

# NPhoto APPRENTICE



## THE APPRENTICE

NAME: **Debbie Paddison**

CAMERA: **Nikon D850**

Wildlife fanatic Debbie first went on safari back in 2003 for the 'trip of a lifetime' to the astounding Serengeti. But on returning she vowed that it wouldn't to be a once-in-a-lifetime thing. Especially fond of big cats, she is a passionate supporter of the Big Cat Sanctuary (BCS) in Kent, UK (<https://thebigcatsanctuary.org>), and inspired by BCS's support for Kenyan wildlife conservancy Ol Pejeta, she signed up for Ian's photography safari, where *N-Photo* joined her.

# Out of Africa

This issue's Apprentice loves big cats and wanted to get images of the amazing animals of Africa, so headed to the **Ol Pejeta Conservancy** in Kenya to find and photograph these remarkable creatures

## THE PRO

NAME: **Ian Aitken**

CAMERA: **Nikon D750**

Ian started out as a commercial photographer, shooting big-budget campaigns for clients worldwide. His love of travel saw him shooting for magazines and guidebooks such as *Rough Guides*, among travel-orientated clients. Born in Tanzania to British parents, Africa – and its wildlife – has always been close to his heart. He has been running safari photography with the Ol Pejeta Conservancy since 2017. To find out more, see [www.aitkenimages.co.uk](http://www.aitkenimages.co.uk)

“J

ambo!” Ian greeted Debbie, using the traditional Swahili term for hello on her arrival after a bumpy four-hour taxi from Nairobi airport. “And welcome to Ol Pejeta. You’ve got half an hour to settle in, then we’re off for our first game drive.”

Soon after, they were bumping along in the four-wheel drive with Jimmy at the wheel, who would be their driver for the week. Ian explained what would be in store for the week ahead...

“Animals are not only most active at dawn and dusk, but that’s when the best light is too, so we’ll be getting up early every morning for a game drive before breakfast. We’ll also do one every evening before dinner. As we’re on the equator, the sun rises at 6am and sets at 6pm year round, so you’ll need to set your alarm clock! But that’s just the half of it, I’ve got plenty to fill the rest of the days too. Ol Pejeta carries out important wildlife conservation work, and so I’ve got something planned for each morning and afternoon. All will be revealed!” he teased. →

**SUPER  
SHOT #1**



<b>Camera:</b>	Nikon D850
<b>Lens:</b>	150-600mm f/5-6.3
<b>Exposure:</b>	1/800 sec, f/5.3, ISO640



record a balanced scene with detail in the land, but to capture the atmosphere of dawn, it's all about getting the colours of the sky. Just don't forget to check that you've removed the exposure compensation later when

photographing animals. You'll have to work fast; like sunset, sunrise is over quickly, and once the sun pops over the shoulder of the mountain, it'll be bright daylight."

True enough dawn broke. "Now let's find some animals," said Ian. "There's a hyena den nearby, and they'll be warming themselves in the rising sun after a night of hunting and scavenging."

Waiting at the dugout holes showed no sign of life. "That's odd," pondered Ian, "but they are wild animals. Let's move on." Arriving at an acacia forest, they came across a family of giraffe. "The collective noun is a 'tower' of giraffe," explained Ian, as Debbie concentrated on capturing the long-necked ruminants eating the leaves at the top of the acacia trees. "The new growth is at the top of the tree," continued Ian, "and the spiky bark is less developed – that's one of the reasons that the giraffe are so tall. The other is that it enables them to spot predators from a very long way – you'll see other animals following the giraffe, using them as an early warning system."

"I'm so happy with these shots," said Debbie. "But don't forget to look around," prompted Ian. There were more giraffe behind them, but this time set against the looming shape of Mount Kenya. A bank of cloud made the mountain look as if it were floating. "It's easy to get caught up in the moment, but keep your eyes peeled; the best shot might be behind you!" →

**PRO KIT BLANKETS**

OI Pejeta is almost 2000m above sea level, so it can get very cold in the mornings before sun up – temperatures also plummet after dusk. While the hooded blankets in the safari jeep help keep you warm, they also serve another important purpose. The open-sided and open-topped vehicles offer little protection from the dusty dirt roads. It's impractical to put the camera in the



bag every time you move, especially if it's equipped with a long lens, so Ian advised covering them with the blanket when they were on the move.

**JUST LION AROUND**

"What are the chances of seeing the big five?" quizzed Debbie. "I can't guarantee it – these are wild animals after all – and at 360km<sup>2</sup>, OI Pejeta covers an area the size of the Isle of Wight, but we'll give it a go," responded Ian. "For now, let's see if we can tick lions off the list; there was a lion kill yesterday, let's see if they're still around."

After painstakingly searching the area, there was a glimpse of something in the grass. "We've found our lioness!" said Ian. Using the long end of her 150-600mm telephoto, Debbie captured a variety of shots. "Once you've got over the excitement of finding the animal and capturing a record shot, work on how you can improve it," advised Ian. "Try getting in really close for a portrait of the face, and back for a full body shot. Try including the wider environment, and if there are more animals in the scene, think about your depth of field; set a narrower aperture and shoot between the animals to get them all in focus."

That said, a rustle in the bush revealed another lioness, walking over to join her sister. But then something else: a lion cub trotting dutifully behind her. Then another. And another... soon there were no less than five cubs following their mother, who seemed to be on a mission. "Let's see where they're going," suggested Jimmy, firing up the ignition of the Land Cruiser. As they followed the felines into the bush they pulled out their prize from the undergrowth: the remains of a zebra carcass. Debbie wasted no time in capturing a variety of shots of the cubs, as they played with one another and licked the carcass clean.

The light was fading and it was time to head back to The Stables – a converted stable block on the conservancy that would be their base for the next week. "The sun sinks like a stone, and it'll be pitch black soon. Thankfully the weather is looking promising tomorrow," observed Ian. "Let's make an early start to capture the sunrise – it's at 6am, so we need to be up and out for five in order to get set up in time."

**MORNING GLORY**

Parking up on the plain, the sunset lived up to its expectations, the sky turning crimson with Mount Kenya silhouetted against the glow. "You'll need to underexpose by two or even three stops," Ian suggested. "The camera's metering system will try and

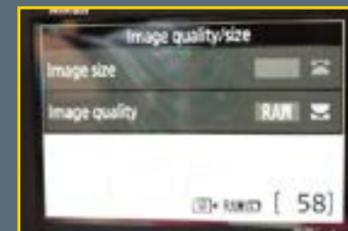
**PRO KIT DON'T FORGET THE FIRST AID KIT!**



**Ian's extensive first aid supplies cover all eventualities for in-the-field treatment.**

**Ian says...** I carry an extensive first aid kit on safari to keep clients safe and well. As well as bandages and plasters for nicks and cuts, I have treatments for everything from dehydration to diarrhoea. I even carry a set of syringes and clean needles; while the facilities close to OI Pejeta are pretty good, that's not always the case, and local medical facilities can be somewhat basic... and I know that these needles are sterile. At the end of the day, you don't want the treatment to make you even less well!

**TECHNIQUE  
ASSESSMENT**



**RAW QUALITY**

**Ian says...** Debbie had only ever shot JPEG before, but I insisted she switch to Raw, as this gives more leeway in post. It can salvage badly exposed shots, and bring out hidden details. I also suggested she set the Colour Space to Adobe RGB as this holds more data than the default sRGB mode.



**AUTO ISO**

**Ian says...** It's crucial you set a fast shutter speed to avoid blur, and on these big lenses that means at least 1/600 sec, ideally more, so I suggested Debbie start in Shutter Priority mode. Whichever exposure mode you're in, set Auto ISO too. This will increase the ISO automatically for a good exposure.



**FOCUSING**

**Ian says...** Set a Dynamic Area Focus mode with 25 AF points, so if an animal strays from a selected AF point one of the others should pick it up; move it over the animal's head (eye for close-ups), and set Focus Point Wrap, so you can jump from one edge of the frame to the other. I also set Continuous AF – even stationary animals can suddenly move.

SUPER  
SHOT #2

Camera:	Nikon D850
Lens:	150-600mm f/5-6.3
Exposure:	1/1000 sec, f/5.6, ISO64



Switching to a vertical composition to capture the towering mountain with the giraffe in the foreground, Debbie had an enviable collection of shots from the morning. And with that it was time to head back for a well-deserved breakfast. "Let's see what you've got!" said Ian.

But on examining the images on the camera's rear LCD, Debbie was presented only by darkness, the forms of the giraffe only just discernible. "Oh no! These are useless" said a dejected Debbie. "And you even told me to make sure that I'd turned the compensation back to zero, too."

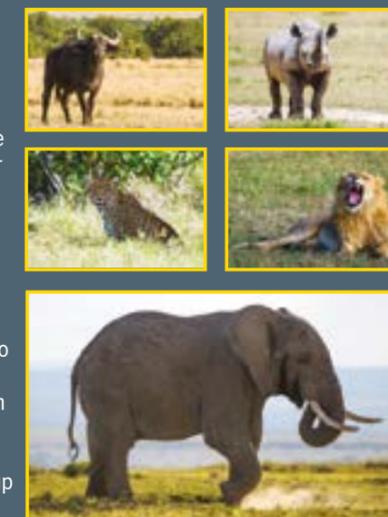
"Fear not!" reassured Ian. "Because you've shot in Raw, you can salvage underexposed shots." Opening the images in Lightroom, Ian showed Debbie how she could rectify her mistake by pulling the Exposure slider to the right, the detail springing back into the shot. Adding a touch of Contrast, and increasing the Shadows and Blacks sliders while pulling back the Highlights and Whites transformed the images from dull and drab into one that was full of life, adding a little Clarity and Vibrance for good measure. "Of course, it's better to have captured a good exposure in the first place, but this is the perfect example of why we shoot Raw; it can salvage badly exposed shots like this and also make good images great."

**A LEOPARD IN THE DARK**

Over the following days Debbie captured more and more amazing shots: zebra on a bush walk, less shy of humans on foot than in a noisy diesel-powered four-wheel drive; elephants digging for roots, throwing up

**EXPERT INSIGHT**  
THE BIG FIVE

In the days of the hunting lodges, the Big Five were the trophies that every big game hunter wanted to bring home, being perceived as the most dangerous animals on the savannah: buffalo, elephant, lion, leopard and rhino. Thankfully, these days the shooting is done with a camera, rather than a blunderbuss. In Ol Pejeta, you're all but guaranteed to see buffalo, elephant and rhino in the wild, while the big cats are somewhat more elusive, but if you do come across a lion they are largely unfazed by your presence – the shy leopard being the trickiest of all to find, spending much of its time hidden high up in the canopy and keeping a wary distance.



great cloud of dust in the process; both black and white rhino (they have identical grey colouring, but 'white' is derived from the Afrikaans word for 'wide', describing the bigger mouth shape, so 'black' is used to distinguish between the sub-species); and great herds of buffalo: "It's the lone buffalo that you have to watch out for," informed Ian, "they're males, they're aggressive, and they're far more dangerous than lions."

"I've captured four of the Big Five," said Debbie. Only the leopard to go!" Then, bumping along the dirt track back to camp after the morning's game drive, Ian suddenly yelled "Stop! There's something over there in the bush. Is it a lion?"

"That's not a lion, it's a leopard!" exclaimed Jimmy, reversing for a better view. Sure enough, there was the most elusive of the Big Five, 50 metres off the dirt road, head just visible in the long grass. "Sometimes you just get lucky," admitted Ian. Debbie captured shots of the half-hidden feline as best she could, when a buffalo wandered into the vicinity. →

**PRO KIT**  
HIRE PRO GEAR

Debbie's own camera is a Nikon D3400 with 18-55mm kit lens and 70-300mm telephoto zoom, but she decided to hire some more advanced gear for this trip to capture the animals in their glory. As well as renting a pro-level Nikon D850, she also hired a Nikon 70-200mm f/2.8 and Sigma 150-600mm f/5-6.3 OS | S super-telephoto to get close to the wildlife. A super-tele-zoom gives much more flexibility than a prime as you can zoom in for frame-filling shots of far-away animals, or pull back when in close proximity to larger creatures.



The open-topped safari vehicle enabled animals to be spotted from a distance.

This attracted the leopard's attention, sitting bolt upright for a better view. The danger soon passed, then some gazelle entered the scene, which really captured the leopard's attention, and it began slowly stalking them through the grass. Sensing the danger, the gazelle began hissing and mock charging the leopard, which slunk away, defeated, into the thick bush.

"The leopard doesn't like drawing too much attention to itself," explained Ian. "It could take down the gazelle stealthily, but once there's a commotion like this its cover is blown and it gives up. It's body is actually relatively delicate, and it won't risk front-on confrontation."

### ROARING SUCCESS

Another early morning to capture sunrise was less successful. Driving to their intended spot on a high point for a glorious view of Mount Kenya, they were intercepted by a bank of low cloud, "We'll have to find somewhere lower," said Ian. But on reaching the new location the sun was already creeping around the shoulder of the mountain and the cloud had followed, beginning to obscure the peak.

"Oh well, you can't win them all," sighed Debbie. But then a noise, a loud, growling noise, and it sounded close...

"Lions!" exclaimed Ian. Despite the scarcity of lions, they had managed to see them every day since that first encounter with the cubs: a juvenile male, mane not yet fully grown, who had been cast from the pride, "just like a teenager who's been told to stop relying on mum and dad and to go out into the world and make something of themselves", as Ian observed; a pair of lionesses drinking from a water station originally designed for cattle; a pair of vocal fully grown males at night asserting their



A pair of lionesses relax on the plain, enabling another fantastic photo opportunity.

claim to their territory; and when out with the rangers checking on the health of a pride using radio to track a collared lion. But this was different.

There were five fully grown males and a female. "I've never seen anything like this," said Jimmy, who had spent years as a driver and eagle-eyed spotter in the conservancy. What followed was little short of magical. Three of the males – probably brothers – were torn between chasing off the other two and turning their attention to the female. Having chased the imposters off, they approached the lioness. She was in a frisky mood, running around the dominant male then rolling on her back near him. But whenever he showed any interest she'd growl to warn him off, only then to continue her flirtations. The other two lions sat on the ridge-line, while this game continued. Transfixed, Debbie took photo after photo of this behaviour, until eventually it was time to head back to The Stables.

### CHEETAHS DO PROSPER

Coming towards the end of their stay, there was one more animal on Debbie's list; the cheetah. The fastest cat of all, capable of short bursts of 80kph, its spotted coat makes it very hard to find. Heading to an area of the conservancy that cheetahs had been known to inhabit, the search began. "What's that by the bushes? Is that a cheetah?" asked Debbie. "No, it's a warthog!" laughed Ian. "But it is behaving strangely; it's alert and something has caught its attention... I don't see any other animals here, which is unusual..."

Driving towards the warthog revealed *something* in the long grass: not one, but two cheetahs, a mother and her almost fully grown cub, scampering into the thick bush. Jimmy followed in the four-wheel drive. "Hold on, it'll get bumpy!" he said as the car lurched through dips and bumps.

"Normally, vehicles aren't allowed to stray from the roads," Ian explained, →



You can't set up a tripod or monopod in a safari vehicle – a bean bag is a better option.

### PRO KIT BEAN BAGS

Ian says... A hefty super-tele lens is much too heavy and cumbersome to handhold for any length of time, but tripods or monopods are far too fiddly and space-consuming to set up in the cramped conditions of a safari jeep, so I provide a few bean bags to rest the bigger tele-zooms on. They can be lent on the open window frames or bars atop the roof, cushioning the weight of the lens while allowing it to be moved freely to track the wildlife.

Mid-mornings saw a picnic blanket draped on the bonnet for a civilized cuppa and cake.



SUPER SHOT #3



Camera:	Nikon D850
Lens:	150-600mm f/5-6.3
Exposure:	1/1000 sec, f/5.6, ISO1800

## EXPERT INSIGHT DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY

There's so much more to see in a nature conservancy than going on safari, and Ian has developed a programme for photographing the conservation work at OI Pejeta, as well as how it interacts with surrounding communities. Sandwiched between dawn and dusk game drives, they headed out each morning and afternoon. Here are just some of the dozen or so documentary photo opportunities that Debbie enjoyed.

#### BUSHWALK

Accompanied by an armed ranger, the pair walked across the plains for a look at the flora and fauna – and poo. "There's so much to learn from checking the droppings; not only can you learn what's been around by its appearance, but how long ago they were last here. Animals don't instantly run from slow-moving humans either, enabling you to get closer shots of creatures like zebra.



#### COMMUNITY

OI Pejeta is involved in many projects to support the local communities; in a country where much of the population lives below the poverty line, it's vital to work with the locals so that they understand the value of conservation and benefit from it. One project involves creating energy-efficient ovens that use less fuel and funnel away smoke efficiently, making them more eco-friendly.



#### DOG TRAINING

Poaching of endangered species, such as rhino or elephant, is a big problem, but OI Pejeta has had big success, with no cases since 2017. Part of the anti-poaching op is sniffer dogs. The bloodhounds have a sense of smell a million times better than humans. Debbie was invited to take part in their training, by hiding in the bush while the dogs picked up her scent with their olfactory organs.



#### LION TRACKING

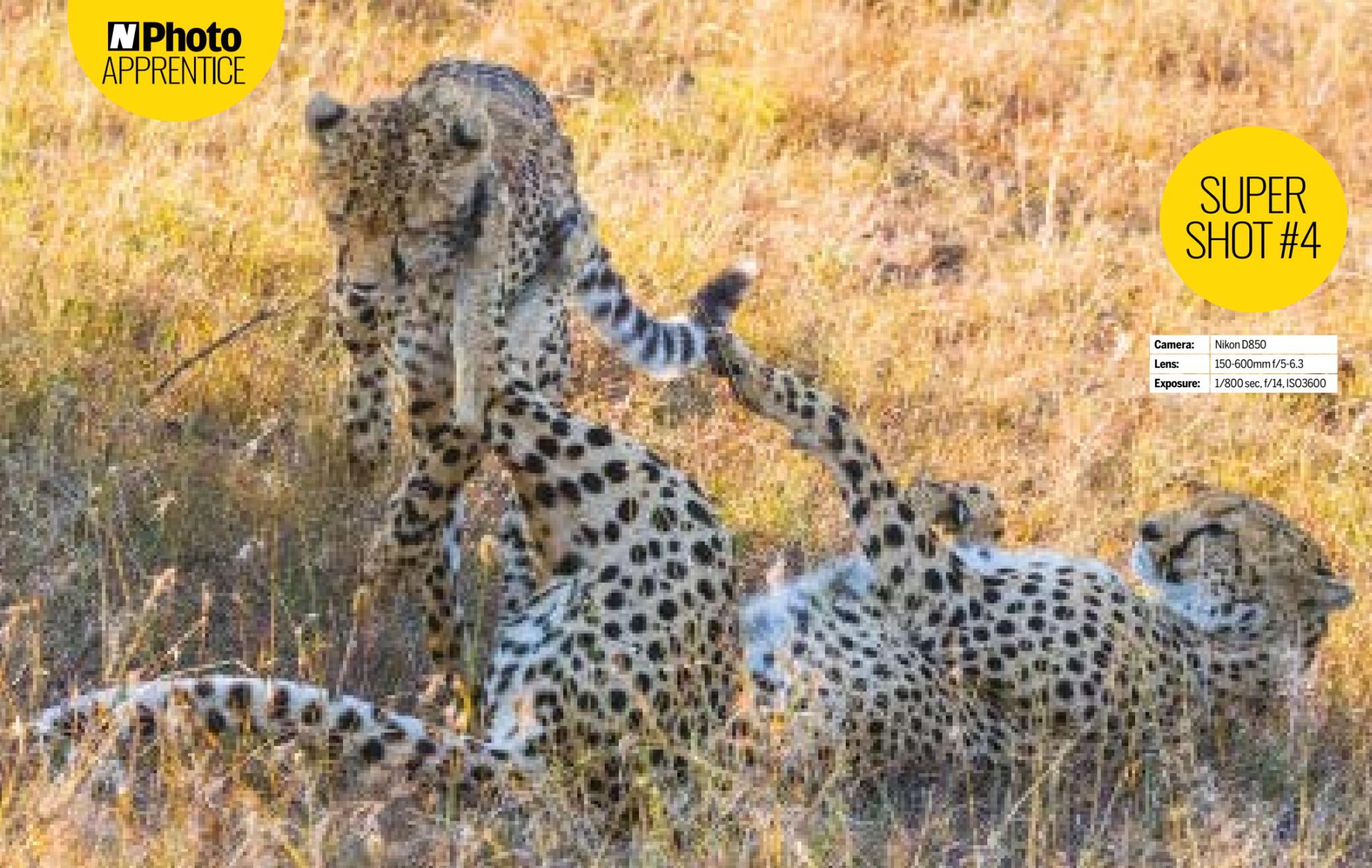
Checking the health of big cats is a crucial part of conservation work, and Ian and Debbie joined the rangers in this task. Lions are sedated and fitted with a UHF radio collar; driving around the park, a radio receiver gives a beep when it detects the signal from the collar, which gets louder as they get closer. They eventually found the pride they were looking for to be in excellent health.



#### CATTLE HERDING

OI Pejeta maintains a ranch with around 6000 cattle, farmed to support the conservation work. Herders walk their cattle to different areas to graze. Debbie and Ian joined them, while the herders explained about the flora and fauna, including the symbiotic relationship between acacia and ants: the tree creates pod-like growths that the ants live in; the ants bite animals that feed on the leaves.





**SUPER SHOT #4**

**Camera:** Nikon D850  
**Lens:** 150-600mm f/5-6.3  
**Exposure:** 1/800 sec, f/14, ISO3600

**BE OUR NEXT APPRENTICE!**

We're looking for future Apprentices! So if you would like to appear on these pages and get top one-to-one professional tuition into the bargain, send an email headed 'Apprentice' to [mail@nphotomag.com](mailto:mail@nphotomag.com) and make sure that you include the following information: your name, address, a contact phone number, the camera and kit you use, and the subject that you're interested in shooting.



Image: © Sally Holmes

**Next issue our Apprentice heads to Devon with Neil Burnell for a long-exposure coastal landscape shoot.**



**PRO PORTFOLIO IAN AITKEN**



**NORTHERN WHITE**

Fatu, my first close encounter with a northern white rhino, and the impetus behind the photo workshops in Kenya and my direction as a photographer. Taken in 2012, I had a vision to photograph Fatu with Mount Kenya in the background.



**GOUCHO**

These guys are tough: sweltering heat, long days, dust clouds, lassos, hundreds of cattle braying, yet they have time to smile. Taken during a trip to document the annual Yarra in the Cordoba region of Argentina, I had the privilege to be the first non-Goucho to be allowed right into the thick of it.



**ULTRA RUNNER**

Sami Marathon (yes, it's his real name!) was a fellow competitor in the Oman Desert Marathon, a multi-day self-supported race of 165km. Taken during the race, I had no camera, but I could see the potential, so borrowed one from the press and set up a shot as the sun dropped over the horizon.

**EXPERT INSIGHT OL PEJETA CONSERVANCY**

Once a vast cattle ranch with a somewhat colourful history, Ol Pejeta lies slap-bang on the equator in the shadow of Mount Kenya. As well as boasting all the Big Five – amongst other African wildlife – it's dedicated to preserving and conserving endangered species. It is home to the last two surviving northern white rhinos on the planet (and is instrumental in attempting to bring the subspecies back from the brink of extinction) as well as the Sweetwaters Chimpanzee Sanctuary, which rehabilitates orphaned chimps back into the wild. It also works with many other charities and organizations dedicated to

**At 360km<sup>2</sup>, Ol Pejeta Conservancy is the size of the Isle of Wight!**



the protection of such animals. In addition to conservation work, the conservancy runs programmes with local communities, ensuring that the locals see the benefits of preserving these endangered species. For more, see [www.olpejetaconservancy.org/get-involved/photo-workshops](http://www.olpejetaconservancy.org/get-involved/photo-workshops)

“but we have special dispensation as we're in an official Ol Pejeta research vehicle. We can go where no one else can.”

The cheetahs were relaxed, lying in the shade, but the youngster was full of energy, wanting to play with its mother. All the time they were sticking to the shade, with a brighter background. “This is an exposure nightmare,” warned Ian. Don't blow out the background as it'll be really distracting. Take a couple of shots and check the image on the screen and histogram to ensure that highlights aren't clipped; that way you'll be able to boost the dark areas the cheetahs are in while pulling back the brightness; you can use a virtual ND grad in Lightroom to help control the balance. Also, I'd increase shutter speed and narrow your aperture to ensure you freeze them and capture both reasonably sharply with a greater depth of field. You're going to have to use Manual to dial in both aperture and shutter speed

settings, but Auto ISO will take care of the exposure; you can dial in exposure compensation if you want a lighter or darker exposure than the camera suggests.”

While the cheetahs paid scant interest to the four-wheel drive, suddenly something caught their attention, and their ears pricked. Then they were off, but Debbie was ready and rattled off a sequence of shots using High Speed Continuous mode before they disappeared into the bush.

**DEBBIE'S VERDICT**

What an experience! I'm so glad that I hired this monster of a tele-zoom; it helped me get images that would have been impossible with my own kit. Coming to Ol Pejeta has been a wonderful experience; I love wildlife, so it's great to know that the safari I've chosen is supporting the important conservation work that they do



– plus the access I've been given puts the other safari options in the shade. The only problem now is narrowing down the two thousand-plus shots I've taken to just four; I feel that I've got dozens of Super Shots!



**IAN'S COMMENT**

Having a passion for your subject is vital, and Debbie had no shortage of that! She just needed to look beyond the excitement of seeing the animal and getting the shot, then think about how she could recompose or alter her settings to get better shots. She made mistakes, but learnt from them, and grew in confidence. She was happy to switch to Manual mode when needed, and I think she's overcome her reluctance to use Raw; you may take thousands of shots, but you only need to process the ones that you're going to print – and she's captured some corkers! 📸