

The Wild Ones

IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT THE LIGHT AND THE RIGHT LENS BUT ANTICIPATING ANIMAL BEHAVIOUR THAT CAPTURES A SINGLE, EXTRAORDINARY MOMENT. THESE THREE WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHERS HAVE SPENT MOST OF THEIR WAKING MOMENTS WATCHING AND WAITING FOR JUST THAT.

BY LES AUPIAIS



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An Artist's Eye

Where does a deep passion for the bush come from? It helps if your father is park warden of a reserve in Zimbabwe and you are a bush-bound little boy with school lessons taught by radio. There was no TV. Ross Couper's no-nonsense Australian-born mother said that if he really wanted to entertain himself, he could get out a pen and paper and draw. Sketching became a hobby with his subject matter all around him. Like the lines leading to a vanishing point on a horizon, Ross would be drawn inexorably to a nexus of his childhood, field guide training, his art and his calling.

While stationed in the Pilanesberg National Park with an opportunity to help re-introduce wildlife to the area, he met his future wife, Lindsay. And then, dramatically, Ross's terrain changed.

Lindsay suggested that he join her on an international cruise line for six months to see the world and save money. The half gap-year turned into 11 years at sea and tens of thousands of guest interactions. On the couple's flight back to South Africa, Ross began chatting to a fellow passenger. The conversation turned to his love of the bush and the couple's experience in management. He left

the plane with a business card in his pocket and a parting comment that if he was ever looking for a job, he should call...

Within seven months, Ross and Lindsay began working for Singita, a conservation and eco-tourism brand with 15 lodges and camps across four African countries. The compass point had reset to his true north.

In the first years, while Lindsay used her management skills, Ross returned to field guiding.

Today, the couple travel between the group's lodges, tented camps and manor houses, Ross as a brand photographer and Lindsay as a vital digital co-pilot. Her meticulous styling and skilful photographic post-production create a portfolio of visuals for the group, from a chef's artistry on a plate to lodge architecture and interiors. For Ross, it may be a case of perfecting on perfection but there's a growing market for large format wildlife photography and his work is in high demand.

During lockdown and subsequent travel restrictions, Singita was the first group to broadcast live game drives twice a day to thou-

PHOTOGRAPHS: ROSS COUPER

sands of people across the world who were locked out from nature. The drives became their window to the wild. Ross and other Singita guides maintained a steady, information-packed narrative about animals that had characters, curious behaviour traits and, soon, a fully engaged fan club. Once again, Ross engaged with a constantly shifting international group of guests, answering their live messages on the fly and digging deeply into his knowledge of the bush and its creatures.

Ross never left his artist's eye behind. 'I think my natural sense of composition is always there but with photography, it's also about capturing a connection between the subject and the viewer. Part of the success of the picture is an intuitive understanding of the animal's behaviour,' he says. 'If you know an animal well enough, you know when it's likely to yawn or jump from one level to another.' The German word 'Sitzfleisch' sums up what else it takes: the ability to remain sitting in one spot and be patient, extremely patient.

It's hard to plan a photographic coup in the wild but sometimes the bush spirits are with you.

'The other day Lindsay and I sighted a cheetah on a fallen

marula log with an elephant in the near distance behind it.' And there was the shot: a perfect alignment of two species, the elephant framed between the legs of the cheetah. One of his most-loved photographs is a head-on portrait a rhino, nose down following the scent of a female, ears perfectly aligned.

If positioning is nine-tenths of the law, perseverance counts for the balance. In the pouring rain in a fork in a blackwood tree is a serval, a long-limbed cat rarely ever seen in daylight hours. Poncho on, camera ready, it turns into an exhilarating high-speed capture.

There's no guarantee that the elephant and cheetah will ever play ball but being there in game-rich, animal habituated terrain is half the trick. 'And never, ever pack away your camera,' says Ross.

The Detective

We may be very young when experiences leave a lasting imprint on us. Juan Pinto was three years old and travelling through the Kruger National Park with his parents when 'right there, on the Orpen road,' he says, 'three lions downed a giraffe.'

It was game over for the boy, so to speak. 'I can't say that I remember the actual incident but when I looked at the photographs...' There it was then, a

captured moment that would connect experience to photography, and create a life-long passion.

Juan's father collected antique cameras and Juan would spend hours figuring out what they could do, what images they could make. A top camera technician who lived across the road advised Juan's parents to give him his first camera, a Praktica MTL5, with manual settings and real film. 'I made lots of mistakes but I learnt,' he says, and from then, there was no bug, bird, animal or frog that escaped his focus. There were further trips to the park, more wildlife photography (now at age 11 and armed with an 'upgrade' Minolta Dynax) and a growing fascination for every aspect of the natural world.

'I wrote my last matric exam on 26 November 1993 aged 17 and I was on a bus on the 27th. I was heading to the lowveld to work at a little lodge armed with my boots, my tent and my Minolta. I was ready to take on the bush.'

Juan joined Liz and Phil Biden's Royal Malewane in 1999 and would go on to become the most highly qualified guide in South Africa, raising the professional standards of the industry. As head ranger, he has been instrumental in driving the company's guid-

ing and tracking apprenticeship programmes. There are seven living master trackers in the world, and Juan is one of three currently work for the Royal Portfolio. Juan is now a director and plays an increasingly critical role in conservation.

But it is in the bush, with his camera and his senses keenly attuned to the smallest clues, that science and experience converge. When he takes his camera to the remnants of a lion kill, with vultures and other scavengers in action, he notices things hundreds or thousands of other people who have been at kills have not. And his camera becomes the recording device, the evidence capturer.

Juan once noticed a female yellow-throated petronia, a small sparrow look-alike, following a white-backed vulture to a kill. And then, focusing closely, Juan saw that the Ppetronia wasn't after scraps of meat or insects, but after vulture down – something most easily found at lion kills where vultures have been eating, attacking one another and generally getting their feathers ruffled.

Vultures fly so high that they need very good insulation and their down, it turns out, is highly sought after – not only by petronias, but by several other species as well, as Juan found out through careful observation. He became the first to observe and record this behaviour photographically in Cape starlings and red-breasted swallows and confirmed that palm swifts do it too. To capture the flimsiest of evidence as a swift, for example, made off from the scene of the



THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

The 20-metre lap pool, a tier down from a broad wooden observation deck, is a clear tropical blue. Below, the Sweni River is full and muddy with washed soil from the recent seasonal rains. Game trails lead down to its banks through lush, dense bush. This is a favourite spot for elephant to drink but should they sense your presence and turn their gaze upwards, they will see little of the lodge above. In the recent dry season, field guide Wessel Booyesen recounted an unusual sighting. A female elephant with her calf sensed that there was a water source close by. While his guests gathered for their afternoon drive, she stretched her trunk high and over the pool rim for a brief, delicate sip. Singita Sweni Lodge hugs the high embankment, its glass walls and discreet steel architecture masked by indigenous foliage. Sunlight streams in. You are as invisible as you should be. The interior design is a glorious rebellion against the traditional concept of a safari lodge, which often confines its palette to earthy neutrals. Here, a neutral canvas serves as a springboard for a spectrum of

accent colours in fabrics, linen, artworks and furnishing that reflect the abundant insect and birdlife of this Kruger Park area. There are soft wool throws in emerald-spotted wood dove green, or perhaps it's the iridescence of a dung beetle's wings. A splash of coral takes its cue from a southern carmine bee-eater and turquoise from the belly feathers of a lilac-breasted roller. Against one wall in recycled wood is a jewel-coloured chest of drawers. How spontaneously a chameleon's nanocrystals would respond to such stimulus. But even neutrals can take their cue from the wildlife, like marble in the gun-metal grey of a Bateleur eagle's tail feather in the sunlight. A soft-hued ochre throw breaks the lapis lazuli blue of a daybed. And textures. Blown glass bowls in forest green are brimful of succulents and a ceramic bowl is filled with river-washed green and blue glass spheres. The seven suites (including a secluded pool suite for families) are contemporary treehouses with fine linen and sunken bathtubs that separate you from the bush only by a wall of glass. This is your lens to an uninterrupted landscape. Every-



PHOTOGRAPHS: LEX HES; SUPPLIED

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where, there are subtle reminders that the Earth comes first: a delicate bamboo toothbrush, glass-covers made from biodegradable cornstarch. Menus also underpin Singita's life-long commitment to conservation and include imaginative and delicious vegetarian fare made with locally grown fresh ingredients. There will be dishes too intriguing and Africa-contemporary to miss, even for breakfast. Try poached egg shakshuka or wood-fired brisket, chimichurri and rooibos dombolo. In the evening, you may dine in the open, the bush sounds your backing track, and with the sommelier, choose vintages from a cellar stocked with a thousand wines. You come to safari, of course, and every day brings the remarkable. Habituated animals are mostly calm in the presence of game vehicles but your guides remain watchful while on a drive, they narrate the stories behind the wildlife they monitor every day. There are battles for territory, curious behaviour to witness and the inevitable cycle of birth and death. We track an old male lion in the late afternoon light. His jaw is skew and his bones sharp through the skin of his rump. He is 10, the guide says, and at the far edge of his lifespan in the wild. He will leave behind a valuable gene pool and healthy rival prides in a territory



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PHOTOGRAPHS: JUAN PINTO; SUPPLIED

crime with a scrap of down in its beak took a great camera and lens, of course, but also patience, persistence and the curiosity of the naturalist-detective to solve the puzzle.

There are several Juan Pintos on Instagram but there is only one @juanpinto2014 who will guide you into the wild and expose those one-hundredth of a second moments that take a lifetime to capture.

The Watcher

In 1991, Lex Hes completed an important chapter in his life as a ranger, tracker and photographer. He had finally finished writing *The Leopards of Londolozzi*, the culmination of 12 years of keen observation and daily records of their behaviour. The stories were dramatic and evocative but it was his photography that made you yearn to be there.

Lex's first camera was the gift of a Kodak Instamatic. 'My dad was a keen photographer and he owned a twin-lens reflex camera. I started doing my own black-and-white developing in a darkroom that I'd built myself. When I had a bit of money, I bought a book on photography to learn about exposure.'

But it was watching films like *Born Free*, based on the lives of George and Joy Adamson, and documentaries by Hugo van Lawick, then Jane Goodall's husband, that spoke so powerfully to him. 'I remember seeing footage of their safari tent underneath an acacia tree on the Serengeti and thinking that's what I wanted to do.' He joined bird clubs and wildlife societies, and volunteered for cheetah feeding camps, much more at home in the wild than socialising. It may explain why he skipped his matric dance to go birding in a nature reserve.

It wouldn't be the first time he would turn down an opportunity.

'My uncle, who had been estranged from the family for years, visited us and when he left, he gave me a Minolta. It was the first camera I owned that could change lenses.'

But there was one invitation that he did want.



FOLLOWING THE SIGNS

When you stand in the middle of a space, any space that belongs in the Royal Portfolio, the following typically happens: you take out your camera and create a mosaic of images. Is it the fandango of colour that makes you smile or the playful arrangement of objects and collections? Does the generous volume of the room or the proportions of furniture to the ceiling height create a sense of perfect balance? It is a nexus of mathematical precision, colour joie de vivre and rule-breaking, and you conclude that it's rather difficult to replicate Liz Biden's signature style.

Phil and Liz Biden opened their first lodge 20 years ago and added four properties to what was to become the Royal Portfolio. To be fair, while the interiors garnered a great deal of attention, what the family really set out to accomplish was to put hospitality at the apex of a guest's experience and social responsibility at the core of their Foundation.

The Farmstead, in Thornybush Private Game Reserve, 12 kilometres from their flagship Royal Malewane, is new and contemporary in style. With its deep verandas, wooden decks and

large daybeds, guests spend more time enjoying their private outdoor spaces. They overlook land that is leased from the community on the understanding that this structured partnership will benefit all concerned. A commitment to specialised training leads to skilled employment and a pledge to safeguard the concession. The Foundation focuses on children's education and a counter-poaching dog unit that conserves not only the rhino population, but several species under threat. The Foundation's tracker and ranger programme ensures that a younger generation can, if they have the drive and passion, become the next generation of guardians and guides. It's a long road to the top.

On a recent visit, we leave our vehicle and in single file, with our guides and trackers, follow slight indentations in the sand. We can read very little until with a twig, the tracker outlines the shape of a partial hoof. Try with an untrained eye to distinguish waterbuck from wildebeest spoor or, with your nose to the ground, read that six pin-hole points left in a patch of mud were made by a wasp collecting material for its nest.

Lex wrote to Dave and John Varty at Londolozi Game Reserve before he left to do his compulsory military training. 'I'll have six months before varsity,' he wrote. 'Do you have a place for me just to come and help out?' It was no luxury destination then.

There were two letters waiting for Lex when he demobbed. One from his uncle offering him a job in his antique export company in Germany. Great salary. The man had no heirs. There were 'prospects' for a young man keen to learn about business.

The other was from Londolozi. The Vartys wrote that they were very happy for Lex to come, but that they couldn't pay anything. There'd be accommodation in a precast building with bullet holes in the roof and there'd be a bit of food. Even for guests it was spartan. 'It was nearly all locals because they were charging about R20 per person per night,' he recalls. 'You brought your own drinks and stayed in four rondavels with a long-drop toilet and an outdoor shower.'

Lex odd-jobbed around the camp but at the end of the day, he headed out. 'I had a notebook, a pen and a pair of binoculars and I just went walking, straight out into the bush, until the sun set, making notes of everything I saw: birds, tracks, plants, bringing plant samples back, sitting back in camp, trying to identify them.'

A year passed and one day neither of the Varty bothers could do the game drive. Lex took a group of South Africans out on safari and discovered that he knew his way round the reserve and that he had found his voice.

'I was a complete introvert. Self-taught. I buried myself in books. Hardly said a word to another person but I discovered that if I had knowledge, it was easier to talk.'

Dave Varty nurtured the young guide and coaxed him out of his deep reserve. Lex gives one of his rare grins. 'It was a bit wilder in those days. We would watch a buffalo wallowing in the mud and someone would say, "I wonder what that is like?", and we would jump in. I have this photo of myself in shorts, no shirt, flip-flops and a rifle slung over my shoulder.'

When the Mammal Research Institute needed help collaring elephants and relocating them from the Kruger Park to the Sabi Sands area, Lex volunteered to identify and photograph every individual elephant from their ear patterns before they were set free in an area where they could breed and build up the population.

When the institute offered him a year on Marion Island, he took unpaid leave and bought a second camera and some lenses. The best of his photographs of penguins, albatrosses and stark landscapes were published in the Minolta Mirror, which sparked an exhibition that led to an article.

Lex was on the map as a photographer to watch.

People often ask him about the secret to a great shot. 'It's not about having the best equipment. It's really knowing animal behaviour,' he says. 'A leopard walking through the long grass is looking for food. What is it going to do? It is going to need to look for a vantage point to get above the long grass, like climbing on a termite mound.'

He still carries around a notebook, he says. 'The other day, a guide wanted to know if Matabele ants injured in a battle with termites carried their wounded back to the nest to nurture them? I checked. They do.'

Today, Lex Hes guides photo safaris with Safari for Real, which is based in the Sabi Sands but operates across Africa. Guests often claim that he seems to whisper up wildlife, especially leopards, so they are positioned to take a perfect shot. But he is really doing what he has done for most of his life, just reading the signs and being one leap ahead. ▽

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