



# Beyond the Basics

10 Ways to Transform Your Wildlife Photography

*Paul Alistair Collins*

[www.paulalistaircollins.co.uk](http://www.paulalistaircollins.co.uk)





# INTRODUCTION

Entry into wildlife photography often begins with these questions: which camera should I use? What shutter speed? Where should I focus?

Those things matter. Yet many photographers reach a stage where their images don't look or feel as strong as they hoped.

The issue isn't equipment or settings. It's clarity of intention.

Over time, I've found that meaningful wildlife photography rests on three foundations: seeing, story, and style.

**Seeing is about awareness** – slowing down long enough to notice what others miss. Light, gesture, setting, atmosphere.

**Story is about intention** – understanding what you want the image to say, and what to include or leave out.

**Style is about interpretation** – the subtle decisions that shape how your photos feel.

The technical “rules” of photography provide structure and control. Once you understand them, they become tools rather than limitations.

In this eBook, I'll guide you through ten foundational principles to strengthen your technique, and suggest ways to go further so your images become more deliberate and personal.

Transformation comes from understanding the basics, and using them with intention.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I am a professional wildlife photographer, guide, and television producer based in London. My work focuses on light, atmosphere and those fleeting gestures that reveal the spirit of wild animals.

My images have been recognised in awards including Bird Photographer of the Year, British Wildlife Photography Awards, and Scottish Nature Photography Awards. Alongside my photography, I have produced documentaries for the BBC, Channel 4, Netflix, Smithsonian, and Discovery.

Across the UK and internationally, I run photography workshops and wildlife tours designed to help others develop not just technical skill, but a deeper connection with the natural world. Small groups, carefully chosen locations and thoughtful guidance allow space for creativity to grow.

Whether through workshops, lectures or tours, my aim is simple: to help photographers slow down, see differently and return home with images and experiences that truly matter.

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# 1. FIND A FAMILIAR SUBJECT

One of the fastest ways to improve your wildlife photography is to work with a subject you can return to again and again. Common animals, such as squirrels and swans in your local park, are often more tolerant of people, and that gives you valuable time to slow down, observe, and experiment. The more familiar you become with a subject, the more confident and creative you'll feel. Instead of reacting, you'll start anticipating. And that's when your photography starts to evolve from lucky moments into deliberate images shaped by your own style.





## TAKE IT FURTHER

Keep shooting until you think you've exhausted every idea – and then stay a little longer.

If the light fades or the weather turns, resist the urge to pack up immediately. Subtle shifts, such as mist rolling in, gentle rainfall, or an animal changing its behaviour, can transform an ordinary scene into something memorable.

Just as important as how you photograph is why. Ask yourself: what drew you to the subject in the first place? What feels different today? What feels worth responding to? The atmosphere? A gesture? A fleeting mood? When you respond to what you feel rather than simply recording what is there, your images gain depth and individuality.

Once you begin working regularly with the same subject, small refinements in perspective can make a dramatic difference.



## 2. GET DOWN LOW

Getting down to your subject's eye level is one of the simplest ways to improve your wildlife photography.

When you lower yourself to the same height as the animal, you enter its world rather than looking down on it. This creates a more intimate connection and often results in stronger compositions. It also increases the distance between your subject and the background, helping to blur distractions and produce a softer, more professional-looking image.

Don't be afraid to lie on the ground if the situation allows. A small change in height can completely transform the feel of a photograph.



## TAKE IT FURTHER

Go even lower than feels comfortable.

A worm's-eye view (shooting slightly upward) can make an animal appear powerful and dominant within the frame. It shifts the viewer's perspective and adds drama. Yes, you might get muddy or wet, but those unusual viewpoints often produce your most distinctive images.

Sometimes the difference between an ordinary photo and a striking one is not a technical choice, but simply your willingness to change position.



### 3. FOCUS ON THE EYES

When photographing animal portraits, sharp focus on the eyes is crucial. We instinctively connect with the eyes first, and if they aren't sharp, the image will feel slightly "off" - even if everything else is in focus.

Using single-point autofocus gives you precision, especially when working with wide apertures and shallow depth of field. Look for catchlight (a small reflection of light in the eye) as this adds life and energy to the portrait.

If the eyes are sharp and expressive, you're halfway to a compelling image. Ask yourself what you want the viewer to feel when they meet that gaze.

## TAKE IT FURTHER

Not every photograph needs to centre on the eyes.

Sometimes another detail tells the story more effectively. A boar's swishing tail or the curve of a swan's neck can suggest character and behaviour without showing the full face.

Don't feel restricted by convention. If another element better captures the essence of the moment, trust your instinct and let it lead. If you'd like to practise these ideas but don't know where to begin, details of my workshops are available at [www.paulalistaircollins.co.uk](http://www.paulalistaircollins.co.uk).





## 4. COMPOSE WITH INTENTION

The rule of thirds is popular for good reason. Imagining your frame divided into thirds – both horizontally and vertically – helps you place key elements in balanced, visually engaging positions.

Positioning an eye, horizon or subject along these lines (or where they intersect) encourages the viewer's eye to move naturally through the image rather than settling in one place. It's a reliable starting point, especially if you're unsure how to frame a scene.

Good composition isn't about rigid formulas – it's about guiding the viewer's attention to explore the image. Before placing your subject, consider what the space around it communicates. Isolation? Tension? Calm?

## TAKE IT FURTHER

Let the story dictate the composition, not the other way round.

Sometimes a centred subject feels stronger. Sometimes large areas of empty space communicate isolation, tension or scale. If an unconventional composition tells the story more clearly, embrace it.

Composition should serve meaning. When you begin composing based on feeling rather than formula, your images gain emotional impact.



## 5. GIVE CONTEXT

Telephoto lenses (300mm or longer) are often necessary for photographing shy wildlife subjects. The one drawback is they can isolate animals from their surroundings.

Consider including elements of the environment. A wider lens or stepping back slightly can reveal habitat, weather and scale – all of which help tell a richer story. The setting often adds as much interest as the subject itself.

Ask yourself: where does this animal live?  
What does its world look like?



## TAKE IT FURTHER

You don't need a wide lens to suggest place.

Shooting through foliage, grasses or other foreground elements can create a natural frame and hint at environment while still isolating your subject. A wide aperture will soften these layers, adding depth and atmosphere.

Context shapes narrative, but it doesn't always mean showing everything. Ask yourself whether the environment strengthens the story, or distracts from it. Sometimes suggestion is more powerful than full description.



## 6. SHOW BEHAVIOUR

Portraits are engaging, but behaviour adds life.

Look for patterns in movement and body language. The more time you spend observing, the easier it becomes to anticipate moments – feeding, grooming, interaction, flight. Being ready for these behaviours transforms your images from static records into storytelling photographs.

Patience is key. Wildlife photography rewards those who watch carefully. But rather than photographing every movement, wait for the gesture that reveals character.

# TAKE IT FURTHER

Behaviour doesn't have to be dramatic to be meaningful.

A subtle gesture – a preening feather, a pause before movement – can be just as powerful as action. These quieter moments often evoke stronger emotional responses because they feel intimate and authentic.

Sometimes the smallest behaviours carry the greatest impact.



## 7. USE SHUTTER SPEED CREATIVELY

A fast shutter speed freezes motion and ensures sharp results, especially with birds in flight or fast-moving mammals. As a general guide, aim for a shutter speed at least equal to your focal length (e.g. 1/300 sec for a 300mm lens) – and faster for rapid action.

Freezing motion is often essential for dynamic wildlife scenes, where clarity matters more than motion. Shutter speed controls more than sharpness – it controls feeling. Before choosing it, ask yourself what feeling you want to convey first. Powerful energy? Grace?





## TAKE IT FURTHER

Slow it down.

Using a slower shutter speed (1/100 sec or less) introduces movement and energy into your images. By panning with a moving subject, you can keep part of the animal sharp while allowing the rest to blur, conveying speed and intent.

This technique takes practice and patience, but it can capture something that sharpness alone cannot: the feeling of movement.

## 8. THINK IN COLOUR

Colour has emotional power.

Warm tones such as reds and oranges feel energetic and “push” out of the image, while cold blues and greens tend to feel calm and immersive. Being aware of colour relationships can strengthen your compositions and guide how a viewer experiences your image.

Look at the background as carefully as the subject. Do the colours support the mood you want, or compete with it?



## TAKE IT FURTHER

Try removing colour entirely.

Black and white can simplify complex scenes and emphasise texture, shape and contrast. Without colour competing for attention, form and texture become more prominent.

Don't convert every image – but when colour feels distracting rather than supportive, stripping it back can be transformative.



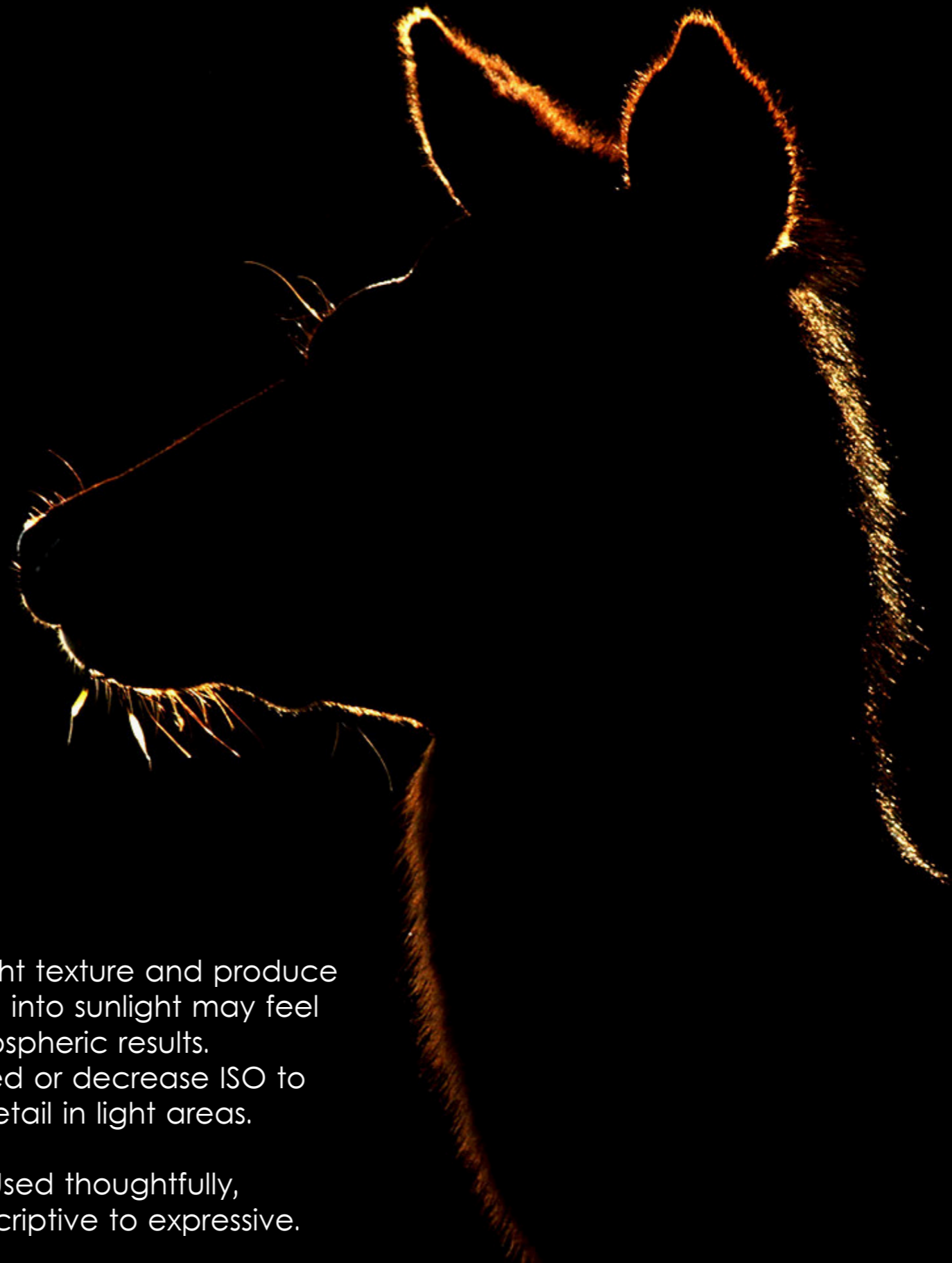


## 9. WORK WITH LIGHT

Light shapes mood more than any other element.

Shooting with the sun behind you provides even illumination, but the most flattering light often occurs at dawn or dusk when it is softer and warmer. Early and late light reduces harsh shadows and adds depth. Midday sun tends to give unflattering highlights and shadows that lack detail.

Pay attention to direction and quality. Light isn't just illumination – it's atmosphere. Is it shaping the subject, softening it, dramatising it?



## TAKE IT FURTHER

Turn toward the light.

Backlighting can create drama, highlight texture and produce silhouettes or glowing outlines. Shooting into sunlight may feel counterintuitive, but it often yields atmospheric results. You may need to increase shutter speed or decrease ISO to darken your images while preserving detail in light areas.

Don't shy away from flare or shadow. Used thoughtfully, they can elevate your image from descriptive to expressive.

# 10. FINISH YOUR WORK

Capturing the image is only part of the process.

If you photograph in RAW, some refinement is expected. A slight crop, subtle contrast adjustment or careful colour correction can bring out the full potential of your image. Think of editing as polishing and clarifying your intention, not rescuing a photo.

Give yourself distance. Revisit your images after a few days with fresh eyes. You'll see them more clearly. Ask yourself what drew you to the image in the first place, and refine it in a way that strengthens that feeling.

Every photograph is part of your development.

## TAKE IT FURTHER

Don't let your work sit unseen, gathering dust.

Get them framed. Make a website. Create a project around a theme. You'll learn so much more about your photography in the process.





## NEXT STEPS

- Practise one principle this week
- Revisit an older image and re-edit it
- Join a workshop to apply it in the field

# WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Photography goes beyond memorising rules and capturing what's in front of you. It's about learning to see and feel.

The techniques in this book are tools – there to give you control when something fleeting unfolds in front of you.

If this eBook has encouraged you to slow down, experiment, and think more intentionally about your images, the next step is to experience that process in the field.

I run small-group workshops and international wildlife photography tours designed to help you refine your own visual style. We focus on incredible wildlife moments, atmosphere, observation, and creative growth, with plenty of time for personal guidance.

If you'd prefer to start smaller, I also offer relaxed taster sessions – designed to help you build confidence and clarity in your photography.

You can explore upcoming workshops, trips, blog posts, and videos at:

[www.paulalistaircollins.co.uk](http://www.paulalistaircollins.co.uk)

I'd love to welcome you.

*Paul Alistair Collins*





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