

All images: Greg Du Toit

- CLOSE UP -

GREG DU TOIT

As the 51st Wildlife Photographer of the Year exhibition begins its year-long world tour in London, Greg du Toit, the overall winner in 2013,



Looking back, Greg du Toit can now say that he has more than fulfilled his childhood dreams of having a life in the African bush among the continent's iconic wildlife, but the idea of being a photographer was a concept that developed much later xxxxxxxxxxxx
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Which interest came first, wildlife or photography?

It was wildlife first, quite a long way before photography. I've only been photographing wildlife for the last 15 years. From about the age of 10, I was pretty much obsessed with wildlife and doing family safaris in Kruger National Park. I knew that when I left school I wanted to work and live in the bush permanently.

So what was your first job?

It was an apprenticeship with a company called Timbavati Wilderness Trails. It offered walking trails on the western boundary of Kruger. An apprentice may sound smart but basically I was just a camp hand. I had to clean the lanterns, fix the roads, dig the holes for the long drop toilets. It was very rustic and basic because there was no electricity, no landlines or cell phones. I absolutely loved it. All the jobs I was given to do meant going out into the bush and it was just like a boy's playground. I would swim in the rivers, stalk the big game and have a great time. The cherry on top was that if I'd finished my chores I was allowed to join a walk and carry a backpack, or I was allowed to go on the afternoon safari drive. That's where it all began for me. ▶



It sounds like the perfect training ground

Yeah, I think with hindsight now it was the perfect training ground to become a professional wildlife photographer because I was messing around with animals all the time and learning not just about them but the whole environment. When we did walking trails we looked at grasses and flowers and trees, so I really got a feel for the whole ecosystem. But in those days I didn't have a camera and there were no cell phones, so I wasn't even taking cell phone photos. I didn't have photography on my mind at all.

How old were you then?

I was 18, straight out of school. My mates went to uni and I went to the

bush. At first I used to work for my board and lodging and then I was earning about \$40 a month.

Am I right in saying you didn't have any formal training in photography?

Yeah, not at all. I had some formal training in nature conservation, so I studied zoology, botany and ecology. From the time I first picked up a camera in about 2001 and then right up until I went digital in 2007, I was living permanently in the bush, first in South Africa, then Botswana, then Kenya, then Tanzania, and I'm completely self-taught. On film it was quite tough because I was only able to get my films developed when I was back in town, which was every six weeks or so. I wasn't



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very disciplined at writing notes and sometimes I'd get a roll of film back and the whole thing would be black and I'd have no idea why! So my learning curve was long and slow – and expensive. In those days I would spend every spare cent I had on film because it was like \$10 a roll and I'd shoot 40 rolls in a six-week period.

Which was your first camera?

I bought my very first camera with money I got from my folks on my 21st birthday. It was a Pentax MZ-30, a film camera of course, and I got a Sigma 70-300mm lens. I thought I was the business.

When did you realise a life in photography was the way ahead to the life you wanted?



The reason why I bought a camera was because I was living in the bush and I was seeing and experiencing all these cool things. One day, I don't why, but something awoke within me and I wanted to share what I was seeing with my friends and family. That's what triggered me into getting a camera. From the very first time I picked that camera up I knew that was what I wanted to do to the absolute best of my ability. I had no idea about a career or the realities of a career. I just knew that this was something I really wanted to excel in and totally commit to it and that's what I did.

Let's fast forward to 2013 when you won Wildlife Photographer of the Year. To what extent has

PROFILE Greg du Toit

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■ Greg du Toit, 38, is one of the new generation of prolific South African photographers specializing in wildlife safari images.

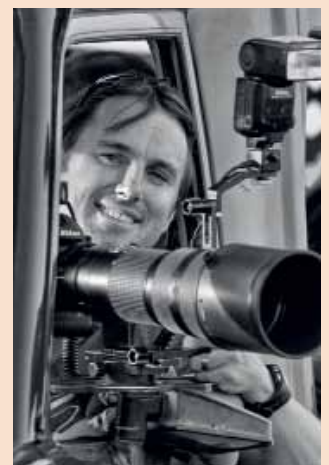
■ In the same week in October 2013, he launched his

first book, *African Wildlife Exposed* and was named Wildlife Photographer of the Year.

■ Based in Johannesburg, Greg spends most of his time working in the bush of Botswana, Kenya, Tanzania and

South Africa.

■ He is a tour leader and partner for Oryx Worldwide Photographic Expeditions, leading safaris in southern and eastern Africa.



FAVOURITE LOCATION

Greg du Toit is passionate about Africa and knows the continent's wildlife hotspots intimately, so who better to ask about naming the number one location for wildlife photography in Africa?

Where is your favourite location for wildlife photography?

■ I think its Mashatu in Northern Tuli, Botswana. I really like it there because it's like no other place in Africa in terms of landscape and habitat. It's just so unique. It's one of those ecosystems where it's just full of surprises. You never know what you're going to see. There's incredible diversity, ranging from big cats through to small predators, through to beautiful birds and landscapes.

Do you get there often?

■ I actually run a predator workshop there. I do about four or five of these a year and we use those hides where I shot my Wildlife Photographer of the Year winning



winning that competition helped your career?

Although I'm young, I think the award came at a time when I had been photographing really, really hard for ten years. I had committed a lot of my life to it. I'd done a lot of the leg work, I'd just published my first book and got my business set up. It wasn't so much that winning Wildlife Photographer of the Year set my career ablaze, but what it did do was two things. One, I'd just self-published my book, so that was out of pocket for me. I launched the book the week before I won, so my timing could not have been better. The first print run sold out in four months and I got my money back, so that was really significant. The other thing was that as wildlife



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photographers you spend so much of your time alone on a mission, you're muttering to yourself, talking to yourself. But winning Wildlife Photographer of the Year made me realize that I do belong to a community of photographers. I got a really nice pat on the back from my contemporaries and that meant the world to me.

How was your success received in South Africa?

When I came back to South Africa, there was a lot of media coverage around it. I was on the radio, I was on the TV, I even had just the average man in the street embrace my success, which as a wildlife photographer was something completely new for me because we are not like sports stars or celebrities. Just to get that sort of recognition from both my peers and from non-photographers, fellow South Africans who were just so proud that a South African had excelled, that was definitely a highlight, maybe not of my career, but definitely of my life.

Which has been the hardest animal to photograph and how did you do it?

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When I moved to Kenya to run a really remote safari camp with my wife, it was in the South Rift Valley of Kenya, on community land. There is wildlife there but it is incredibly shy. The lions that live there are still co-existing alongside the Maasai, so they are like ghosts, you hardly ever see them. But just below our camp was a waterhole and I saw tracks of these lions around the waterhole and I decided that I wanted to get photographs of a truly wild lion, a lion that is still roaming Africa wild and free, living amongst the villages. I thought it would be a quick project, so I built a little hide and waited and waited. To cut a long story short, it took 16 months and the last three months I literally sat in the water just to mask my scent and eventually



I got photographs of those lions. To this day, that was the toughest project I took on.

Most people outside of Africa imagine the majority of lions are free roaming, shy and wild, but that's not the case, is it?

No, it's not. Currently, only about half of our lions are free ranging, but we are losing them at a rapid rate. We've lost about 40% of our lion population in the last 30 years. The only place in Africa where you can be guaranteed of seeing lions is within the established parks and reserves, like the Maasai Mara. Outside of those protected areas, lions are on the decline and quite hard to photograph.

So getting that picture must have been incredibly satisfying?

Yes, it really was, but I didn't publish those photographs for years. As soon as I had photographed a truly wild lion I felt somehow as if I had wound the clock back in time, that I had seen and experienced the really wild Africa that the early explorers did. So it was like a personal triumph. It was only many years later that the story got published and it went viral, but the point was largely lost: it just became about this crazy photographer and what he did.

Do you see your love of wildlife photography as a passion or an obsession?

I think I would like to answer that it is a passion, but if I had to be



honest with myself and with you, it's an obsession because I spend my entire life thinking about photography; there's not a day goes by when photography doesn't totally dominate my life. So it is an obsession and I'm not too sure what to do about that!

Which is your desert island lens?
Mine's the Nikkor 80-400mm f/4.5-5.6. The new version is so nice and sharp. That's my go-to lens.

What was your first Nikon camera?
The F100 – a film camera. I took a loan and bought it in 2004 and that was the one I took to the waterhole to photograph those lions. What a superb camera. It was fantastic. I've



still got it on my desk. I'll never sell it.

Which camera bodies and lenses do you use now?

I travel a lot within Africa and on small flights we're only allowed a 15kg total baggage allowance, and that includes clothes and cameras! Normally, I buy a freight seat but that only increases my baggage limit to 20kg, so I travel with not a lot of gear at all. I normally shoot with just one camera body – I've got the D4s at the moment, and I have a back-up body, a Nikon D750. I absolutely love the D4s, it is a fantastic camera and does everything I need. Then I'll have my 600mm f/4, a 1.4x converter and I've got the 80-400mm f/4.5-5.6G ED VR.

I've always got my macro lens, the 105mm f/2.8, and my wide-angle: I use the 16-35mm f/4 because it's still quite small and light. I also have a 24-70mm f/2.8. I always have a flash, the SB-900. That's it. And a beanbag! I leave the tripod. I hardly ever take a tripod.

Is there a camera that had a significant impact on the way you work?

Yeah, it was the Nikon D3. I couldn't believe its low light capability. It opened a whole new world to me in terms of low light imagery. At the time I was photographing leopards extensively and suddenly I could photograph these leopards at night, just using a torch and with no flash. When they launched the D3 I

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FAVOURITE PHOTO

Best known for his images of Africa's iconic wildlife, Greg has a surprising choice for his favourite photograph – a subject that could have fitted into a matchbox...

Out of all of your images, do you have a favourite?

■ It's quite a strange one. I say that because it's a macro shot. We were living in southern Tanzania and the rains had set in so I couldn't drive anywhere. There were these beautiful yellow flowers growing right outside our house, and I said to my wife, 'I'm just going to get a shot of these flowers.' I was about to take a shot when one of the petals moved and it was a spider called the flower crab spider. I thought, 'That's cool, I'll get a shot of the spider.' And then a bee landed to pollinate and the spider grabbed the bee, so I closed my aperture down and was about to take another shot when I noticed something on the back of the female spider and it was a little male and he was mating with her, so I thought, 'Wow, I have three subjects now!' I was about to take the shot and two flies landed, one on each of the wings of the bee. Suddenly I had four subjects, all within a frame that could have fitted into a matchbox. I call this photograph 'Food Chain' and I photographed all this where just a month prior there was nothing but a bare patch of earth. It sums up the incredible diversity you get in the African

realized I've got a tool that can do something that no previous camera has been able to do, which means no other photographer has been able to do it. So that really motivated me to work on an extensive leopard portfolio which I then managed to publish in BBC Wildlife and Geo magazine in Germany.

Do you shoot video?

I never shoot video and most of my clients on safari never ask about video. For me, video and stills are two totally different languages. My whole brain is wired to communicate through a single moment, to tell a story through a moment, whereas video for me is telling a story through a series of lesser moments. As a stills photographer I'm chasing

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that one big moment, so I find I can't video and chase the big moment.

Are you the sort of photographer who deletes a lot when he gets back or do you keep absolutely everything?

I keep everything, but what I do is I only select my winning shots. I do this because it is easier to pick the winners than delete all the junk. It takes less time.

Do you use Lightroom or Photoshop?

I use Photoshop. I'm not really a computer savvy guy. I enjoy being out in the field. I've heard Lightroom is great but just learning one set of software was a mission for me.



© Greg de

Are you a light processor of your images, or do you fiddle a lot with your favourite images?

No, I don't really like to fiddle. I get most of my satisfaction out of getting most of the stuff done in camera. I like my Raw files to contain the essence of the photograph and then in Photoshop I just do the basics: I sharpen and just add some saturation and contrast and that's it. I've got one recipe that I use for all of my photographs so I don't mess around too much.



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What would you like to see as a feature in the next Nikon camera?

The cameras are really very good, so I can't really say anything on the camera side, but on the lens side what I'm really desperate for is a lighter 600mm f/4. It's like a ball and chain I drag all over this continent. Every flight I take it's an issue. If they could make a lighter 600mm f/4, I tell you I'd be the happiest man alive!

Who are your heroes who have inspired you?

The funny thing is most of my heroes are not photographers, they're nature conservationists. There are three who stand out. One is Dr Ian Player who wrote the foreword to my book African Wildlife Exposed. He did some fantastic rhino conservation work in the 1940s and 50s when rhinos were a lot closer to extinction that

they are now – he led the team that brought them back from the brink. Dr Iain Douglas Hamilton, who is a Kenya-based conservationist, is also one of my heroes. Moving more to the wildlife side is a film maker, Alan Root, who won an Academy Award in 1960 for a documentary called Serengeti Shall Not Die, so he's one I really look up to. I've just read his biography. He showed Dian Fossey her first gorillas.

What about a photographer?

It would have to be Jim Brandenburg. That's more recent. When I won Wildlife Photographer of the Year, he was the chairman of the judging panel. I found him to be such a gentleman, so generous and inspirational, and so wise. The one thing he said to me that I will never forget is that a photograph shouldn't speak a thousand words, it is its own language. And the quote of his

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that I'm really trying to apply to my own work is that a photograph need only speak for itself. He's been a real inspiration to me of late.

What has been your most embarrassing moment?

I was camping in Nakuru National Park in Kenya and a baby rhino with its mother ran across the road into the bush and I really wanted to get a shot so I jumped out of the car. You're not allowed to get out of the car there, not even on the road. I started leopard crawling through the bush and I got this feeling that I was being watched. So I turned around to look at the road and right behind me was a ranger's car and it was packed full of rangers with their automatic rifles sticking out, and they were just watching me. I turned around and gave them a sheepish wave and they called me to the car. I felt like this ignorant tourist and



they gave me this big lecture about how dangerous rhinos are and I could be killed. I thanked them for saving my life and they let me go. But it was quite embarrassing when I had turned around and they were all just staring at me.

Is there another genre of photography that you're attracted to?

I would love to join a landscape workshop. One thing I find very difficult about wildlife photography is that I'm always in a vehicle, which I don't like because it's noisy and uncomfortable and all the shots are like grab shots. You've got to grab it before the animal walks off or the bird flies off, so I would love to spend a couple of hours working on my scene, stretching my legs and waiting for the sun to come out. It just seems to be very romantic.

What are your goals and ambitions for the future?

I've had two goals. One, is to just drink deep of Africa and to experience as many incredible wildlife moments as possible, and I'm really on track with that. I've seen more than I would ever have dreamt was possible and I go to places now that as a kid I only dreamed of seeing. But what I would like to do is to get my images working more: working for myself obviously too, but working for conservation and especially as fine art. I feel the best way for a wildlife photograph to be appreciated is as a work of fine art, whereby it's printed nice and big, framed and displayed for people to just admire and enjoy.

• To see more of Greg's images, visit www.gregdutoit.com, and to find out about the expeditions he leads,