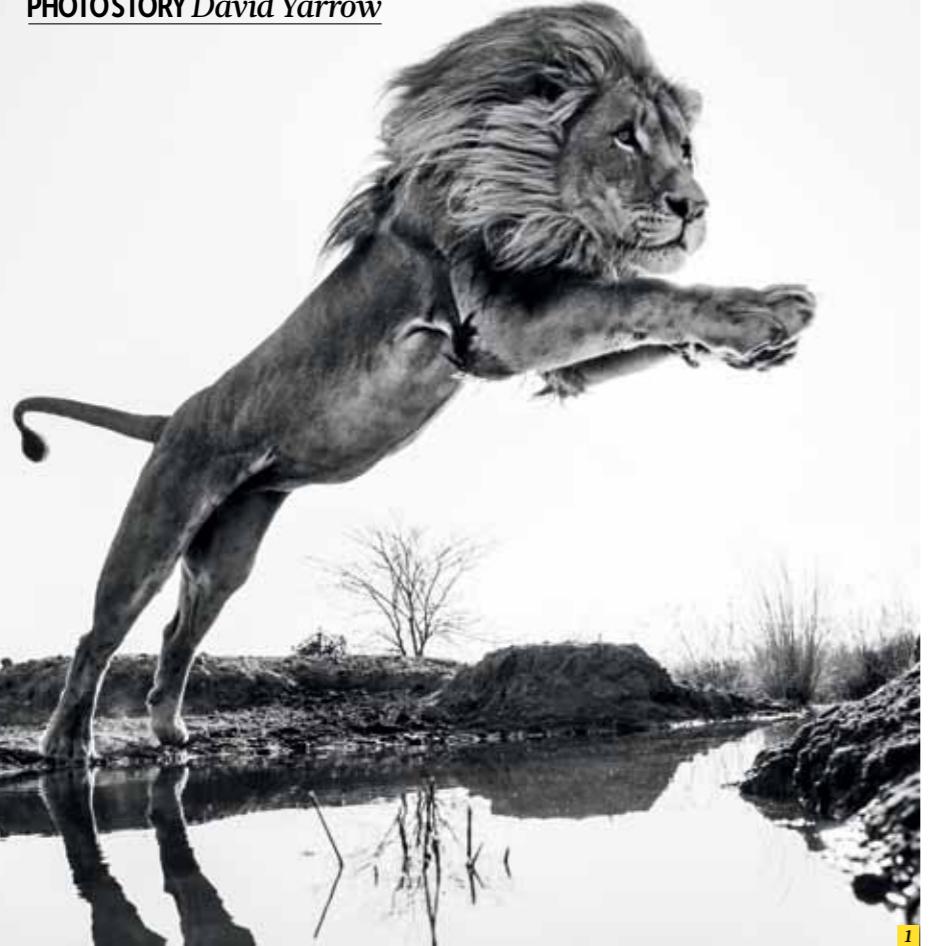


DAVID YARROW

PHOTOGRAPHY IS BIG BUSINESS DIDN'T YOU KNOW? OR AT LEAST IT'S PROVING SO FOR NATURAL WORLD PHOTOGRAPHER DAVID YARROW. CAROLINE SCHMIDT SPEAKS TO HIM ABOUT HIS SUCCESSFUL YEAR FOLLOWING HIS DEPARTURE FROM LEADING A DOUBLE-LIFE

Words: Caroline Schmidt



FEW PHOTOGRAPHERS CAN lay claim to similar success as David Yarrow. One of his limited-edition prints regularly sell for USD\$25,000, while in the last year, his latest collection of work from South Sudan has accumulated a worth of more than USD\$1m. David's almost unrivalled reputation and approach to capturing remote landscapes and endangered animals has arguably made him one of the UK's best-selling fine-art photographers. But how did this former finance tycoon from a shipbuilding dynasty come to make his prosperous living from lions, elephants and rhinos?

At the age of 20, he won the Young Scottish Photographer of the Year award, while in the same year photographing the 1986 World Cup for the *Times* newspaper; and yes, it is his shot of Diego Maradona holding the trophy aloft that's become so iconic – early signs of success for sure. The near-30 years since have seen him split time between creating hedge funds in the finance industry and his love of photography: shooting major sporting events and striking images of wildlife, indigenous communities and landscapes. It was only in late 2014 that David left this double-life to concentrate on photography, after a hugely successful sale of all 12 of his limited edition *Mankind* prints – an image of a previously unfilmed Dinka 25,000-strong cattle camp. “Even when I was a part-time photographer, it was like I was full-time, and my pictures were still selling around the world”, claims David. “It’s never been a hobby, but I had to make

BIOGRAPHY



Born in Glasgow, Scotland, as part of the Yarrow shipbuilding dynasty, David began his career as a UK stockbroker while pursuing his passion for photography, with a focus on the natural world and sports. His photography has been published in two books, *Nowhere* and *Encounter*, and exhibited in iconic locations such as the Saatchi Gallery, Christie's global headquarters and the Rotella Gallery. He shoots a lot in Africa and is affiliated with the charity Tusk Trust. www.davidyarrow.photography

sure it was something that could make me enough money before leaving my past life, and my work in South Sudan cemented that,” he adds. And what a year 2015 has proven. Aside from one of his images taking centre-stage in New York’s Times Square, David has exhibited three single-man shows in Amsterdam, Zurich and New York City; has been scooped up as one of Nikon UK’s new brand ambassadors; and signed his third book deal since 2007, this time with German publishers teNeues for 2016.

“When I first started out, I didn’t know what I was doing. But that’s got to be encouraging in a way as photography is the type of job where the more you do it, inevitably the better you get at it. You might know how to use a camera, but I think that’s just the beginning. I think you photograph best what you know best because you can anticipate in your planning in terms of



Opening image: Can you see the selfie? I’m about 1.5ft away! 1) Positioning remotes takes days of research and monitoring behaviour. I placed the camera in a muddy stream hoping the lion would jump out to get wet. 2) This is a well-earned and timeless photograph. 3) Rhinos follow the same path approaching watering holes. 4) The Kibish tribe in Ethiopia.

timing, angles and composition. In Africa I now know most parts of the continent and its types of wildlife just as well as I knew the German football team from 1986. The biggest difference between wildlife and sports photography is that the latter is a very, very tough gig now; it’s extremely difficult to turn up to an event, be it Wimbledon or a big football match, and get a picture no-one else has got. In 2016, everyone is a photographer who has the ability to take as good a picture as anyone else; you have to be very lucky to get something other people haven’t got. From a business perspective, it means you’ve got a static demand and an ever-increasing supply. ➤





But by travelling to a far corner of Africa, I won't see another photographer within 500 miles from where I am," David observes.

As most of David's wildlife photography is conducted in East Africa, he throws a lot of support behind African conservation charity Tusk Trust; he donates 10% of his sales to the charity. "It's nice to be affiliated with a charity I see working on the ground," he explains. "When working with endangered species, you can't help but get emotionally involved in the issue that they might be extinct for our children. This is something I can do to put a little finger in the dam."

Don't be misled by David's sentiments, however; his search for rare scenes that are beyond the mainstream is not only a pursuit for conservation, but a profitable business. "Conservation isn't the sole motivation for what I do. I think there's an awful lot of false pride in the idea of being an impoverished artist and supporting a charity is good business. I don't think there is anything wrong with doing photography with a view to make a business out of it. If lions, rhinos and elephants didn't sell, I would be drawn

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towards photographing a different subject matter that people want on their wall."

Looking through David's work, there's a clear clean style – not just the fact they're all monochrome: a conscious decision to make his work timeless and more sellable – but there's a unique impact. Be it a wide view of a hectic indigenous scene or his deceptive proximity to wild animals, the frame is always full and it's understandable when he tells me his work is guided by war photographer Robert Capa's assertion: "if your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough". "For me, the most important

1) With zebras it's all about lines and patterns. 2) Taken in Ranthambore National Park, India, there are only 1,700 Royal Bengal Tigers left in India. 3) I wanted *Mankind* to show the raw enormity of the Dinka cattle camp. 4) Amboseli, Kenya, is the best place to photograph elephants – this image was taken with an AF-S 35mm f/1.4G. 5) This picture flashes up every hour in Times Square, NYC, the size of a giant billboard. 6) The baby hippo offers context to the enormity of the adult's face.

thing about a picture is how long it engages you. Some people can look at a Rembrandt painting for half an hour as there's so much going on, and that's very telling. Taking a picture that people will look at for an awful long time is the goal and I like to get as much in the photograph as possible."

While most wildlife photographers go to Africa armed with a 400mm f/2.8 lens, David's longest lens is a 200mm and most used is a NIKKOR AF-S 35mm f/1.4G. How does he get such frame-filling images with these focal lengths you might ask? For the most part, the answer is simple: remotes. "Photographing with a 400mm f/2.8 from 100 yards away means you lose any spiritual immersion in the subject. The most successful portrait photographers shoot with a standard 50mm or 35mm lens and it should



be no different with animals. You have to rip up the rulebook or flip it on its head; it's not about the image I might get but how I'm going to get the image that I want."

In order to use remotes, David explains to me the vast amount of essential preparation that's needed, how he relies on the best field operatives to ensure he's not in any danger, to know the right time to go and the people to work with when he gets there – all of this



is knowledge David has developed over the last 30 years. Sometimes he fires the camera from a cage 40 yards away, using manually preset remotes and his judgement on where the animal might appear, other times he's no choice but to get close to the animals and fire the camera himself. "Using a remote obviously risks the animals not going where you want them to and your kit getting kicked by an elephant, for instance. But it's

not the low percentage gig that it might sound. Elephants walk in a very predictable straight line and will only see the camera when it's a yard away, while lions have an acute sense of smell so by coating a camera in an aftershave that the Masai wear, I can entice them in the right direction. Rhinos are also very predictable when approaching watering holes, almost to the same footprint. Saying this, I think Nikon must ➤



get bored of me filling out repair forms that use 'eaten by a lion' as a reason; however, it's also got to be good PR to be able to say I could still use my camera after it had been kicked 10ft by an elephant!"

Last year was a busy year for new work too: Bangladesh, Kenya, Namibia and the Arctic, with the latter providing David some long-awaited and carefully planned images. "I've often come back from the Arctic having tried photographing polar bears really disheartened. You can't use a remote camera as it means knowing where they're going to come to and placing it on the ice, which is really difficult, so I have to shoot from a boat and no one needs a picture of a polar bear taken from a boat as you look higher than the animal. So last year we did our homework and went to Barter Island the week polar bears are known to work in collaboration with the indigenous community during the whaling season. I got within 1.5ft of a polar bear – probably closer than almost anyone ever has and lived to tell the tale. I used

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Nikon's flagship AF-S 58mm f/1.4G, which captured every hair in detail and even my selfie in the bear's eyes. All I remember is my heart pounding with fear and adrenaline, which in retrospect is hardly surprising."

2015 wasn't all wildlife, though; David also camped with Namibia's Himba tribe for three days. "Tribal documentation has been well done, so I think you have to go further and further afield to get tribes that people haven't seen or at least covered before. It's a harder and harder gig. The Himba are

actually one of the easier tribes to spend time with, you can get to the capital and be with the Himba people in a day and a half. Whereas for some tribes in Ethiopia, for instance, it takes 72 hours in a 4x4 over tough roads and there's often the dangerous combination of marijuana and guns to contend with.

"The Himba are very beautiful and it's always humbling to immerse yourself in an indigenous way of life as they're very happy people. The slight difficulty with the Himba, unlike Sudan's Dinka, is that there aren't a lot of them. A wrestling match with the Dinka may involve 600 people, but the Himba are a scattering of villages and I like pictures with a lot of people in them. From a photographic perspective, I had two options: portraiture, which is not very demanding; and pictures of everyday life. The best picture I got was when a little kid took my sunglasses."

Aside from the challenges of heat and language barriers, David describes working with indigenous people as a "big game". "For many tribes, money doesn't work because

they can't use it; their currency is cows. There are always three important things to bring: cow medicine, then bizarrely razors and pens. It's important to respect their traditions. You have to emotionally invest yourself in a project too: I don't think you can turn up on a Monday evening having never been to the place before and expect to get a great shot on the Tuesday, unless you're really lucky. The intricacies of the process from working out what you want to get, to how you're going to get it, all have to happen on a blank sheet of paper before. And thankfully we have the internet to help us."

David's most famous image, *Mankind*, is a great example of his impeccable preparation. He knew from research few photographers had gone to where he was going and those that had used a much too low angle. "If you're photographing a massive scene and you're at ground level on flat land, you're only going to get the first row of people. So I knew in London I'd need to take a ladder with me through South Sudan. That way when I got to

the position I wanted I could be 10ft off the ground. If I'd gone there with no spec and tried to find a ladder, well, I'd imagine there aren't many ladders to be found."

You'd expect when funding such expensive excursions that David would look to fill his memory card with prospective profit but he doesn't, in fact he spends much of his time waiting for the perfect image before packing up and going home. "A week photographing lions and I think I took 11 frames. It sounds unromantic, but I tend to want to get the hell out of there as soon as I can as I have a family back in London. Stock photographers tend to make the same mistake in coming back shouting about a portfolio of 50 pictures – if it's true, it's remarkable. I think I took about four good pictures in 2015. Saying you've got 50 great images confuses the consumer; what you want is one great picture, so when I have it, I often put my camera away, change my flights and go home. As they say in the film industry: it's a wrap."

1)Wildebeest late afternoon in Amboseli. A tremendous storm was building and the sky looked biblically menacing.

2)Photographed in Alaska, in some ways this is a ridiculously lucky picture as the position of the second polar bear is almost perfect. 3)Taken in 2013 in Nunavut, Canada, as Simon Qamanrig builds our igloo.

IN THE BAG...

While I have a Nikon D4s, I'm a big fan of the D810 as my pictures can be so big – upwards of 50sq ft. Our printers in Los Angeles can tell if I'm using the D4s or the D810 just by the level of detail and quality at that size. The one drawback is the motordrive but, by and large, I don't need 12 frames-per-second. I also like to get as close to the subject as possible and work with a prime wide-angle lens, like the NIKKORAF-S 35mmf/1.4G, to incorporate a sense of place around the subject matter. www.nikon.co.uk

