



Cropping Safari Images for Story Telling and Capturing Mood

Description

Cropping is one of the tools I use to give my images to tell the story of why I took the image: the mood I felt, capture the essence of the wildlife subject, or tell a story of details I found interesting. Often I want to present the images different ways each time presenting a different aspect of my creative vision. Cropping together with minimal post processing such as color and exposure adjusting can achieve this. Many tools such as Adobe Lightroom now have some tools that use masking in combination with nondestructive editing.

Below I present several images and how I used cropping to make them into my complete vision.



Male Lion After crop and original image out of camera

Lion Image

This is a close, sharp, and well lit image of a glorious specimen of male lion. Unfortunately the paved road detracts from the composition with its horizontal line competing with the verticle silhoutte of the lion standing tall. It also brings “civilization” into the story. This photo was about celebrating the hard life and triumphs of the male.

My creative decision: Close crop to the face to bring the attention to the scars, the hunter’s stare in the eyes. Had the road cut through the subject a bit lower, I would have perhaps included more of the body, but to save from doing elimination (of road) editing of the image, I kept tight on the face.

Other steps to process this image:

- Exposure: darken blacks, lighten the darks (less contrast in darks) to bring detail to hair, brighten the white levels, improve contrast, improve midtone contrast / sharpening
- Warm the image to communicate the morning light this bathing the scene when images was captured
- Use simple masking to select all background around the mane (with a soft edge). Use a combination of post crop vingette on the whole image and exposure darkening in the mask area. This darkening decreases the color contrast and horizontal line created by the road “ it is still there, but no longer grabs attention.
- Next level details such as spot adjustments to white marks, eyes, contrast to mouth.

Note: I could have done a close crop in camera, but this would have limited possibilites for creating different versions of the image. Next time, if the animal gives me the chance, take one whole body shot, then go in for the close up.

Leopard Sitting



Cropped Leopard Image and original

This leopard was the our first sighting on the first day withing 5 minutes of entering Kruger Park. It was barely dawn but she was close and patient and all of us got wonderful images.

This composition was perfect for vertical orientation : yes, I could have done this in camera, but you never know when she will quickly move away so it is best to not move much while getting multiple images. The horizontal version also has its charms with the booka light in the background and a nice symetrical grass to the side just a bit forground to the leopard.

After the vertical crop I applied some light processing:

- Using a temporary conversion to Black and White, I adjust exposure values to get sharp contrast making sure the white fur is bright and blacks are true black.
- I make a masking selection so I can apply separate adjustments to the background versus the cat
- For the leopard, I brighten overall and the background darken a few steps.
- Special contrast and sharpening to the eyes and nose and sharpening to the whole cat
- For background, it was darkened and unshapened (blurred) except at the ground level where a gradient mask limited it to less adjustment than the rest of the background
- Overall I added a slight color gradient to the whole image by adjusting greens, oranges, and white balance. I could have gone with a morning glow warm light, but experimented with a more (trendy) magenta/teal green treatment.



Creating a new image from a wide shot with a different story to tell

Elephant Image Detail Story

The dramatic bull elephant owning his environment is a must have image from a safari. The color of the grass and the trees vanishing into a distant horizon tells you all about this elephant's home and life. To tell a different story, I cropped the image close to include just one eye, tusk, and ear. The close crop gives the viewer the ability to concentrate on the wrinkles, the wear on the tusk, injuries, texture. With no other competing elements they come to know this creature in the same way you did when you were less than 10 feet away from it on safari. Cropping out half the face might seem like violating a rule, but it further focuses attention and their brain can imagine the opposite side. A full face would not have been close enough to highlight the details.

I further processed this image:

- Sharpening for detail
- White balance to warm the image slightly
- open the whites and highlights for a bit of a "high key" / over expose the blank white space effect " further eliminating unnecessary details

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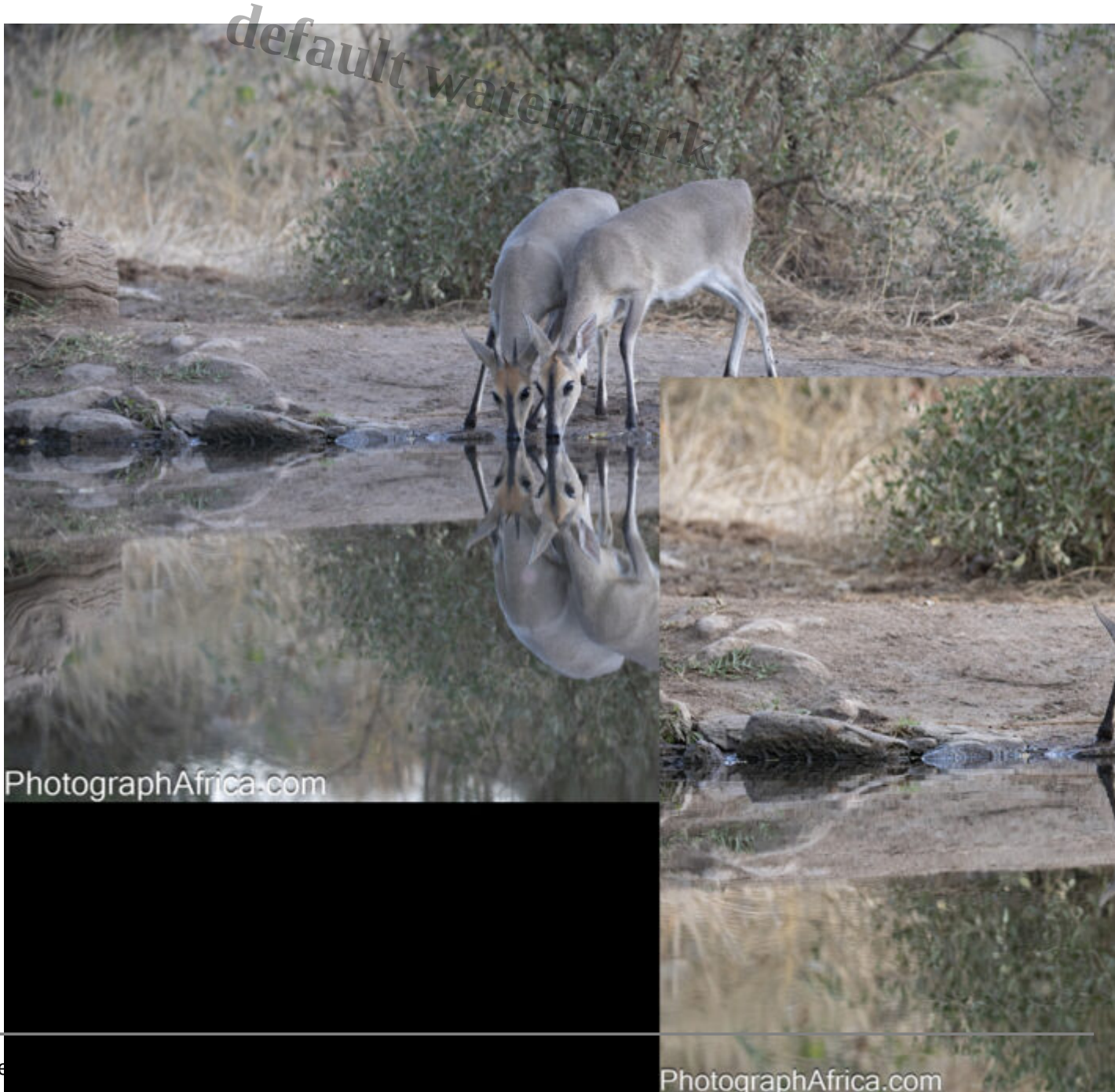
A good leopard composition cropped to be intimate and show a mood

Lounging Leopard Image

This very typical leopard pose tells the story of how they find comfortable places to sleep and their love of termite mounds. To create a 2nd story from the same image, I cropped it to just the face and shoulders. The cropped version no longer talks about the leopards good choice for a resting spot, but it makes us feel she is deep in thought about the coming evening's hunt. Processing it to warm light communicates it was taken in the morning after an active night (which it was) .

I added some light processing:

- Used HSL color sliders to adjust yellow and green saturation and lumosity
- Basic exposure adjustments for dark blacks, contrast, control highlights down. Again using the technique of temporarily turning it black and white and adjusting in this mode until it pops
- Had to treat upper right background and lower background separately with masks . Darken and blur each area different amounts to have less contrast and less sharp.
- Finish image with a post crop vignette to darken and create a slight halo / glow on the face



cropping to focus attention

Other Cropping Ideas

- Leave negative (empty space) on one side or the other: space on the side that animal is facing or will be moving into. This creates movement and telegraphs what will happen next
- Use monochrome to remove distracting color information. This will focus the audience on texture, pattern, and details.



Use black and white for story telling and effect

Cropping is an excellent tool for use to create different versions of your images; each bringing out a different story, mood, or point of detail. Use your memory of the wildlife encounter then find in your image what supports your story and feeling (or that which does not) and use cropping as a first edit to isolate and draw the viewer into the story you want to tell. Each wildlife image tells many stories and you as the creator can be in control of the narrative.

Our safaris are full of wildlife encounters, but we also mentor our guests (of all skill levels) to help you create great images in the camera and in post production through one on one advice tailored to your interests.

Find out about our safaris: <https://photographafrica.com/>

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