

# Nature Made Easy



**It might seem difficult to capture nature and wildlife images like the pros, but with the use of some useful techniques your shots can dramatically improve. Pro wildlife and nature photographer Michael Snedic explains.**

I've been a photographic tutor to thousands of students across Australia over the last 12 years. Often, when photographers see what they perceive as 'amazing' shots, they'll comment "I could never get an image like that". But the truth is, with some perseverance and the application of the right techniques, most people can improve their ability to shoot in difficult scenarios significantly. Here I'll explain, using easy-to-understand methods, some important photographic tips and techniques you can use to capture shots that might at first seem too hard to get.

## Landscape dilemmas

If you're photographing a landscape on a windy day, with shrubs or trees in the foreground of your shot, it can be hard to get them in sharp focus. I was faced with such a scenario in Lamington National Park in the Gold Coast hinterland, Queensland. The valley below looked stunning, bathed in a subtle golden light which only a sunset can produce. To compliment the scene there were some impressive grass trees in the foreground, but unfortunately the wind was strong and they were waving about madly. A standard set up would have resulted in the Grass trees blurring, but I wanted them sharp.

So I set up my SLR camera and wide-angled lens on a large, sturdy tripod. Then I attached a cable release to minimise any movement created by manually pressing the shutter button.

I'd normally choose an aperture of around  $f/16$  for good depth-of-field when photographing landscapes, but in this case it was getting dark and I needed a faster shutter speed, hence my choice of  $f/2.8$ . A lower ISO setting is also normally used when shooting a landscape with a tripod, to minimise noise. But once again, in order to freeze the movement of the Grass trees, I needed to raise the camera's ISO setting to 3200. This had the effect of greatly increasing the shutter speed and thus freezing any movement created by the wind blowing the trees around. My use of a full-framed professional SLR camera meant I was able to increase the ISO to 3200 with minimal 'noise'. However, with some entry-level cameras you might need to reduce the ISO to 1600 or even 800 to avoid excessive noise. Try a few 'experimental' shots first, to see what maximum ISO setting your camera can take, before noise becomes visible.

Another landscape photography situation which can be challenging relates to how to focus on a scene when it's too dark for the lens to actually focus on anything, either manually or via auto. The best way around this problem is to first set up your tripod and compose the shot. The next step is to shine a torch and light that specific area. Either manually focus or use auto to focus on the area you've lit up and then turn off your torch and flick the camera/lens switch to manual focus. You can take shots using auto-focus, without the lens 'hunting' back and forth in the dark. As an example, at Horseshoe Falls in Tasmania, I focused on a torch-lit

## ABOVE

I found lying on my stomach was the best angle to photograph this wombat. I was completely still and I waited patiently before finally getting this shot of it scratching the ground. Nikon D800, 10-20mm lens @ 12mm, 1/320s @  $f/5.3$ , ISO 1600, hand-held.

## OPPOSITE

The wind was blowing strongly on top of the hill where these grass trees were, overlooking the Kerry Valley, Queensland. Even though I was using a tripod for stability, I significantly increased the camera's ISO rating so I could increase the shutter speed, which in turn 'froze' the trees. Nikon D700, 24-70mm lens @ 28mm, 1/800s @  $f/2.8$ , ISO 3200, tripod, cable release.

## EXPERT TIPS Improve Your Nature Shots

### RIGHT

It was after sunset and getting quite dark when I arrived at Horseshoe Falls, Tasmania. To alleviate the problem of the auto-focus on my lens 'hunting', I used a torch to highlight the rock I needed to focus on. Nikon D800, 24-70mm lens @ 24mm, 8s @ f/16, ISO 200, tripod, cable release, torch.

### BELOW

While panning my camera with this flying Red-tailed Tropicbird on Norfolk Island I also moved the focus point. That way I was able to focus on its eye and also leave room in the direction that the bird was flying. Nikon D700, 80-400mm lens @ 400mm, 1/8000s @ f/8, ISO 4000, hand-held.



mossy rock, partway between the waterfall and where I stood with my camera. The advantage of photographing a waterfall or cascade when it's quite dark is that you won't have any overblown highlights in the water, which can be evident on a sunny day. The slower shutter speed will also create that 'milky-water' effect which is quite popular with many landscape photographers.

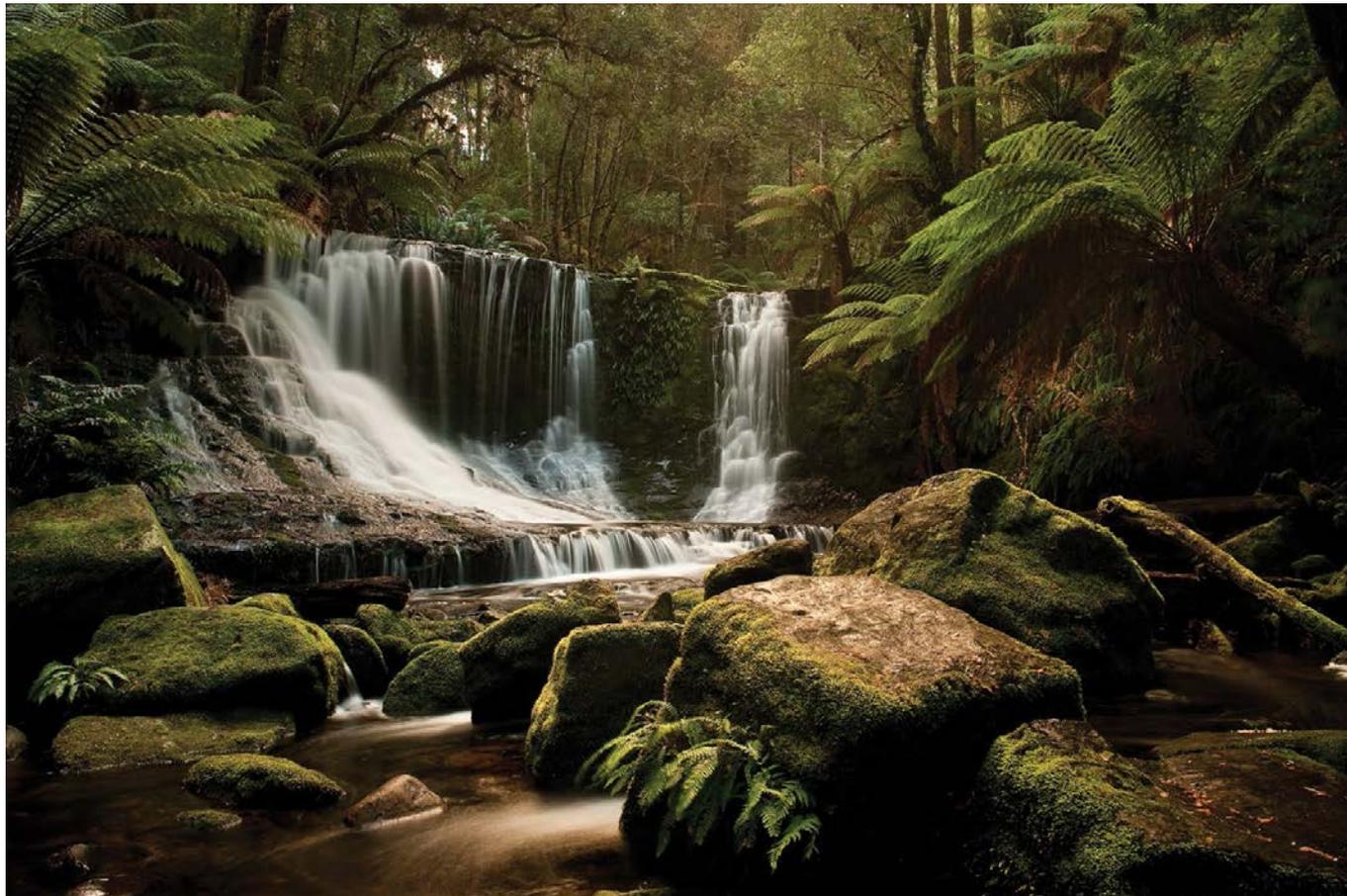
### Making macros better

Fungi are my favourite macro photographic subjects, but they can be very difficult to shoot in low-light conditions. Especially difficult to photograph are luminous fungi, which only glow in total darkness! If you want to shoot such a subject when it's completely dark, set up your camera using a tripod and cable release or remote for absolute stability. If you're shooting on your own I recommend using a head torch, which will free your hands so you can compose the image and operate the camera freely. When you've composed your shot, shine the torch on the fungi and manually focus on it. Set your camera to the bulb setting and use a long exposure. The time needed for the correct exposure of luminous fungi varies greatly, depending on the type and size of the fungi and how long it has been fruiting already. I recommend starting with an exposure of at least a few minutes as a test. If the image is still

dark, then the shutter needs to be open for longer; whereas if the image is over-exposed the shutter speed needs to be faster than the original time set. It might take a few attempts to get the correct exposure, but by experimenting with various shutter speeds you'll eventually find one that is right for the particular luminous fungi you're photographing.

The luminous fungi featured here required the shutter to be open for over 13 minutes to achieve correct exposure. While you're waiting in the dark for the image to be fully exposed, take extra care that you don't accidentally bump your tripod or camera! This will give you a blurry shot and you'll have to start again. Also, if you have a camera with 'Long Exposure Noise Reduction' as a feature, I strongly recommend using it. This feature helps reduce any 'noise' that might be evident with long exposures, as noise can degrade the quality of an image. I also suggest using an ISO of 100 or similar when using a tripod, to reduce any noise which can result from a much higher ISO setting.

One of the effects I like using when shooting macro images such as plants is known as 'backlighting'. This is where the sun is in front of you, rather than behind you. Having the sun directly in the image causes an unsightly blowout and you can also risk damaging your eyes if you look directly at the sun through your viewfinder. Try blocking the sun with the

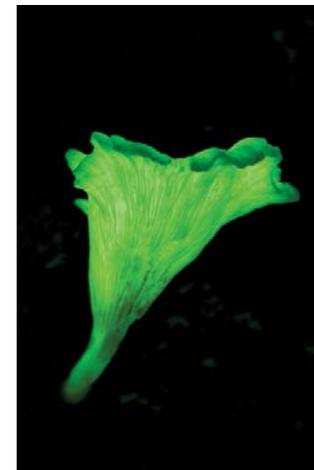


subject you're photographing, so the sun is directly behind it but doesn't show up in the shot. Using a lens hood will also greatly reduce any blow-outs from the sun, especially if the sun is in front, but slightly to the right or left and just out of sight of your subject.

### Wildlife worries

One of the most common difficulties encountered with wildlife is photographing them in low light, such as in rainforests or on days with dark clouds overhead, or even at dusk when they might become more active. It can be especially difficult to get decent shots when hand-holding a large lens in such conditions – the result can be blurry shots. If your lens has the function, using Image Stabilisation (called Vibration Reduction for Nikon lenses and Optical Stabilisation for Sony lenses) really helps to get sharp shots where shutter speeds are low. You can generally hand-hold two to three shutter speeds lower than would normally be necessary for sharp shots, when you're using image stabilisation.

However, another way to stabilise your hand-held camera and lens is to use a photographer's beanbag. This is usually filled with seeds, rice or beans and can be placed on the ground, on a post or rock and even on the roof or bonnet of a car. Your



### LEFT

This luminous fungi in Lamington National Park, Queensland, only glows once a year for a limited number of days. To capture this image I used a sturdy tripod and cable release for guaranteed stability and a long shutter speed to absorb the light emitted by the fungi. Nikon D700, 150mm macro lens @ 150mm, 800s @ f/8, ISO 100, tripod, cable release.

## EXPERT TIPS *Improve Your Nature Shots*



camera and lens are then nestled into the beanbag to give great stability. For the Little Egret image that I photographed, I placed the beanbag on the ground so that I was at eye-level with the bird. I was easily able to move my camera/lens and follow the bird until it spread its wings and pounced on the tiny fish in the water.

It can be quite tricky knowing when an animal will perform a particular behaviour. One of the crucial aspects of capturing great behavioural shots is to spend time beforehand researching the particular species you might wish to photograph. Having a bit of prior knowledge of the species' behaviour gives you a much greater chance of predicting what it might do. I would also advise you observe the behaviour of each individual first. You can then wait patiently with your camera until something happens, with some chance of anticipating its patterns of behaviour. This is exactly

what happened with a Lace Monitor I was photographing at Rocky Creek, in tropical North Queensland. I spent many hours, over a week, observing the behaviour of a male monitor on a property where I was staying. When another male appeared anywhere nearby, the subject I was photographing would often rear up in a territorial stance. So I waited, and as soon as the other male appeared, I had the camera ready and focussed on my subject.

A wildlife behaviour shot which is very popular with photographers, but often seems to be in the 'too hard basket', is a breaching whale. In Australia, there are quite a few whale-watching cruises which operate both on the east and west coasts of Australia. No one can guarantee if and when a whale will breach, but when it happens, knowing certain patterns the whales often follow increases the chance of getting great breach

shots. Often when there is a breach, it will be followed soon after by more. By noting where the first breach occurs and then pointing your camera just in front of the breach (in the direction the whale is travelling), your chances of getting more breach shots are greatly increased. This happened on one of the whale photography workshops I presented recently. A calf breached and this was followed by a succession of over 20 more! Each and every participant managed to get a series of great shots of whales breaching, just by following this simple instruction.

Another challenge for the wildlife photographer is getting close enough to a subject without scaring it away. For wildlife which often visit one area, using a camouflaged hide is a good strategy. There are many portable hides on the market that are quite light and easy to set up. I recommend positioning the hide a reasonable



### ABOVE

The early morning sun created beautiful backlighting for this Thread-leaf Hopbush in Girraween National Park, Queensland. The sun was positioned behind the plant and just to the right. I used a higher ISO to increase the shutter speed as the wind was blowing plant around. Nikon D700, 150mm macro lens @ 150mm, 1/160s @ f/11, ISO 1600, tripod, cable release.

### OPPOSITE PAGE

To get this shot of a Little Egret displaying at the Mount Coot-tha Botanic Gardens in Brisbane, I got down on the ground and rested my camera and lens on a photographer's beanbag, for better stability. Nikon D700, 80-200mm f/2.8 lens @ 28mm, 1/4000s @ f/4, ISO 200, beanbag.

## EXPERT TIPS *Improve Your Nature Shots*



distance from your subject and then leaving it a while. That way the subject can get used to it and continue with its normal behaviour. If you see the animal is taking no notice of the hide, move it closer still, until you're at your desired distance. This is how I managed to shoot the rare and incredibly elusive Albert's Lyrebird, in south-east Queensland. Without a hide, the lyrebird wouldn't have ventured anywhere near me and my camera. Bear in mind that councils and conservation groups also set up established hides at some locations, often in parks where waterbirds frequent. These are also great spots to shoot from, as long as you're prepared to exercise patience. Make sure you bring snacks, drinks, and warm clothes if the conditions are cool – and possibly a cushion for those hard wooden benches!

Photographer's often struggle to shoot moving targets, such as birds in flight. Learning how to move the camera's focusing point around easily will greatly increase the chance of getting well-composed shots. Choose the single focal point setting in

your camera and then practice moving the point around while tracking a flying bird. That way you'll have more chance of focusing on the moving bird, while also composing the shot in a way that leaves room in the direction the bird is flying. This is a very important, but frequently neglected, element of wildlife composition with beginners. Shooting a Red-tailed Tropicbird, I used continuous focus and made sure my focus point was on the bird's eye, another important aspect of wildlife photography. There are various 3D tracking settings available on some camera models, but by practising the above method, you have more control on focusing exactly where you want.

For the beginner, moving focal points around can be challenging at first, especially when you're trying to track a flying bird at the same time. I've found an easier option is to leave the focal point in the centre. That way, no matter which direction the bird is flying from, you have more chance of getting the bird in focus. You can

then crop the image later while post-processing, remembering to leave room in the direction the bird is flying. Once you feel you've mastered birds in flight using the fixed central focal point, you can then practise moving the focal point around.

By following some of these simple photographic tips and techniques your chance of getting those difficult nature, wildlife and landscape shots will improve greatly. As they say, practice makes perfect! ☺

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### LEFT

This Humpback whale calf, off the Redcliffe coast in Queensland, breached repeatedly. By focusing in front of the breach, and waiting, I was able to capture many more breach shots. Nikon D800, 70-200mm f/2.8 lens with 2x converter @ 400mm, 1/3200s @ f/5.6, ISO 400, hand-held.

### BELOW

The only way I was able to photograph this elusive Albert's Lyrebird displaying was to sit in a camouflaged bird hide daily – for an extended period of time! Nikon D700, 80-200mm lens @ 200mm, 1/125s @ f/7.1, ISO 100, tripod, three flash units, camouflaged hide.

