

# TRUE TO HERSELF

After coming face to face with endangered gorillas in Rwanda, Sydney's **Jan Latta** knew she was in the wrong profession. Now, 20 years on, she's a renowned wildlife photographer, author of the successful *True to Life* books - and still looking for that next big adventure...



**You were working as a creative director in Hong Kong. Now, 20 years later, you're a successful photographer with a dozen books to your name. How did you make that change?**

I was looking at a photo essay by [wildlife activist and photographer] Karl Ammann that I was designing for *Regent* magazine and I remember being absolutely mesmerised by his photographs. With that as an excuse, I went to Africa for the first time - this was back in 1994 - and I fell in love with it. Karl organised for me to go up and see the mountain gorillas in Rwanda. Now, that was as the war was starting, which made it very dangerous, but I decided that this might be my only

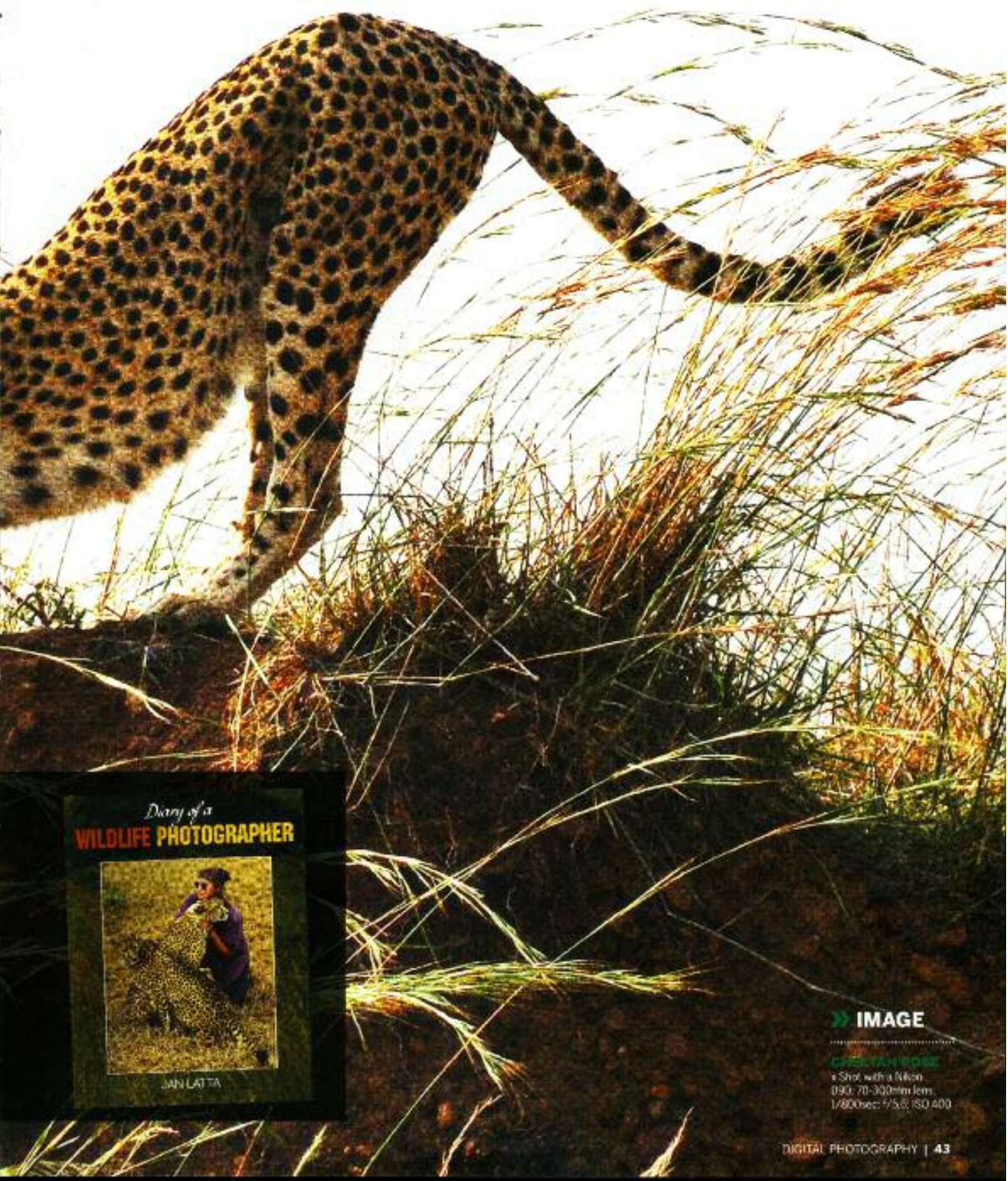
opportunity to go and do that. And when I came face to face with a mountain gorilla, that moment changed my life.

I was there with a friend from Hong Kong, a guide, and perhaps four other people. They only allowed very small groups to trek up the mountain at that time. I was talking to the guide as I was struggling back down the mountain and I said, "How many of these mountain gorillas are left in the world?" And he said, "About 600." I thought that was so sad. I said to my friend at that moment, "I'm going to start making books for children on endangered animals."

And then I said to Karl, who was a very famous wildlife photographer even then and who was living in Africa, "How do I go

about this?" And he said simply to buy a good camera - he suggested a Nikon at the time, which was my first camera - and he said, "Do your research about every single animal you might see in the wild, and come back to Africa and learn."

So, technically, I've never had a photographic lesson. I just went back and made lots of mistakes. But I learned. And when I do talks at schools or at festivals now, I say to the kids, "Homework is so important. I have to learn everything about that animal to keep myself safe; I need to know everything about that animal so I can read his body movements, anticipate his next action, and get a great photograph."



*Diary of a*  
**WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER**



JAN LATTA

» **IMAGE**

**CHEETAH ROSE**  
x Shot with a Nikon  
090: 70-300mm lens,  
1/800sec; f/5.6; ISO 400

## “I’m much happier covered in dirt on the back of a jeep, looking at lions!”

**That first camera was a Nikon film SLR?**

Yes, while I was there in Africa I discovered the joys of Velvia. And when you're out in the wild, especially when I was up in the mountains of China with the pandas in Wolong, taking all the photographs for my book *Ping Ping the Panda* was on Velvia. It was raining, and if it wasn't raining it was misty. The guide that I had to hire to allow me to go into the region held an umbrella over me the entire time. But the Velvia film was just so beautiful, despite all that – bringing out all the rich greens, and the depths of the blacks. It was wonderful.

When I first moved to digital after a disaster in Borneo with the orangutans, I was a bit disappointed with the results. Just for a while, until I got used to using digital properly. And I believe – although I haven't done this myself yet – that there is a Velvia type of filter you can apply digitally nowadays. I haven't had time to look into that yet because I've been lucky, shooting in morning and evening light – that lovely golden light that only Africa produces.

**What happened in Borneo that was so disastrous you switched to digital?**

Oh, it was quite a few years ago now. I'd been trying to make bookings to enter Borneo to shoot the orangutans, and the Indonesian government said, “The section you're trying to enter is too dangerous. We can't guarantee your safety and we can't guarantee your flights.” So I just went to the Malay part, and I had the very great privilege of being allowed into an area on walkways – and I was so pleased with myself. I got all the action I wanted to tell the orangutan story. I flew back to Sydney, I went to a lab when it opened at 7am, dumped all my film, went back home to have a shower and the phone rang. The lab said, “I'm sorry to tell you, but you have not one single frame on all these rolls of film.”

I couldn't talk to anyone for a whole week. But I bought my digital camera, and a few years went by, and because I'd had that experience with the orangutans and because Indonesia was safe again, I was able to visit again and did the trip very differently. I did far more research, had a guide with a boat, and just the two of us went into the jungle



## » IMAGES

### GERENÜK PAIR ON HIND LEGS

» (top left) Shot with a  
Canon PowerShot  
G9; 74-44.4mm lens;  
1/400sec; 1/4.8; ISO 400

### MENACING BUFFALO

» (left) Shot with a  
Nikon D90; 18-200mm  
lens; 1/500sec; 1/5.6;  
ISO 200

### ON THE HUNT

» (right) Shot with a  
Nikon D90; 70-300mm  
lens; 1/1000sec; 1/5.6;  
ISO 800





## “I wanted to be the voice of the animals, talking to children about their life and survival”

each day – it was fabulous. I never did find out exactly what went wrong with that film, but it was totally my fault; I should have had it in a lead bag.

**How much time passed before your dream of publishing books became a reality?**

Well, in Hong Kong, where I was living at the time, I had to work seven days a week – it's a very fascinating city to live in, but you have to work very hard to survive – but even so, I believe it was within a year. Since I was already working in publishing, it was relatively easy for me to get the printing done, so I printed a very small quantity and flew with them to Australia. I went around to all the publishers and said, “I want to do a series of books for children on endangered animals; here's the idea for the format,” and the response was, “Well, we're interested, but we want to see the series. Until you have that, good luck.”

But one man – Gordon Jackson of Koala Books – actually said yes. He said, “If you do a series, we will be your distributor in Australia.” So I went back to Africa, did a book about rhinos, then back to Australia for a book on koalas, and then the first tiger book, and those three became the beginning of the *True to Life* series.

Then suddenly, with the handover of Hong Kong from the UK to China, I lost the publishing company – it all came tumbling down like a pack of cards. I had two English partners; one moved back to England and one didn't want to come with me to Australia, so I decided to relocate back to Sydney on my own. That was when I was able to concentrate solely on the children's

books. I went back to Africa and everything has been wonderful from that moment on. That old life was glamorous in its way, but I don't miss it. I'm much happier covered in dirt on the back of a jeep, looking at lions!

**Had you already dabbled in photography prior to your life-changing decision to create the *True to Life* books?**

I was just a happy snapper. Like all Australians, I travelled quite a bit when I was young and took some photos. But I'd been around some of the world's great photographers through my work in publishing *Regent* magazine, so there was always that involvement with photographers and photography. But this was different.

My purpose in doing the *True to Life* series was to go off into the world and tell the story of the animals through images. I wanted to be the voice of the animals, talking to children about their life and their survival. So, after researching each animal and talking to scientists and working out where to go, I would write a script – a wishlist of photographs I was hoping to capture in the wild – that would best tell the animal's story. I mean, there are many better photographers than me, but when I went back to Borneo that second time, when I had my wishlist, the first experience, as bad as it was, ended up being good because I had much better knowledge of the behaviour of the orangutans. For instance, when an orangutan is making a lip-smacking noise, you might think, “Oh, how nice, it's kissing me.” But no, that means it's angry. You have to learn all the sounds and actions and so forth.



So my aim is only to tell the animal's story, to put that in a book so that children can understand and be excited. With all my talks that I do – especially in China once a year – I try to make children be aware that some of these animals may not be around when they become adults. That's my challenge.

**There's a real sense of humour behind your images, especially in the playfulness of the compositions. Did you shoot them that way intentionally because you had an audience of children in mind? Or is it just your whimsical sensibility coming through?**

Yes it is intentional. I try, with the children's books especially, to always get a very memorable or even funny photograph because I don't want my books to be boring! A lot of people think non-fiction books are boring; I want mine to be enthralling. I want kids to laugh at the orangutan trying to stuff 15 bananas in her mouth. Those things are important so that the children can laugh, be entertained, and remember.

**Besides raising awareness, what other ways are you involved in helping endangered animals?**

With every single performance or school presentation, I'm always telling the children it's so wrong to kill a rhino to grind up its horn for medicine; it's so wrong to kill a tiger and use his whiskers and bones for Chinese medicine, and that message I think is very important. Then at the end there's always question time, and usually there's a child or a teacher who says, “What can we do to help?” And my answer is the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust ([sheldrickwildlifetrust.org](http://sheldrickwildlifetrust.org)).

I've been to his elephant sanctuary in Kenya five times now and it is the best charity I've ever seen. All the little baby elephants that have watched their mothers being slaughtered, if they're found anywhere in Africa they're rescued, put on a plane and taken to the Sheldrick orphanage where Daphne [Dame Daphne Sheldrick,

## » IMAGES

### ELEPHANT HERD

» (FAR LEFT, TOP)  
Shot with a Nikon D90; 70-300mm lens; 1/250sec; f/10; ISO 200

### ORPHAN ORANGUTAN

» (FAR LEFT, BOTTOM)  
Shot with a Nikon D90; 70-300mm lens; 1/125sec; f/7.1; ISO 400

### SLEEPY PRIDE

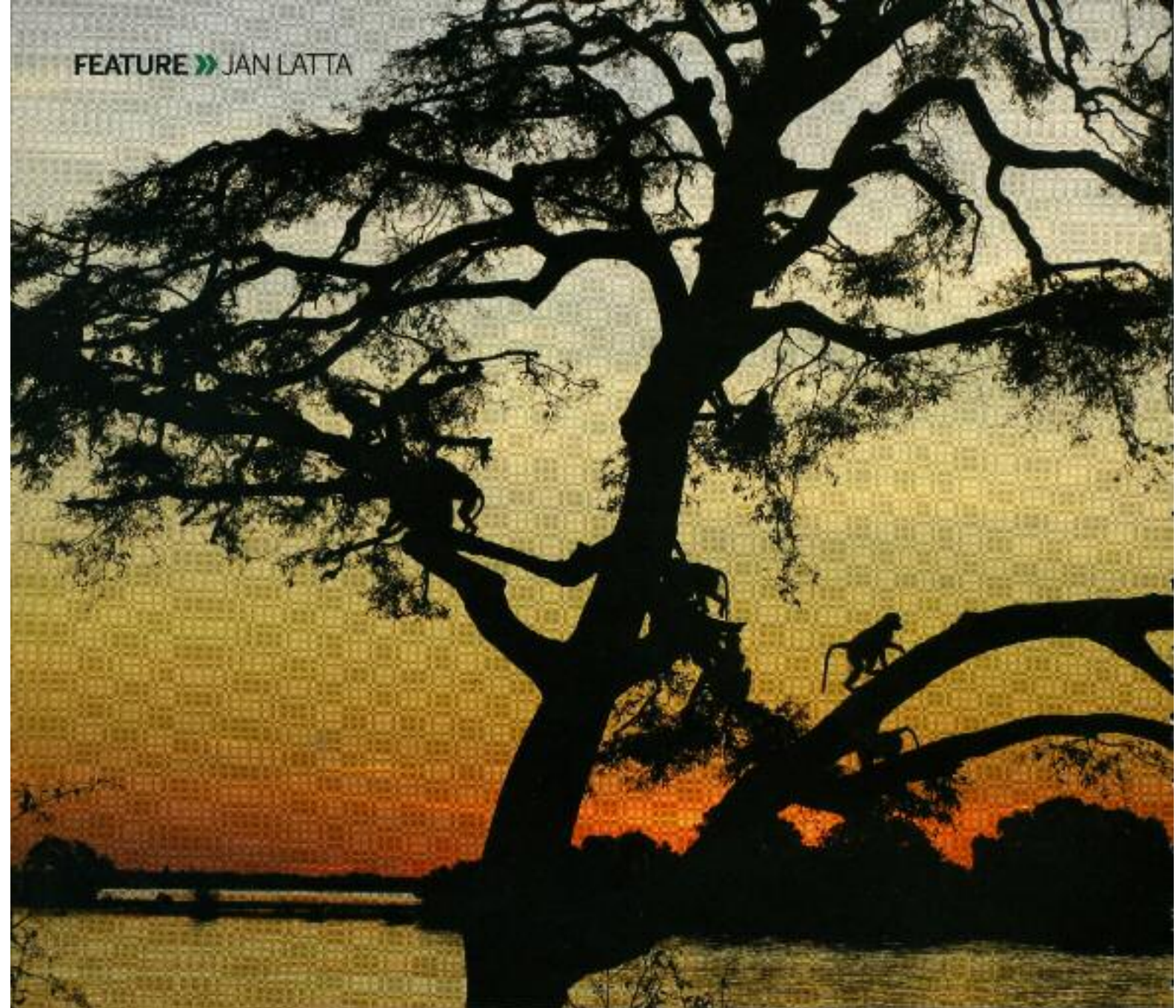
» (LEFT) Shot with a Canon PowerShot G9; 74-44.4mm lens; 1/160sec; f/4; ISO 80

### AFFECTIONATE LIONS

» (THIS PAGE, TOP LEFT)  
Shot with a Nikon D90; 70-300mm lens; 1/125sec; f/4.2; ISO 200

### GIRAFFE'S KICK FIGHTING

» (THIS PAGE, TOP RIGHT)  
Shot with a Nikon D90; 70-300mm lens; 1/400sec; f/5.6; ISO 200



Kenyan author and conservationist] and her daughter Angela live. Every little baby has a keeper, and that keeper stays with the elephant all day and night, even sleeps in the stable with the traumatised baby. So I always encourage schools I visit to adopt and sponsor an elephant, and so many have. I was talking at Wenona School in North Sydney a few months ago and I met with the librarian recently and she told me they'd adopted four elephants. I just thought that was wonderful.

Children love this kind of project, because what they do – besides sending you a certificate and a nice watercolour drawing by Angela – is they give you a monthly report on the progress of your little baby. One of my elephants, the first one I chose, was 'Yatta', basically my own surname but with a Y. She's now had a little baby called Yattu and she's happily back in the wild with a herd. That's the main aim; to nurture the babies, who to be honest often die because they're so traumatised, until they're placed in a kind of middle station before being taken back into the wild. And the most amazing thing happens when they reach

that middle stage. It's a place they have to be trucked to, and all the wild elephants come and say hello to them. It's just extraordinary. So it's safe to say that the love of my love – after cheetahs – would have to be elephants.

**Speaking of which, who are the two cheetahs that make an appearance on the cover of your book, *The Diary of a Wildlife Photographer*?**

I was with Karl Ammann, back while I was still shooting on film, and I'd stopped to change rolls. When I looked up, I could see a cheetah coming towards me. I looked back at Karl and he just indicated to me to get down. Instinctively I knew I had to be very calm. The cheetah just flopped in the grass nearby.

When I went back to Africa the next year, I said to Karl, 'Well, Cheetahs are territorial, so if we walk around in the same area, might we see them again?' So off we went.

We heard the purring before we even saw them. I gave my camera to Karl, knelt down, and that one cheetah just came up to me again. Then the second cheetah

came up to me, and Karl captured that photo – that was the second click of the shutter, where the second cheetah had turned around at the unfamiliar sound. That was just the magic moment of my life.

I spent quite some time taking photographs of those two. You can see I'm holding the throat of one of them. That's because he was purring so loudly! And I was just trying to feel that vibration of the purring. I found out later that one of those cheetahs had been brought into the area as an orphan and had been handled and looked after by humans before being released into the wild. So that and the fact that I was not frightened made all the difference. Any animal will pick up on fear, so I just kept talking to the cheetah as though it was a lover!

That sort of thing has happened quite a few times to me. I'll just be in the jeep with my guide – I always travel alone – and a cheetah will use the hood of the jeep to climb up on and get some warmth or use as a vantage point to look out over the plains. Then they'll just turn and look at you through the window.



**Were there ever any situations in which you felt things could go badly?**

Oh, yes. Being charged by a bull elephant in musth is pretty terrifying. That's when they're very unpredictable and dangerous, running around with mating on their minds. But their charges are usually mock charges. My guide, Letaloi, who's been with me for so many books and so many trips. I mean he is huge. I felt he could wrestle a buffalo and win. He was a wonderful guide, and his knowledge of animals – especially elephants – was vital. He was one of Cynthia Moss' helpers, the woman who researched all the elephants in Kenya's Amboseli area for about 30 years.

So when this huge, terrifying six-tonne elephant charged me the first time, Letaloi drove our jeep away... and then just stopped. I kept taking photographs – the horizon was never straight, but I kept on shooting – and when he stopped I said, "What are you doing?" This huge elephant was still flapping and screaming and running towards us, and Letaloi says, "Don't worry. It's just Conrad."

He knew that it was a mock charge and



**"This elephant was running towards us, and Letaloi says, 'Don't worry. It's just Conrad'"**

that Conrad was just cranky. But shortly after that we saw an even bigger elephant on the horizon and I said, "Letaloi, do you know this elephant?" He said, "No." So we drove in the opposite direction. I didn't think my heart could take another encounter.

**So it sounds like your advice for beginners would be to know the dangers you're likely to encounter.**

Absolutely. Apart from making sure you have a very good guide, doing your research behind all the animals you're going to see is so important. I mean, the first time a big lion started thumping his way towards our open jeep is something I'll always remember. I said, "Ah, there's a lion coming towards us," and the guide said, "It's okay, it's okay." And the lion literally came right up to the jeep, a huge male, looked at me... and then kept walking past. I was rigid with fear, and I said, "Don't the lions ever jump into an open jeep?" And the guide told me that they don't; they identify the smell of the jeep as a single unit. They don't see the individual people as separate objects unless you become a moving silhouette by climbing onto the roof or hanging out the side. Then that might catch the lion's eye and something might happen – but again, that's all in the homework.

You also need to know the best times of year. For instance, if you go to Africa after the rains when the grasses are high, you're not going to see anything but an animal's tail. So there really is a lot to learn and discover before you even get on a plane.

**Now that you've been at this for 20 years, what's the feeling when you look back over the experience?**

I've been so lucky. It's just the most fabulous thing to be doing. When I'm talking to children at schools and a mother will email me and say, "I've never seen my son so excited, he wants to do what you do," that's a huge thrill.

**Where to next – another book?**

I'm trying to solve a problem in Costa Rica. I want to do a book about the sloths there. I saw a sloth sanctuary on TV and got over-excited, contacted them, and they sent an email back saying, "Discovery Channel and Animal Planet have the rights to all photography of our sloths, so if you come and take a photograph, you are not permitted to make a book from the photographs you produce." I found that extraordinary. So I had a full page in the Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post* and the journalist asked me that – what is the next book – and I just did a little synopsis of why I can't do the sloths, and the emails have started to come in. "I'm Costa Rican and I've never heard anything so terrible," things like that. I've just been copying all of these responses and sending them to the sanctuary, so I'm anxious now for Hong Kong to wake up so I can find out what the answer is. I'm very tenacious; I'm not going to take no for an answer.

**To see more of Jan's images and to find out more about her books and other conservationist projects, head to [truetolifebooks.com.au](http://truetolifebooks.com.au)**

## » IMAGES

### AFRICAN SUNSET

(FAR LEFT) Shot with a Canon PowerShot G9; 7.4-44.4mm lens; 1/320sec; f/4; ISO 80

### ENDANGERED TIGER, MADYA NATIONAL PARK

(ABOVE) Shot with a Nikon D90; 70-300mm lens; 1/80sec; f/5.6; ISO 1600