

## Composition in African Wildlife Photography

### Description

In this article I describe three typical types of African Wildlife compositions and the features that make them successful. My goal is to get you planning ahead, analyzing the scene in front of you, and consciously using your knowledge of composition to achieve the best rendering of the exciting animals you will see on safari.

Looking through my catalogue I can put most of my images into three categories images: animal portraits, animals with environment or landscape, and groups of animals

## Animal Portraits

These images have one center of interest; the animal. All other elements that can be distracting are eliminated and all the viewerâ€™s attention is on the animal, its textures, and eyes.

### Setting the Camera for the Portrait

When setting up for animal portraits try to include the following camera techniques

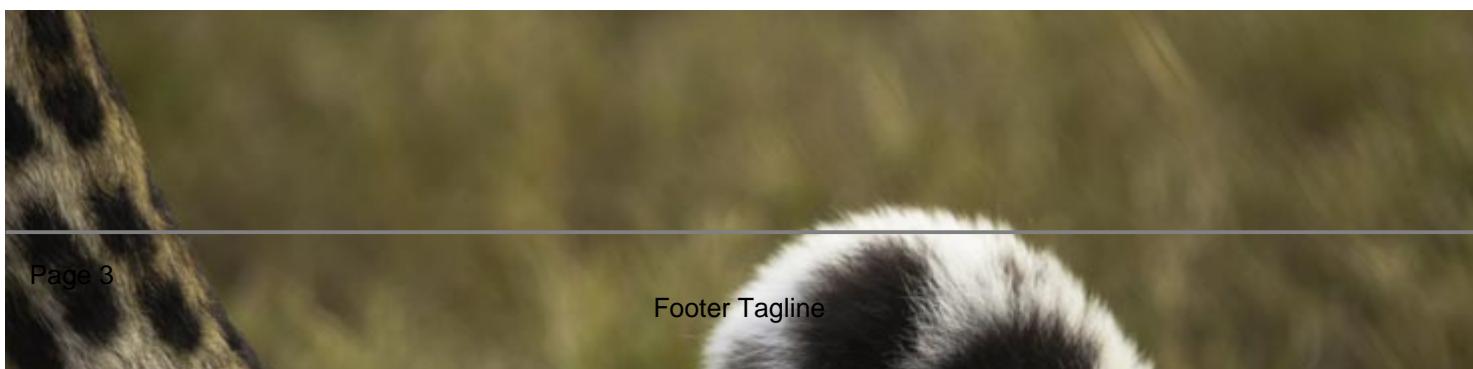
- â€“ Include an uncluttered background of solid color. The best way to achieve this is by blurring out the background so it is monochromatic and has little texture leaving the subject in sharp focus.
- â€“ Use apertures such as f2.8 f4.0 or f5.6
- â€“ The background should be at least 2 feet behind the subject



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Use proximity to show details

## Placement of the Subject in the Frame

Most portrait subjects will be too large in the frame to worry about Rule of Thirds placement (more on that below). If there is space around the subject, it should be in front of the subject or in the direct that the subject is moving or looking.

Get close and fill the frame – cropping can be done after the fact to add impact if the aspect ratio is not flatter or you just were not sure how to frame the shot.

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**Other Elements**

**that add to the Portrait**

Light and shadows enhance interest. Light from the side reveals texture and gives the 3D pop effect. Shadows can play down less important features. Light can create leading lines that help viewers discover all the details of the portrait.

Some external elements can enhance the portrait almost like props: a bit of fresh kill, flies buzzing around the head, a bit of the branch gripped in a talon.



The mother elephants legs tell the story of a baby protected and seeking closeness with its mother  
African Wildlife photography tips - Photo safari techniques *The carcass bits in this image add to the portrait explaining the look of bliss on the lion's face and tail attitude*

## Animal in its Environment or with a Landscape

The goal here is to show the animal interacting with its environment. In these images there can be more than one center of attention. The smaller the animal is in the frame, the more importance lies in

the composition and its success at getting the viewers attention on the subject



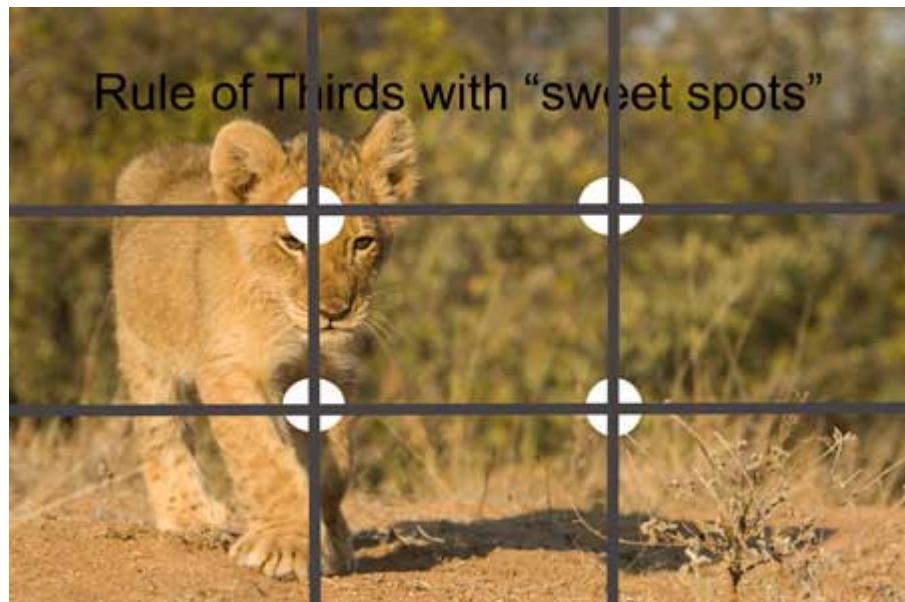
This image not only describes the shape of the young lion, but itâ€™s hunting conditions and challenges. The eye goes from lion, then up and across the open space.

### Place Elements Using Rule of Thirds

Position the subject in one of the strong points of the Rule of Thirds grid.



The subject should be walking, looking, or flying into the centre of the frame. If it is larger than the frame, there should be more space in front than behind it. As the subject gets smaller the importance of correct placement increases.



## Lead the Viewer Around the Scene

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Leading the viewers eye to the subject, especially when the subject is smaller relative to the rest of the image is achieved through careful composition.

**Make the subject easy to spot** : in contrast to the background

**Look for and use leading lines**: these are straight or curved lines that lead from a corner or edge of the frame to the subject (rivers, paths, tree branches).





**Present a Story.** Begin to think in terms of a still image as a story with a beginning (where the viewer's eyes go first), middle (what they will notice next), and end. Think about what other elements should be in the image to complete this movement and discovery.



*I have tighter shots of the cubs playing, but this wider shot tells the story of the nice cool rock they chose and the two lionesses closely supervising the surroundings.*

**Leave some active space** for the subject to move into. Space also helps tell the story: it leaves the viewer space to use imagination to fill in off camera elements that complete the story . Space is good for anticipating and catching future action: leave the subject room to spring.

**Light can serve as a leading line** drawing a path from the light source to the subject. The shadows that will result tell us what is not important. If shaded items are important, consider using HDR techniques or open these areas in postproduction.



*The wary gaze and heavy step was important here and the angled late afternoon light highlights this.*

**Resizing and Cropping is part of the toolbox.** Don't forget about vertical shots and consider how vertical can enhance the composition (emphasizing trees and giraffes). Cropping can be done after the fact, but adding space back in to improve a composition is much harder so don't squeeze your animal in a landscape images too much in camera or you will be removing creative flexibility.

You might have the urge to "fill the frame" but this eliminates the ability to do fine adjustments to the crops afterwards. It also can cause problems when you go to print such as on a wrapped canvas which requires a few inches of non subject on the borders.

**Depth and Vanishing points tell a story.** Use depth to place story elements such that viewers are drawn into the 3d scene. Depth and the correct lens can create movement, record proportions and distances. An element in the background can make the whole composition more interesting as long as it is part of the story and not a distraction (a lion moving toward the viewer or shade tree with a carcass in the background).



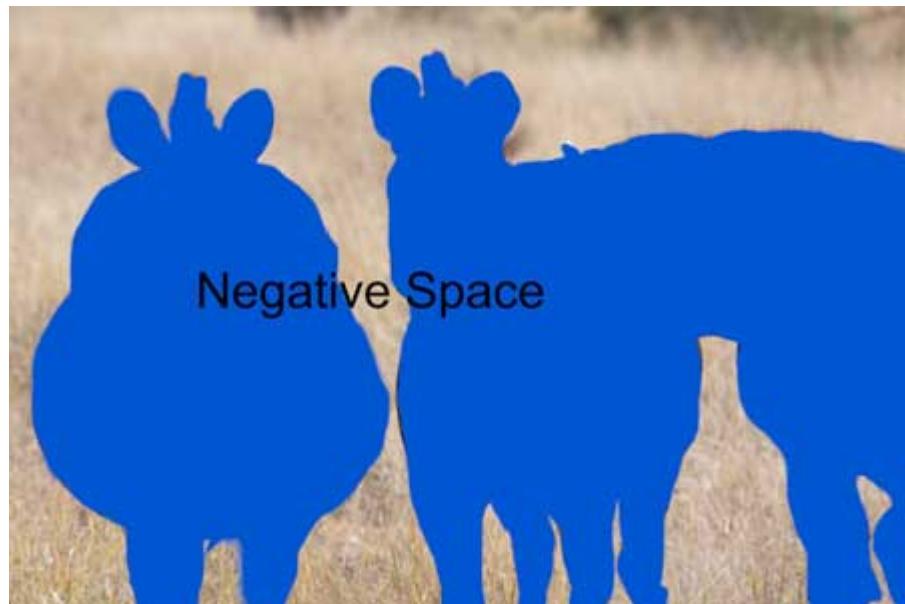
## Animal Groups

These images are not tight enough to be portraits and do not show many elements of the environment. The center of interest is the group rather than any particular one animal.



**Combinations of 3â€™s work well and have a harmonious balance.** Symmetry such as all looking the same direction or each in an opposite direction gives a balanced feel. Odd numbers, odd shapes, triangles are more visually interesting and should be included. This is a chance to show different poses and sides of the animal all at the same time (front,  $\frac{3}{4}$ , and side view all at once). Mixing sizes (juveniles and adults) of animals or species is interesting content.

**See the Negative Space.** Negative space is the outline created by subject(s) as if it was viewed as a silhouette. African animals are perfect subjects for their interesting shapes. Catch poses and groups that are creating an interesting shape and place them against neutral backgrounds for strong compositions.



## Composition Does not Stop after the Shoot

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Once back in front of the computer you can still enhance composition. The following are all useful tools for furthering your compositional goals.

- â€“ Use creative cropping: You may wish to make several versions of an image each with a different crop.



- â€“ Use tonal adjustments to enhance the impact of the subject, downplay distractions, and otherwise lead the viewer as you intended through contrast and proper lighting.

- â€“ Use color adjustment in a similar manner to lighting to announce the subject (perhaps through saturation) and downplay secondary elements (desaturate or limit color variation and texture).

- â€“ Use Blur to fade out distracting detail.

“ Clone or Heal elements that are really distracting and can not be cropped out.

Learn to quickly analyze a scene for story, interesting elements to include, what not to include, textures to highlight, light direction, and movement. Good composition is mostly achieved in the field as you plan the shot and read the animal, but applying a creative eye after the shoot boosts your shots to the next level

### **Category**

1. Creating Photo Stories
2. Photography on Safari
3. Safari Camera Techniques

### **Tags**

1. Photo safari in South Africa

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