

Africa in pictures



Greg du Toit is arguably Africa's most respected wildlife photographer, and in 2013 he won the BBC World Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition. He has been taking wildlife photographs for almost two decades. Today, the 38-year-old is also one of the best photographic guides on the continent. Scott Ramsay caught up with him recently to ask a few questions

Greg, which are your top three African wildlife regions?

I think the first one would be Mala Mala. It's the largest part of Sabi Sands Game Reserve, and all its infrastructure was built on less than 10 percent of the land. There's nothing between you and Kruger National Park, except bush and the wildlife. For me, the Lowveld is still the place where my heart is, because that's where I grew up. It's where I first fell in love with the bush.

The second is the Maasai Mara, because it is the wildlife Mecca of the world. So often people tell me you shouldn't go there because there are too many tourists, but it covers 1500 square kilometres, so if you know where to go, when, and how, the wildlife experience is unrivalled.

My third place is Mashatu, in the Tuli Block of Botswana. I like Mashatu simply because there's great wildlife in the area. Also, I've never seen a place in Africa where you've got black sand in the rivers and the gigantic mashatu trees. It's a unique place. I love it, and it's a mere six-hour drive from my home in Johannesburg.

You have had some incredible experiences with wildlife. Tell us about the most memorable.

About ten years ago, I staked out a waterhole in Kenya's South Rift Valley for 16 months. It was a small waterhole, only about 20m wide. It was basically a spring in that dry area, and my mission was to photograph the free-ranging lions.

The life I saw in and around that waterhole was mind-blowing. I dug a hole next it and put some hessian tacking over the top, and just watched the animals come and go. During the last three months, I actually sat in the water, and I eventually got eye-level photos of the lions drinking.

If you had to leave Africa and had only three weeks left on the continent, which three spots would you visit, and why?

The first would be Satara Camp in Kruger National Park. That's where it all began for me. When I was ten we were there on a

family holiday. I'll never forget leaving. When it was time to go, I was so depressed. I saw the sun rise from within the camp, and I promised myself that I would eventually return and work in the bush.

The second spot is quite different. I would go and camp in the South Rift Valley, just north of Lake Natron. There's a magical site there. It's community-owned, but it's as wild and rugged as Africa gets. What I love about it is that you get see how man coexists with the wildlife. It's so dramatic. You've got the wall of the Rift Valley, Lake Natron, the swamps, forests, rivers... It's an ancient piece of Africa.

And then the last one: I would go on the iMfolozi Wilderness Trail in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Game Reserve, KwaZulu-Natal. Actually, I've never done that. The legendary Ian Player was one of my huge role models, and I love Zululand. I've spent a lot of time in Hluhluwe and iMfolozi, but I've never done one of those trails and I'd like to spend a week doing that.

Which are your three favourite wild animals?

The first is definitely lions. When I say this,



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it always surprises people because they think lions just sleep! But I love their primal movement. For me, the roar of a lion is the most spectacular sound in Africa. And I love their playfulness, the way the pride plays with each other, the way a male lion, one minute, can run towards you as if he's about to kill you, and then just flop over. They play both the role of king and jester, and I love that. They are regal and powerful, but they're also stupid and goofy. So, lions are number one.

And then comes the leopard. I love them for their beauty, their independent nature

Pic of Greg's book African Awe?



and their superb stealth. The old adage goes: "You don't see a leopard; the leopard allows you to see it."

Then my third is wild dogs, for their playfulness. Everything is a game for them, even when they are killing their prey. They don't fight with each other. Their teamwork, camaraderie and complete fearlessness are amazing.

What advice would you give aspiring wildlife photographers?

First, you need to discover yourself and recognise what you are passionate about. Then, when you've figured that out, just go out and photograph what you love. Lots of beginners want to do it all, but to be a really good photographer you must be a communicator, and you'll be most effective if you are communicating with something you are passionate about. So it really starts with your own journey of discovery.

Who do you admire most in African conservation?

Ian Player inspired me from the age of 16 because of his dedication, commitment and the utter purpose with which he lived his life. His goal was to try to save the wilderness areas of South Africa.

When I was a boy, he came and spoke at our school. I listened to him talk about how he started the Dusi Marathon, and then Operation Rhino, and the wilderness trails in iMfolozi.

He was an absolute inspiration, so much so that he wrote the foreword to my photography book, *African Awe*. He also signed his biography for me, and I've just finished reading it. Now that he has passed away, it means even more to me.

Second would be Kenneth Newman. I've always been keen on birds, and he had boundless passion for them. He painted portraits of all 900+ species in southern Africa. I admired his experiments with little European warblers, during which he placed some in a planetarium and proved that they migrate by the stars.

Third would be Dr Iain Douglas-Hamilton. I spent time up in Samburu, at his research camp, and I think he's an incredible guy. He must be in his seventies, but he's a maverick. He's a crazy bush pilot and has this spirit of adventure. But he's pragmatic, similar to Ian Player in style.

Iain is a brilliant scientist and animal expert, but he doesn't just write scientific papers – he comes up with real solutions for problems in Africa. For example, his research revealed that elephants hate the sound of storming

bees, so he and his team designed beehives that villagers can build and place around their villages. These hives are linked with pieces of string, and when elephants come in to raid crops, they bump the hives, causing the bees to swarm.

Does hunting fit into your conservation matrix?

My answer is yes and no. Hunting in general has, up to this point, been very beneficial in that wildlife areas have expanded because of it. But I agree only with certain types of hunting, and I'm vehemently against another type.

So, let me describe an example of the hunting I agree with. In Timbavati Game Reserve they hunt old buffalo bulls. Those old bulls are no longer breeding, so a hunt is set up, and the money gained from it is ploughed back into conservation and managing the reserve. I think that's excellent.

But I'm totally against hunting for territorial animals, especially wild cats. I've seen it in many different parts of Africa, most recently at Mana Pools. There's a national park, and on the boundaries there are hunting areas where people go to hunt cats.

If you shoot one of the cats it creates a vacuum, and that vacuum then pulls in another cat from the conservation area or the park, and that cat gets shot. Eventually the population is decimated, so I'm dead against the hunting of leopards and lions.

But if you are talking about hunting older animals that aren't territorial and that are no longer breeding, then I think hunting is a very pragmatic and wise solution. It can raise a lot of funds for conservation.

I need hardly mention that most people are against hunting, but every morning they get up and eat their breakfast cereal. Now, there's nothing worse than a wheat field, because it's a monoculture. That wheat field has wiped out the natural ecology of the area. Which would you rather have – a wildlife area where hunting is permitted or a wheat field that has no natural ecology whatsoever?

Greg, you clearly have a deep love for the African wilderness. What do you love most about it?

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UNDER THE BAOBAB

My photography is an expression of my love for the wilderness. The wild, for me, offers a connection with my creator. It's a place where I really come alive – where I can see clearly and exist at a deeper level. It's mysterious, beautiful, fresh and enchanting.

There's a quote from Ian Player that sums up how I feel: "Wilderness, in whatever way we describe it, becomes a chance for human beings to redeem their humanity. It is a place where we go to contemplate our origins, examine our past, and plan our future. It is manna for the soul and hope for all life."

Finally, name your favourite places to watch the sun rise or set in Africa? With whom would you want to enjoy the moment?

I'd watch the sunrise at Campbell Koppies in Mala Mala, where you've got a view over the Lowveld into Kruger. I'd sit there in the early morning with coffee and a rusk, with my old friend Rowan Ravenhill, because he's a kindred spirit. He loves the bush, like I do.

For sunsets, I'd choose the baobab tree known as Rhodes' baobab, on top of a sandstone koppie in Mashatu Game Reserve in the Tuli Block. And I'd watch the sun go down with my wife, Claire, by my side. **lw**



Scott Ramsay

Scott Ramsay is a photo-journalist focusing on national parks and nature reserves in southern Africa. He is supported by Cape Union Mart as a K-Way ambassador, and also by Ford, Goodyear Wrangler, Safari Centre Cape Town, Hetzner and Tracks4Africa.

For more information, check out www.LoveWildAfrica.com, or www.facebook.com/LoveWildAfrica and @love_wild_africa on Instagram.



K-Way/Cape Union Mart gear review

Stoves – MSR WhisperLite and Kovea Top-Mount Gas

While hiking anywhere in southern Africa, a good, all-weather stove is a critical item. I've been caught out before. When I was hiking in the Mnweni area of the Drakensberg two years ago, I was using a simple stove with a gas canister and a screw-in burner. The problem was, there was no regulator, so I couldn't control the amount of gas pressure. At high altitude and in cold conditions, the stove didn't burn hot at all, and it was inefficient. On a cold morning in the 'Berg, when you're dying for a cup of hot tea or coffee or hot Pro Nutro breakfast, this can definitely ruin your day!

So I got hold of an MSR WhisperLite stove. This is just one stove in a range of MSR high-altitude, cold-weather stoves. They are made in the US and have been tried and tested over decades in the most demanding conditions. They are expensive, but if you regularly hike in the mountains, consider one.

The best thing about the WhisperLite is that it can burn any type of fuel. I used benzene, which I'd heard was the most efficient fuel and burns hottest. But you can also use unleaded fuel, paraffin, methylated spirits or kerosene. So even if you run out of benzene, for instance, you can top up your gas bottle at the local petrol station!

The stove burns hot and efficiently. I used about 800mm of benzene during my six days on the mountain, which was good, because I used my stove a lot to boil water every morning, lunch and dinner. Conditions were cold, and I drank a lot of hot tea and hot chocolate!

The flame burns bright and hot, and once it's started, it's unlikely that a strong wind will blow it out. However, it does come with a lightweight metal reflector and windscreen, which helps a lot in the wind.

One word of caution with the WhisperLite: It can be finicky to get started. Once you have connected the gas line to the stove and the bottle, you have

to pump the gas bottle a little to build pressure, and then slowly allow the liquid gas through into the primer. Then you light this liquid with a match, so that the flame can heat the primer, which turns the liquid into gas as it comes through the stove. Then you turn the regulator attached to the bottle to control the flame size.

You need a little practice, but once you have learnt the tricks, the stove is easy to use.

I've also used a Kovea Scout Top-Mount Hiker stove. It gave no problems. What's nice is that it has an ignition button to start the flame, so you don't have to use matches (but I'd still take matches just in case). Also, the regulator seemed to control the gas pressure well. However, in windy and cold conditions, it seemed that the Kovea stove didn't burn as efficiently or as hot as the MSR WhisperLite. However, the Kovea stove is much easier to start and use than the WhisperLite.

One word about using gas, and especially benzene. Be careful when handling the flammable substance, because not only is it flammable, but it is extremely toxic. I have spoken to several

seasoned hikers and adventurers about this, and they warned that the cumulative effects of benzene on your hands can precipitate serious health issues – including cancer, apparently. So, if you are using benzene (or any other flammable fuel), don't get it on your hands or face.

Visit www.capeunionmart.co.za for more information on both stoves. The Kovea stove retails for R399, so it's much cheaper than the WhisperLite (R1899), but it doesn't have the same efficiency or reliability. For the MSR WhisperLite, go to Cape Union Mart stores, or contact distributors Outward Ventures to find a retail outlet near you: www.outwardventures.co.za; tel 021 683-3638 or e-mail info@outward.co.za.

