have you camera at hand, and set-up for the current situation.





Pre-visualize

The beginning of a great photograph is an idea. Try to envisage possible great images, and dissect how you would go about taking it. Read books, look at other peoples work, and get inspired. If you see a shot you like, ask yourself why, and how could you do it. This will keep you motivated when you can't get out, but also, if the occasion should arise, you already know what you would do to get that dream shot!

Keep calm & stay focused

It is easy to get excited in the moment and forget all the other details in the image that could. Often it is these small details that can make or brake an image. So try to stay calm and look at the whole image and not just your subject. Is there a tree or leaf in the way that is distracting? Is the background a nice colour? These smaller elements are often just as important as the main subject, so stay calm, and look at the details.





Know your subject

Get to know your subject, you won't know what is normal or extraordinary otherwise, and these are important for making a meaningful image. Not to mention finding the subject of interest in the first place!

Keep trying

When I head out into the jungle, there is no guarantee that I will see something new (less and less likely the more I go in fact), so I am constantly trying to get the best image I can have of commonly sighted subjects. Never be satisfied, always strive for better and keep trying! One such endeavour of mine is the spotted deer/chital. It's continuing....



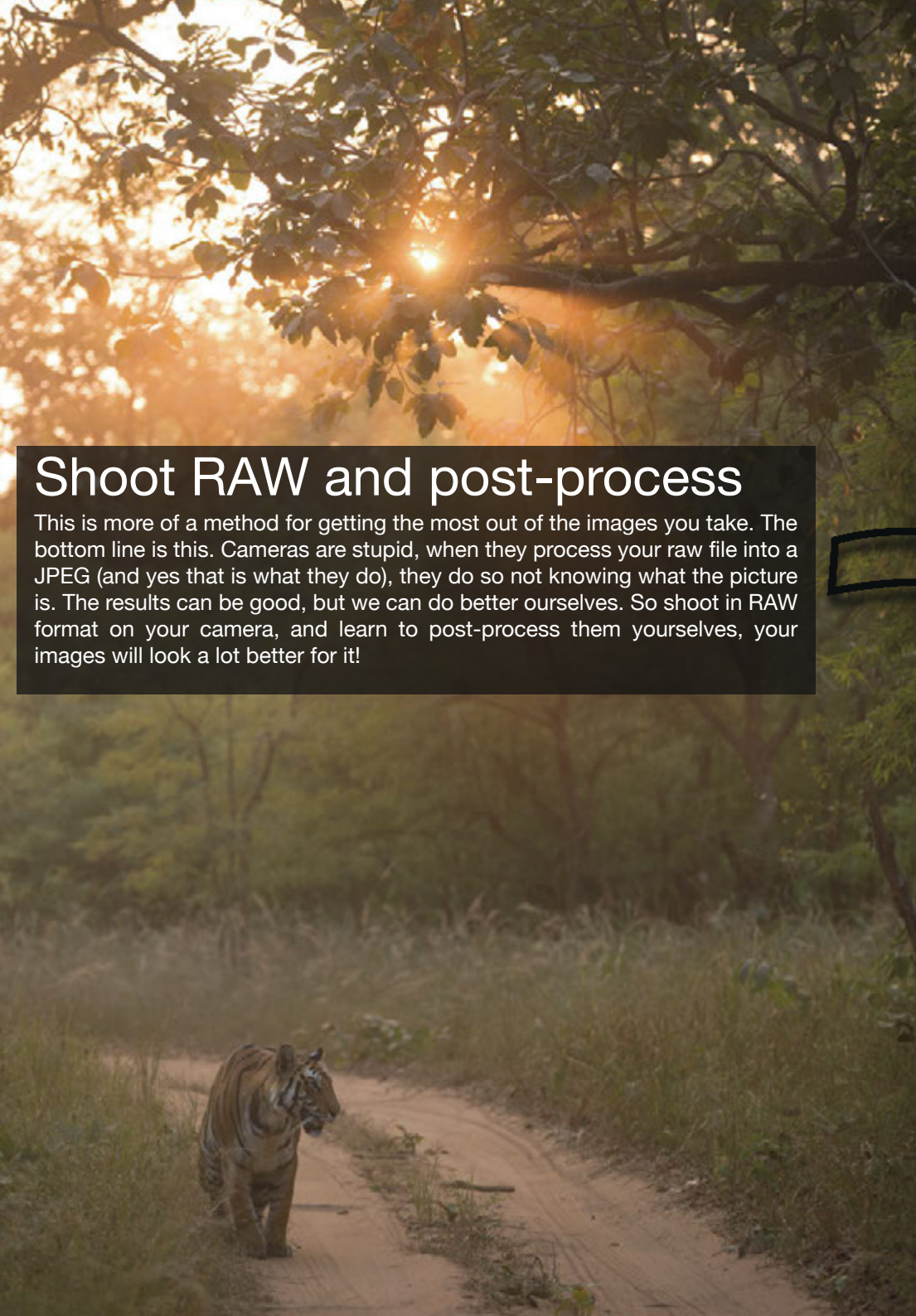


Go wide-angle

Wildlife photography is not close up portraits of the subject, but is the context of the subject in its natural environment. So, don't forget to go wide, you will get the bigger picture! It can also generate different perspectives if you manage to get close to your subject.

Shoot RAW and post-process

This is more of a method for getting the most out of the images you take. The bottom line is this. Cameras are stupid, when they process your raw file into a JPEG (and yes that is what they do), they do so not knowing what the picture is. The results can be good, but we can do better ourselves. So shoot in RAW format on your camera, and learn to post-process them yourselves, your images will look a lot better for it!



Don't crop

I know that this is very tempting, as we want to get as close to your subject as possible, but don't. If you are too far for your lens, then take an environmental shot as opposed to a close portrait. The more you crop, the lower your image quality. Use the fact that the subject is far away as a narrative for your story.





Do something with your images

You've spent time and effort to create great images... so share them! Print them, share them on social media or put them on your own webpage. Be proud, take comments and enjoy your personal achievements! If you don't know where to share them, try www.jungledragon.com.

Enjoy

This is probably the most important bit of advice. It's great to get out and shoot as much as possible, as practice does make perfect but don't forget to put the camera down and enjoy the moment. It will keep your passion alive; it will keep you motivated and keep you connected to the moment. We photograph nature because we love it, so don't forget to actually enjoy it in real time to!





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