

Kenya Photo Strategies for Super Images

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Figure 1 Cheetahs are fairly common in the Masai Mara where we spend much of our time.

Kenya offers impressive wildlife photo opportunities! Since 1981, John has led photo tours to Kenya almost every year and sometimes three times in a single year. Kenya remains our favorite photo destination. Kenya is easily the most repeated photo tour we lead. That says a little about our leadership and a lot about how impressive a photo tour to Kenya is

for everyone! We know a Kenya tour is expensive, but it is a life-changing experience. Many of our clients over the years have gone on our Kenya photo safari several times.

If you do not already know John Gerlach, here is a little info. His college degree is wildlife ecology, and he worked as a professional

biologist for a time before moving on to professional nature photography when he was 27. While John is keenly interested in landscape and macro photography and conducts photo workshops and authored books covering those topics, his favorite subject is wildlife photography. Dixie and John both excel at wildlife photography, and we are terrific at ensuring you get the best results with your equipment. Dixie has always shot Nikon and John uses Canon. Both of us know the Kenya mammals and John is an avid birder who knows hundreds of birds found in Kenya where you will photograph many of the most interesting and colorful species. Dixie's background is working in the operating room while shooting photos and traveling when time allowed.



Figure 2 One of the many birds you will certainly photograph - the wattled plover.

Camera Gear

Cameras (2)

Bring two cameras. You never know when a camera may malfunction. Given your investment of time and money in this trip, you must have a spare camera just in case a camera problem arises. That is not likely, but it could happen. Bring your camera manuals a PDF on your computer. All lodges have Internet access today as well.

Camera batteries, chargers, camera memory cards, external storage, and power adapters

Have enough camera batteries to get through the entire day. In John's case, that is four batteries for his Canon R5 Mark 2. We are at the lodge from noon till about 3:30pm each day when the light is unfavorable, and the animals are hiding in the shade from the equatorial sun. Recharge your batteries between the morning and afternoon game drives and each evening too. Bring two battery chargers to speed this up.

We use two fast 256GB memory cards in our cameras. Download images in your room when you return after the morning field trip or at night. Use a computer and store the images on external hard drives. We use 2TB and 4TB SanDisk SSD external drives. SSD (Solid State Drive) drives are faster, quieter, consume less energy, and are more durable and compact. Be sure to bring all cords needed for your computer and storage devices. In Kenya, the supply voltage is 240V. A Type G power adapter converts the power for your gear.

Lenses

A Kenya safari is a wildlife photo trip. It is unlikely you will shoot any macro photos and only a few landscapes. A zoom lens in the 24-105mm range covers your landscape opportunities and photos at the camp quite well. Most of your photography will be done with long focal lengths and you have many options that work well. You nearly always photograph from the open window or top of

the safari vehicle as getting out of the vehicle is too dangerous (lions) and not legal at most places in the park.



Figure 3 While everyone thinks having a long telephoto lens is best for wildlife, there are times where short zoom lenses are best to make images with wildlife In the landscape such as these reticulated giraffes in Samburu.

The vehicle must stay on the dirt lanes (usually) and that makes it difficult to adjust your shooting distance from the subject by moving the vehicle. Fortunately, there are numerous animals and many of them are close. How close, you ask? It is not unusual to have elephants within 10 yards of the vehicle, and lions and leopards may come within mere feet of the vehicle. Since you cannot change your shooting distance, you must use a zoom lens to adjust for animals of different sizes (giraffe vs baboon for example) or for an animal that is moving closer to you or further away. And naturally photographing a group of animals will normally require less focal length than a single animal. Fortunately, there are many great zoom lenses to use today. Typical excellent zoom lenses include those such as the Tamron 150-600mm or Sony 200-600mm. For example, John frequently uses the Canon RF 100-500mm lens on his Canon R5 Mark 2 camera. He also uses a 1.4x extender when necessary with that lens. With the 1.4x extender, he loses 1 stop of lens speed but now the lens and 1.4x together reach 700mm! And if he switches to the 1.6x crop mode on the Canon R5 Mark 2, he has

1120mm!! In practice, John normally does not put the 1.4x extender on the 100-500mm unless he has no other choice to get more optical reach. By merely switching to the in-camera 1.6x crop mode, the RF 100-500mm f/7.1 lens gives the angle of view of an 800mm f/7.1 lens as no light is lost. If more than 800mm is needed and that is not often, then he adds the 1.4x extender.

John always brings a backup long lens for photographing small birds. On the 2025 photo tour, he used his older Canon 200-400mm zoom with a built-in 1.4x teleconverter, extending its reach to 560mm. Since this lens fits older Canon cameras, he attaches a conversion ring to use it on his mirrorless Canon R5. Thanks to the R5's 1.6x crop factor, the setup provides an effective 896mm ($400 \times 1.4 \times 1.6 = 896\text{mm}$) field of view—ideal for capturing tiny birds like bee-eaters or small mammals such as dwarf mongooses.

We cannot stress the value of a quality zoom lens that includes longer focal lengths strongly enough. A prime lens may have a lot of extra lens speed, such as a 600mm f/4, but it is heavy and bulky and terribly limiting when you cannot easily change your shooting distance. Most of the time the African subject is too close and other times it may be too far away. A zoom lens is a far better choice. We find we are constantly zooming our lenses to achieve the best composition. We would not want to be locked into a single focal length.

Accidents happen so prepare for the worst. During the 2023-2024 Kenya tour, one person brought both a Canon 100-500mm lens and a huge Canon 600mm f/4 lens. Unfortunately, while juggling two cameras with the two lenses simultaneously, he dropped his Canon R5 with the 100-500mm lens on the first day and it broke in half. The remainder of the trip was difficult for him with only a 600mm as it was not suitable most of the time. Fortunately, John

was able to let him use his extra 70-200mm lens and that helped, but the focal lengths between 200mm and 600mm were not available. If you can bring two zoom lenses that reach 500mm, that will give you insurance that you will have a lens that works well for most photos in Kenya.

Juggling two cameras with lenses simultaneously in a safari vehicle is an accident waiting to happen. Good safari drivers must be able to move and stop immediately to get the best photo position for their clients. They do not have time to ask each time if all clients in their car have their equipment secured. Our rule is this. When the driver starts the safari vehicle, that is your cue to secure everything. If you are using two cameras at once, it is easy to forget about one of them momentarily, perhaps the one resting on top of the vehicle and that will surely fall off when the vehicle moves.

Therefore, we prefer to use only one camera and lens combo at a time and that is why we highly favor zoom lenses. When the vehicle is moving along the dirt tracks looking for the next photo subject, we are nearly always standing up to get a better view of what is coming toward us. Often we spot a wonderful photo subject before the driver does or alert the driver to a bird or small mammal to photograph that the driver might see and pass by because they do not know we want to photograph this species.

When standing up, I do not want to hold my camera gear and do not want it resting on a seat either as it will eventually bounce off the seat and hit the metal floor and perhaps be damaged. The best answer we have found is to pack a long bag designed for holding a single lens with camera attached. We strap this bag to the upright portion of the seat in our row that we are not sitting in. This secures the camera gear securely, but it is easy and quick to flip up the top of the bag and bring out the camera/lens combo and start photographing right away. Always make sure the straps

securing the long lens bag to the back of the seat are tight and secure!



Figure 4 Many bird winter in Kenya during January, like this red-necked falcon.

Tripod

A tripod is seldom needed. If there is a place where we can get out to photograph, we will let you know ahead of time. Tripods are most typically used inside the protected camp fence for camp wildlife or photos of the camp or your room. You can certainly get by without bringing a tripod with you, especially if you have a camera offering IBIS (in the body image stabilization). If you do bring a tripod, a smaller tripod will do. The less stuff you must carry, the better. Indeed, you might consider a monopod for the few times when you will not be photographing from a bean bag in the safari vehicle. For example, at the Karen Blixen camp, hippos live just on the other side of the river and a tripod or monopod to support your camera gear from the bank at the camp would be useful.

Bean Bags

You have your own private row in the safari vehicle for you and your gear. That means you can easily photograph out either side of the

vehicle. You have your own roof hatch and two side windows. That means you have four shooting positions, and you never know which one is best until you find your subject. Our driver-guides bring bean bags with them that work well, so you do not need to bring any. We prefer to keep the bean bag on the seat with us and then grab it and put it where it works best at the moment. This works if you remember to put the bean bag back on your seat when you are done photographing. If you forget to do that, you will soon lose your bean bag when it falls on the ground, and nobody notices. Our driver-guides specialize in leading photographers, so they know how valuable bean bags are to us.



Figure 5 Even the Agama lizards are colorful.

Most efficient way to work in the vehicle

Our game-drivers know what we want. Do not over direct them! Though, feel free to make suggestions and be gentle. One frequent mistake photographers make happens when the driver is slowly driving the safari vehicle to get ahead of a walking animal. Often a person shouts out “stop now.” The walking animal is in the perfect spot for that person when they shout, but often in a poor position for everyone else. When the driver stops, the others do not have a photograph and ask the driver to move the vehicle and that wastes precious time. Plus, even if the vehicle stops in the perfect spot for the person who shouted “stop,” as soon as the animal takes another step or two it no longer is

in a good spot for photos and usually becomes a butt shot for everyone in the vehicle. And in most cases, nobody gets a good shot. When trying to photograph walking animals, it is always best for the guide to drive the vehicle well ahead of the animal and let it walk toward everyone. Whenever possible, the driver puts the vehicle in a spot where everyone can easily photograph, though sometimes that is not possible. Do be patient to let the ones who do have a shot get the shot.



Figure 6 Try to position your vehicle ahead of an animal moving in a particular direction. Feeding animals can quickly pass by, often resulting in the classic "butt shot" photo.

Though Kenya birds and mammals usually allow incredibly close approach in a slowly moving safari vehicle, they are wild and often react to quick movements of people in the vehicle and birds respond negatively to loud chatter. When the guide approaches a possible photo opportunity, keep noise to a minimum and **do not make quick movements**, or you most likely will make the animal flee! Being noisy and making fast movements while on safari is likely the biggest cause of lost photo opportunities. The guides allow you to stand in the vehicle when they are moving on game drives. All of our drivers have given permission to stand on the seat when they are slowly driving into photo position. If you get in position while the vehicle is slowly underway, you are less likely to frighten a bird away when the vehicle stops. Jumping up to shoot out the

roof hatch and swinging a big lens into position when the bird is close often frightens it. It is **FAR** more effective to be standing on your seat with your camera steadied with a bean bag, not make any motion or noise, and slowly drive to the spot that offers the best photo.



Figure 6 Black rhinos are possible subjects too.

We continually look for great subjects in the best light as the vehicle moves along. For example, if golden afternoon sunshine is lighting all the subjects well on the left side of the vehicle, we watch the left side of the dirt tracks being driven. If we spot a lilac-breasted roller up ahead, for example, we have the driver stop before getting to the bird. Everyone stands on their seat or on the floor if they are tall enough with the camera lens resting on the bean bag, nobody moves or talks, and then the driver slowly drives the vehicle closer to the subject at slow speed. We whisper to the driver when to stop, the driver does and turns the ignition off. With everyone already standing and ready to shoot, usually the bird poses for a few seconds to several minutes allowing plenty of good photos to be taken. Wildlife are used to vehicles passing by them and normally allow them to pass. If you stop, they are quick to notice this “suspicious” vehicle behavior! But if there is no noise or movement, often they pose for photos. Unfortunately, most safari vehicle occupants do not do

it this way. The wrong way to photograph skittish wildlife is to let the driver drive up to the animal quickly, slam the brakes on, turn the ignition off, and then noisy people climb up on their seats to shoot out the roof hatch while swinging big lenses around. Nearly always the subject flees you really cannot blame the bird for flying away!



Figure 7 This lilac-breasted roller in Samburu was approached by getting everyone ready to photograph ahead of time, driving up slowly to the bird, and stopping when we had a distant hill for a background rather than the white sky on this cloudy afternoon.

We have had some clients insist they will not stand on the seat when the vehicle is underway. Keep in mind the vehicle is moving very slowly, so it is perfectly safe if you hang on. If you will not stand up on the seat, then it is best to let the others do so and once they get their photos, you can slowly try to stand and perhaps you may get a photo. But do not try standing when the vehicle first stops at the perfect photo distance because most likely you will scare it (especially birds) and then you will rock the vehicle, and nobody can get a sharp photo until the rocking stops.

Do not wiggle the safari vehicle. Anytime you move in the vehicle, or

even shift your weight, the vehicle rocks. That means you cannot shoot sharp images and nobody else can either. Avoid making unnecessary movements when the landrover is stopped at a photo opportunity. Instead, watch the animal, preferably through the camera viewfinder, and shoot when you get the pose. Just an observation! People who complain the most about rocking vehicles tend to be the biggest offenders. A frequent problem we have in the vehicle is someone decides they have shot enough photos and sits down. Remember, if you are moving, nobody can shoot until you stop! So, if you are done photographing, stay where you are or ask the others in your vehicle if it is okay to move to avoid ruining their photos.

- Keep photo gear to a minimum in the vehicle when on a game drive. Though you may have brought a backup lens (that is a good idea), do not take up space and carry it with you while on safari. If the lens you are using breaks, you can always go to the spare lens when the vehicle returns to camp. Gear does not break very often, so the odds are in your favor of not having any problems.
- Camera gear sitting unrestrained on a seat will certainly hit the floor sometime during the game drive. The metal floor is hard and has broken lenses and cameras in the past. **Never** leave unrestrained gear on the seat. Even if we are at a rest stop, do not leave gear loose on the seat. What if the driver needs to get gas for any number of other reasons, has to move the vehicle, and causes damage to your

gear? Drivers look for loose gear, but they may not notice everything, so do everyone a favor and protect your camera gear. **That is your job!** Consider yourself warned.

- Batteries - When you first arrive in Kenya, check the charge on all camera batteries. If a battery is not fully charged, put it on the charger at the first hotel. When I arrive at the first lodge in Kenya, I lay out all the chargers to both of my cameras and insert the AC power adapter in the power socket of the room. Following the initial game drive, I prioritize placing all used batteries on their chargers before proceeding to lunch. I also download my images to a 4GB SSD SanDisk external hard drive at the same time. We actually download to two different SSD hard drives to have a backup of all photos just in case.
- Memory cards. My cameras – Canon R5 Mark II take two memory cards each. I use 256GB memory cards for each slot. The last thing I want to do is change camera memory cards during a game drive. I **NEVER** fill up 512GB of card memory in one game drive!



Figure 8 Black-backed jackals are small and quite adorable to photograph.



Figure 9 The typical landrover we use.

Be on time! Morning is an especially valuable time to photograph as the animals are active in the cool temperature and the light is sweet. Do not make your landrover late to leave. Arrive at the vehicle at least 10 minutes ahead of time, take your position in the back of the vehicle and attach your bean bags. Be ready to shoot as the vehicle leaves the camp gate since we live among the wildlife, so they are close and all around.

Showers – Game drives can sometimes be dusty. We find taking showers right after the evening game drive works best. Then you go to dinner around 8pm. All rooms have showers.



Figure 10 Masai giraffes are common and fun to photograph.

Exposure

By far the two most useful exposure modes on a Kenya safari is Auto ISO and manual exposure.

Auto ISO with manual shutter speed and aperture and exposure compensation

Nearly every camera offers this option. Auto ISO does exactly what it sounds like. In this mode, manually select the desired shutter speed and aperture. For example, with a lion resting on a termite mound and using Auto ISO, I might pick f/8 and 1/250 second. Since both are manually set, the camera cannot override the shutter speed and aperture selection. As ambient light, subject reflectance, or background brightness changes, the ISO goes up or down to give you a reasonably good exposure. While we prefer full manual exposure for much of our photography, especially landscapes and macro, we seldom use that option in Kenya as it is too easy and quick to drive from a subject in bright sun like a giraffe and then a minute later you are driving in a ravine along the river in the shade when a leopard unexpectedly appears. When you quickly focus on the leopard that is in the shade, the ISO moves higher to produce a suitable exposure. Manual exposure forces you to change the exposure manually and that either takes too long, or you forget altogether. Sometimes you need to let the automatic systems in the camera come to your aid and Auto ISO does that. Auto ISO is like having aperture-priority and shutter-priority simultaneously. Of course, when using Auto ISO, you must use the exposure compensation dial to fine-tune the exposure for best results. Though the shutter speed and aperture are manually set and therefore fixed, Auto ISO allows the ISO to increase or decrease as needed.



Figure 11 The light was steadily declining this evening as we photographed the cheetah.

Years ago, back around 1990, many safari participants used aperture-priority routinely for their photos. Unfortunately, that is a terrible choice for an African safari. Why? Aperture-priority is a semi-automatic exposure mode (so is Auto ISO), as it keeps your set ISO and aperture, and the shutter speed varies. Why is that a problem you ask? Consider this common situation with aperture-priority. You are photographing elephants in the bright early morning sunshine. You manually set ISO 100 and f/8. The shutter speed set by the camera is 1/400 second. You photograph the elephants for a while and then decide to photograph a giraffe on the other side of a tree-lined creek. Your driver takes you down to the creek and into the shade....and then whispers "leopard" as he turns the vehicle off. Excited to see the leopard at close photo range, you quickly put your lens on the bean bag in your window, compose and autofocus the leopard, and shoot away. The leopard is slowly walking in the bushes as leopards do and it only takes seconds for the leopard to disappear into the dense brush, but you take lots of photos. How did you do? Not too well when you view them on your computer because the light in the shade is four stops dimmer than the sunshine lighting the elephants, so aperture-priority lets your shutter speed slow from 1/400 second down to 1/200 to 1/100 to 1/50 and finally down to 1/25 second. With a 300mm lens on a bean bag, it is quite unlikely you captured a sharp image of a walking leopard with 1/25 second, so you did

not get the shot. Had you been using Auto ISO; it is true the ISO would move from ISO 100 to ISO 1600 and there would be more noise in the image. But you can reduce the noise problem with software whereas there is nothing you can do about a leopard that is not sharp because the shutter speed is too slow. Because safari vehicles cover a lot of ground quickly, driving into areas where the quantity of light changes quickly and significantly is a frequent problem and that is where **Auto ISO is king!**

Now we all realize it is possible to force the camera to use a faster shutter speed with aperture priority by setting a high ISO, opening the lens up more, or some of both, but in the few seconds you had to photograph the leopard, do you remember to do that, and more importantly, do you have time to do that anyway? In most cases, the answer is no on both counts.

Keep in mind Auto ISO is an autoexposure mode, just like Program, Aperture-priority, or Shutter-priority. Your camera's meter will average whatever it is metering and set the exposure to produce an overall middle-tone reflectance exposure. If you are photographing a golden lion in yellow grass, your base exposure will be too dark because the camera meter darkened the exposure to get to a dimmer middle-tone gray. To correct this, you must use exposure compensation. Probably an exposure compensation of + 2/3 stops might work well. Indeed, most of the time on safari, we find we need some positive exposure compensation from + 1/3 to + 1 stop of light. All we do is adjust the exposure compensation dial until the rightmost data of the viewfinder histogram touches the right histogram wall. Then we shoot a shot, play it back, and check for blinkies. If there are too many flashing highlights(aka blinkies), we reduce the exposure by 1/3 stop and try again. If there are no blinkies, we add another 1/3 stop and try that.

The ideal exposure when shooting RAW images is to get to the first blinkies. If shooting JPEGs, then you want to be just short of generating any blinkies.



Figure 12 Grant's gazelle are quite common at all parks.



Figure 13 Most likely we will get the chance to photograph a leopard.

Manual Exposure

This exposure mode is fully manual. The ISO, aperture, and shutter speed are all selected by the photographer and the camera cannot automatically change any of them. In practice, set the two exposure controls that are most important to you, and then your metering determines what the other exposure factor must be to suit the situation. This method is

especially effective when panning with wildlife subjects where the background brightness changes. For example, a yellow-billed stork flying against a deep blue sky has the same exposure even if the background should become white clouds. Manual exposure keeps it correct for the bird as long as it stays in the same ambient light where you determined the exposure. If using any auto exposure mode in this case, if you have perfect exposure for the stork against the blue sky, you will not have a suitable exposure when white clouds become the background as the stork flies along. Will you be underexposed....or overexposed? Your image will be too dark (underexposed) because the auto exposure mode suddenly “sees” lighter tones of the white clouds and darkens the exposure to get back to its average. We do not use manual exposure much on Kenya safaris, but if we were doing a lot of panning shots where the brightness of the background changes quickly, then manual exposure is the mode we use.

Exposure Summary

We shoot only RAW images and process the Raw images with software made by our camera makers. In John's case who shoots Canon, that is Canon's DPP4 (latest version). We use the live histogram we see in the viewfinder of our mirrorless cameras, adjust the exposure when using Auto ISO with the exposure compensation control, move the rightmost histogram data over to the right wall of the histogram, and go with that. To check ourselves, we like to allow the first blinkies to appear in the image when we play it back. Blinkies are otherwise known as flashing highlights and the first ones to appear are simple enough. If an exposure of ISO 400 at f/8 and 1/500 second does not produce any blinkies when you shoot the image and play it back, and you then use the exposure compensation control to add 1/3-stop of light, and that does produce a few blinkies in the

highlights when the shot image is played back, those are the first blinkies. We know many say blinkies mean you are overexposing that portion of the image. This is somewhat true but only when the blinkies are excessive.

Remember both the histogram and the highlight alert are based on an embedded JPEG in the RAW file. The RAW file captures a wider range of tones than a JPEG file, so the first blinkies are not overexposed if you are shooting RAW!



Figure 14 Olive baboons are plentiful and a joy to photograph.

Focusing

Autofocus is the way to go for both speed and accuracy. Autofocus is much improved today with modern camera gear and it is especially accurate with mirrorless cameras because sharp focus is determined at the sensor plane and not in the pentaprism of DSLRs. Today we primarily use eye focus with our mirrorless cameras. On those animals where their eye is dark and surrounded by dark fur, sometimes eye focus cannot locate the eye. In that case, we go to single spot focus and use Touch and Drag which is a quick way to quickly move the active focus point. In John's case, with the Canon R5 Mark 2, he slides his right thumb over the LCD to move the active AF point over to coincide with

the animal's face when the image is nicely composed and shoot away. He also has a button on the back of the Canon R5 that he merely pushes in the direction where he wants the active AF point to be.

Make sure your camera and lens are set to continuous autofocus. This mode lets the camera change its focus as the animal approaches or moves further away. You do not want to use single or one-shot autofocus with wildlife.



Figure 15 The typical sunrise in the Mara with the acacia trees!

Always use the High-speed Shooting Option

When photographing wildlife, we always shoot many images per second and never shoot single images. Obviously, you do not need the shooting speed when photographing an elephant merely standing in place, but you never know when an animal will become suddenly quite active. To be on the safe side, pick the greatest number of images per second as possible. It is easy enough to delete unneeded duplicate images of a still animal, but you can never get back the magnificent action image you missed because you were using a slow shooting speed.

Over the past few years, many new cameras have more shooting speed options. John's Canon R5 Mark II over three shooting speeds that can be set by the user. I set the slowest

speed to 7.5 images per second and that is suitable for fairly slow wildlife. If animals are interacting with each other, then I use the medium shooting speed that I have set to 15 images per second. When photographing dramatic fast action like two animals fight or birds flying past, then I use the fastest shooting speed possible at 30 images per second.



Figure 16 Even when this common zebra is merely looking at you, shoot a lot of photos. The zebra was swishing its tail about and in most images the tail was not in a photogenic spot. Unlike the next image, the tail is in a good position here.



Figure 17 The tail is now behind the zebra making this image less desirable. If I did not use it to show you the problem of the missing tail, I would have deleted this image.

Back-button Focus

For 30 years prior to moving on to mirrorless cameras, John used back-button focus. This method involves assigning the autofocus to a button on the back of the camera and removing

autofocus from the shutter button. This allows you to keep the camera set to continuous AF all the time and you are ready for still or active animals quickly. If the animal is motionless, point the active AF point at the animal's head, press the button on the back of the camera that autofocus is assigned to, the camera focuses on the animal, let up on the button to lock the focus, recompose, and shoot away with excellent focus on the subject. If the animal is moving, put the AF point on its head, press and hold the button in that controls autofocus, and shoot away by pressing the shutter button while simultaneously holding the back-button down to keep autofocus active.

It takes some time to get used to back-button focusing, so Kenya is not a good place to learn this technique. Try the zoo to get used to it. But if you think you are upgrading to a mirrorless cameras that has eye focus, many will find they no longer need BBF. I stressed using back-button focus in all the photo books I wrote and had published over the years. At that time hardly anyone was using it, so it was important information. However, now that back-button focus is all the rage and some even program their cameras for three different ways to back-button focus, due to the eye focus capabilities of our mirrorless cameras, we no longer use BBF.

It is much easier to use a grid of active AF points and set your camera to eye detection. When photographing, make sure some portion of the focus grid coincides with the eye, and press the shutter button half-way down. When the viewfinder shows the camera has found the eye, press the shutter button down all the way to capture images. John has done it this way for his last two million images and has no trouble at all getting sharp photos consistently.

Image Stabilization

Since you are photographing on a bean bag in a safari vehicle that is often wiggling a bit due to occupant or wind movement, always keep image stabilization on. If you have image stabilization options, be sure to select the appropriate one. My Canon lens offers IS mode 1 and 2. Mode 1 stabilizes the image in both the vertical and horizontal direction and that makes it ideal for still subjects. If you are panning with the subject, though, then use Mode 2 as it stabilizes the image only in the direction you are not panning. In most cases on a Kenya safari, you will be panning left or right, so Mode 2 does not stabilize the lens in the horizontal plane you are panning in but does stabilize lens movement in the vertical direction and that helps you shoot sharper images. We normally leave our lenses set to Mode 2, rather than switch back and forth between Mode 1 and Mode 2.

Other Techniques for Sharp Wildlife Images

You may hear some wildlife photographers shoot everything with their lens wide open. Shooting wide open does help you get sharp photos where the focus lies because you can use a faster shutter speed and the background is more out of focus with the shallower depth of field. But, when the animal is close, often only a small portion of the animal is sharply in focus due to too little depth of field. While we like out of focus backgrounds too, Dixie and I prefer getting our wildlife subject as fully in sharp focus as possible most of the time. Usually this means stopping the lens down to f/8 or f/11. Indeed, when two or more animals are the primary subjects in the image, we sometimes stop down to f/16 and may even ask the driver to move the vehicle a little, so we are more parallel to multiple animals. Stopping down more and getting parallel are two keys to sharper wildlife subjects.



Figure 18 John got this pair of gerenuks in sharp focus by having the safari vehicle stop where both animals were close to the same distance away and then stopping down to f/11 for more depth of field. By the way, the gerenuks were watching some lions eating a warthog on the other side of our vehicle.

Focus Stacking is another super way to get better overall focus on a single or multiple wildlife subjects. Most cameras have in-camera auto focus stacking where the camera quickly shoots multiple images that are focused at slightly different distances. John typically used increment 3 and 10 shots to cover an animal or group of them. Usually, he does not need all the images the camera shoots because some images may be shot that are past the animal. John selects the images he needs to extend the depth of field and thus overall sharpness, processes them using Canon's DPP4, and then merges the images with Helicon Focus since he has a lifetime subscription to that specialized focus stacking software.



Figure 20 I focused on the left lion, used in-camera focus stacking for sharpness on both lions, and combined the shots with Helicon Focus.

Big Lens Switches

Your telephoto lens may have switches on the outside of the lens. Common ones are AF and image stabilization switches. If you always plan to use autofocus (we do), it makes sense to make sure you never accidentally turn AF off on your lens. And that can easily happen when shooting on a bean bag because there is a lot of friction between the lens and the bean bag when you slide the lens forward or backwards on the bag. Switches can unexpectedly be turned on or off. If you have a switch on your lens that you know you do not want to change on safari, it is smart to use duct tape over the switch to keep the switch where you want it. You do not want to be on a game drive with lots of subjects and your lens autofocus switch is turned to the manual position without you knowing it. You will have out of focus images if that happens.

Firmware Upgrades

Be sure to always have the latest firmware for your camera as often the latest firmware will make your camera work better. Also, many lenses work better with their own firmware upgrade. Go to the web site of your camera or lens maker and check to see what the latest firmware update is and that you are using it. It

really is a simple process to download the firmware upgrade, open it up if it is zipped, and copy and paste it to a clean card that you put in your camera. Then find the firmware upgrade tool in your camera menu and follow the simple instructions.

Camo Covering on the Lens

Many wildlife photographers use a camouflage cover on their lens. This is fine if you like it, but often the cover makes it difficult to use the switches on the lens. Wildlife know the vehicle is there, so you are really not hiding. I doubt a camo cover on your gear will actually be helpful for getting the photo, but often it causes failure when the shooter cannot change something on the lens quickly. Outside of putting camo tape on the lens hood, we do not use camo covers on the rest of the lens – ever! And few photographers shoot as many wildlife photos as we do.



Figure 19 Lions are more actively hunting in January.

Lens Hood

Kenya can be dusty. Keep your lenses clean and always use your lens hood as it reduces flare problems and also helps to keep dust off the glass. We do suggest using camo duct tape to cover your lens hood.

Wear a Hat

Being on the equator, Kenya days are typically sunny. Wear a hat to protect your head and to shade your viewfinder when shooting.

Use Camera Cards with Huge Capacity

John's Canon R5 Mark 2 has two card slots. One takes an SD card and the other takes a CFexpress card. So, in his camera all the time there are a Sony Tough CFexpress 256GB card and a Lexar SecureDigital 256GB Professional 166x card. That means he begins every game drive with 512GB of camera memory and that has always been enough for one game drive and John's RAW files are rather large at 45MPs.

We have heard advice about using many small cards. If the small card malfunctions, you do not lose so many images as many experts advise. That sounds reasonable. But, let me tell you about losing images. I once used only smaller memory cards and on one Kenya safari, a rosy-patched bushshrike suddenly appeared on top of the bush next to the safari vehicle and sang away. I put the lens on the bird, shot a few images but just before shooting, the bird turned away, so I only got the back of its head. Then when it finally turned back to me, I pressed the shutter again and the camera failed to shoot because the cards in the camera were full. I rapidly turned the camera off, took the cards out, put more cards in the slots, turned the camera back on, put the lens back on the bird and composed.....and the bird flew away. So, I got no useable images of that shrike – a bird I have been wanting to get pleasing images of for more than 30 safaris.



Figure 20 Finally, in 2023, I got a photo of the rosy-patched bushshrike, 20 years after I failed to get it due to the small memory cards I used at the time.



Figure 21 The dirt "highway" in the Kenya parks. Animals are typically at close distances.

I never worry about the card malfunctions now as I have never had one. When I return from a game drive, I download all images to two external hard drives. When I check that all images are downloaded, I put the memory card back in the camera and format the card, so it is ready for the next game drive. I never use camera memory cards to store images for extended periods of time. Both Dixie and I use SSD external hard drives for that!

Small Pair of Binoculars

It is productive when on safari to help the driver find wildlife. Always be looking as you drive along. Your safari guides are terrific and most of the time they will spot great subjects before

anyone else in the landrover does, but driving is a distraction for them. You can concentrate more on looking and spotting worthwhile subjects. Often the subject is a bird perched in a bush along the track. Be sure to let the driver know you want to photograph it. Often the safari vehicle stops on a hill to let the driver scan the plains below for lions, cheetahs, and other creatures. Feel free to use your binoculars to help spot good stuff to photograph.



Figure 22 Cheetahs live out in the open plains. With binoculars, even spotted cheetahs can often be detected from quite a distance.

Keep Your lenses and Camera Sensors Clean

Any dust on the glass of your lens will degrade image quality. Keep your glass clean. We will be driving mostly on dirt tracks while on safari and they can be dusty when it hasn't rained recently! Always use a blower brush to blow dust off your lens and use a microfiber cloth to gently wipe the dust off the glass. Do not use the same cloth for wiping the metal parts of your lens. The cloth used on the glass must be as clean as possible. Sometimes it is necessary to use a lens cleaning liquid to get the lens truly clean. Also, keep the lens on your camera as much as possible to keep floating dust out of the interior of the camera. Dust that settles in the sensor box of your camera will eventually take up residence on your sensor and then it

will create a spot in every photo you shoot. There are special tools for cleaning your sensor if you must but avoid cleaning the sensor more than necessary.

Safari Times and Strategies

In all the game parks, we leave a little before sunrise around 6:15 am and we normally stay out until late in the morning around noon. By noon, the equatorial sun has risen high in the sky, the temperature is warm, and the wildlife tend to retire to the bushes and forests to rest in the shade. Around 3:30 to 4pm, depending on the park, we drive out to photograph wildlife until sunset around 6:30pm. This means you have between noon and 3:30 pm to eat lunch with the group, take a shower, recharge batteries, download images, clean camera gear, and relax!

OPLs and How to Shoot Outstanding Wildlife Photos

Everyone wants to photograph cats, especially lions, cheetahs, and leopards. Lions are easy to find and photograph in the Masai Mara. Cheetahs are less numerous, but we always find them in good spots for photos too. Leopards are the tough ones. They are not afraid of our vehicles at all, but leopards tend to dwell in dense vegetation like the bushes along the creek. Finding one is hit or miss. If you devote the day to finding a leopard, you probably will fail and shoot few photos. Our drivers know we are all keen to photograph the big cats, but rather than unproductively looking for leopards and doing little else, we photograph the next animal in a good spot with suitable light while our driver monitors the radio for leopard sightings. Invariable, someone finds the leopard and then we join them. That is why we call them OPS's ("Other People's Leopards"). As soon as someone finds the leopard, then we drive over to take photos. Sometimes we find the leopard, but you never know when it might

show. A leopard is not something you can plan on, but sometimes they appear and provide splendid photo opportunities, especially on a safari of this length.



Figure 23 This is the leopard we found during our 2023-2024 photo tour near Mara Intrepids Lodge - the last stop of our safari!

On each game drive the drivers have a destination in mind, but we drive slowly to see and photograph the splendid wildlife we find as we go. The variety and numbers of birds and mammals in Kenya is amazing. It is not unusual to get close shots of more than 20 major wildlife species on a single game drive. Heck, we remember one especially productive game drive where we photographed lions, leopards, cheetahs, and a serval cat all in a single morning! That was an amazing game drive, and you might get one like that too.



Figure 24 You will see and photograph lots of elephants! They are common at all three of the parks we photograph in.

Look for and Spend Time with the next Best Shot

All too often folks on a Kenya safari have the wrong attitude if they want to shoot gorgeous wildlife photos. Let me give you a couple of examples from previous photo tours. I once had a client who photographed a Grevy's zebra in Samburu National Reserve late in the morning as we were working our way back to camp. The zebra was standing on a small hill, and the background was white clouds, and the sun was high overhead. They had the vehicle stop, and the client shot away. Once they had enough, the landrover continued on to camp. Later that afternoon, the vehicle this person was in came across a small herd of Grevy's zebra in the golden grass about ½-hour before sunset. Red-billed oxpeckers were perched on some of the zebra's backs and a couple zebras had a bird perched on their face. The person who photographed the Grevy's zebra in the harsh light of late morning against a white cloud background complained they did not want to waste their time with this herd of zebras because they already photographed that species. When you find zebras like this, this is what you photograph as the situation is now much better with the birds on them in the golden light.

Rather than wasting time on a little bee-eater across the creek in horrible light and tiny in the frame, by moving along we soon found a pair of little bee-eaters at nearly full-frame distance with a 600mm focal length and in wonderful soft evening sunshine with a pleasing background. In other words, spend your time on the excellent photo opportunities you are sure to find and do not waste time on the bad ones.

I have enjoyed photographing on Kenya photo safaris for at least 500 days of my life, and my heart still quickens during the first two and last two hours of the day when the sunshine is so wonderful to work with as everyone photographs the magnificent wildlife. On a cloudy day, the light is quite photogenic all day long! And even if the sun is high in the sky (most of the day it is like that because you are on the equator), it still is possible to make pleasing images thanks to shooting RAW images and good image processing. Thanks to digital, the effective photo time on a game drive is greatly extended, compared to the film days of



Figure 25 Egyptian Goose

the eighties and nineties. Now we all can effectively shoot images in the dim light of dawn and dusk and also during the middle of the day light!

The way we get our clients on excellent photo opportunities is we continually look for subjects, especially on the side of the vehicle where the light is most favorable and have our driver stop at the next best photo opportunity. Kenya game drivers get their tips from finding cats especially, so they are programmed to always be looking for them. We want cats too, but our drivers have been with us long enough that they know we want any wildlife subject in a favorable situation, so now they look for pretty birds and the smaller mammals too.

And always keep in mind that Dixie and I are leading this tour not only to show you the incredible beauty of Kenya and joy of seeing all the wildlife, but we want you to shoot outstanding wildlife photos and learn a lot about photography. Ask all the questions you wish! We are happy to answer them for you.



Figure 26 Coke's hartebeest



Figure 27 Lesser flamingos



Figure 28 Spur-winged Plover



Figure 29 A cheetah backlit showing how the sunshine rims the cat.



Figure 30 Mount Kilimanjaro

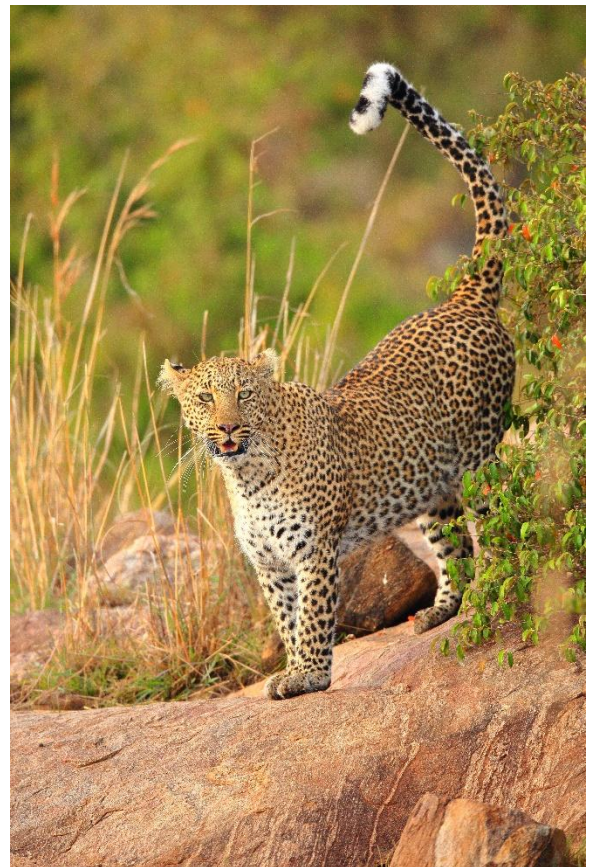


Figure 31 Leopard



Figure 32 You do not find hippos out feeding in fields during the day that often, so when you see something unusual like this, go for it first!



Figure 35 Eland family



Figure 33 Male lions pose nicely for our cameras.



Figure 36 Crowned cranes are spectacular birds found in grassy areas.



Figure 34 Rosy-breasted Bush Shrike



Figure 37 Topi are abundant in the Mara, and many have calves with them in January.



Figure 38 Everyone's favorite small bird (size of a robin) is the lilac-breasted roller. You will surely get to photograph it as they are common in the Mara.



Figure 39 Common zebras are plentiful on safari at Amboseli and the Mara.



Figure 40 Sometimes it rains in Kenya. Do we stay in when it is raining? Absolutely not!!!! While we close the roof hatches when it is pouring, we go out and shoot through open windows during downpours. Wildlife are magical in the rain. Often they stand in the rain and just look at our vehicles providing wonderful poses, such as this baby common zebra.



Figure 41 Though John has led more than 40 photo tours to Kenya, each tour offers something new. In 2023-2024, for the first time John saw and photographed this aardwolf, usually a nocturnal animal at Samburu National Park.



Figure 42 Everyone loves to photograph the lilac-breasted roller.



Figure 43 There are times when a short zoom lens is desirable for making wildlife landscapes. Samburu National Park was green for us in one January and that made for spectacular backgrounds with these reticulated giraffes.



Figure 44 Don't forget to use long lenses for wildlife portraits!



Figure 45 Greater flamingos at Amboseli National Park



Figure 46 African spoonbill about to eat breakfast!

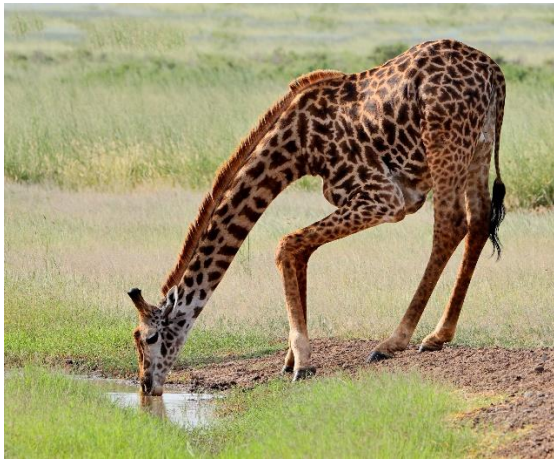


Figure 47 Masai giraffe drinking. This is a dangerous position for this tall animal as a lion can jump on its head when it is drinking to take it down.



Figure 48 Baby elephant staying close to its mother for protection.

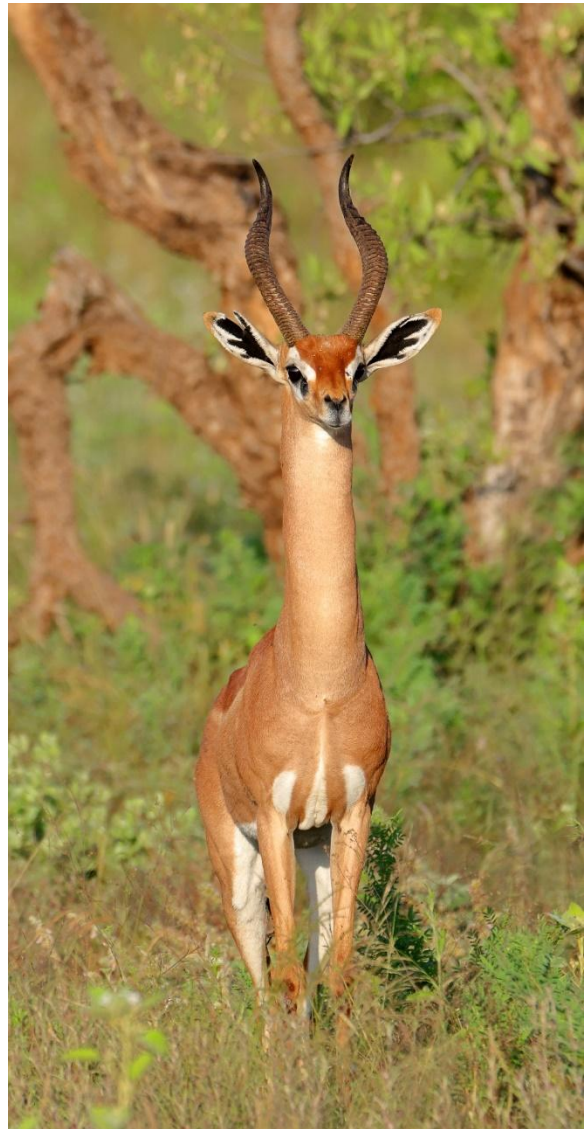


Figure 49 Gerenuck are common at Samburu National Park.



Figure 50 Rufous-crowned roller

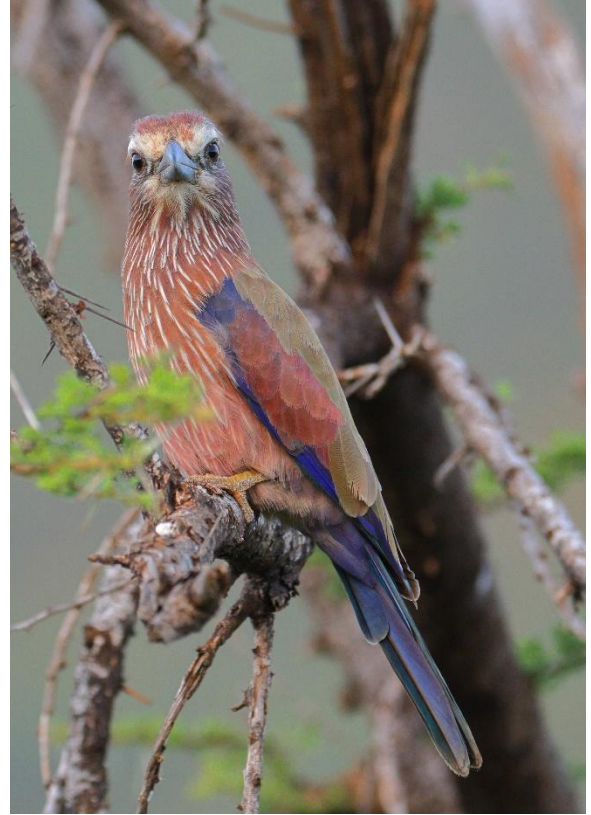


Figure 52 Rufous-crowned roller



Figure 51 Rufous-crowned roller



Figure 53 We do not see the rufous-crowned roller that often on safari. So, when we found this one that allowed us to approach closely, we photographed it for at least 30 minutes on various perches before it flew off to a spot that we could not follow in our land cruiser.