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WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY



It is a quiet postlude to a hot summer day, when suddenly out of nowhere, it comes. The jeep is brought to a halt as the leopard darts across the road. You want to tell everyone you know that you actually saw a leopard in the wild. You wonder what words will do justice to those perfectly formed dark rosettes that stand out against his coat of dappled gold. You only wish they could see, as you do, the fluid motion of those muscles or his molten eyes of amber, when he turns to look at you.

And so you will take a picture.

Doing so will make you part of an emerging tribe of photographers in India who train their lenses on the colours that swirl on a butterfly's wings as he sucks nutrients from a muddy puddle, the glint of triumph in the eye of the bird that has caught the worm or simply the joy visible in every motion of the baby elephant as she splashes in a stream for the first time.

Wildlife photography is about seeing beauty where the rest might only find a silly insect, a dull brown bird or a clumsy pachyderm. This ability stems from an inherent love for the natural world. As Michael Swamy, a food stylist and chef, who shoots wildlife as a hobby puts it, "I loved animals and had a camera so it just came automatically." But then it's a love that's continually put to test and how!

Shivang Mehta, a wildlife photographer and Director of 'Nature Wanderers', an organization that conducts workshops on nature photography, states "Wildlife photography is the toughest genre of photography". As a wildlife photographer, physical and mental resolve will be your litmus tests. For example, you'll have to be up well before the crack of dawn, only to return to bed 20 hours later, during which time you will brave extreme weather conditions while your camera braves dust and moisture. Want to photograph the elusive Hoolock gibbon or the lion-tailed macaque? Well then, you'll have to trek through the leech-infested rainforests of North-east India or the Western Ghats in the South. The best time to see and photograph the tiger is in the peak of summer when the sun blazes down on India's forests while Bar-headed geese and Coots can only be had by venturing among the waters of India's wetlands in the biting winter winds!

Assuming luck is on your side and you do see some wonderful sights, your photographs will depend on how well you know and interact with your subjects. Dr. Anish Andheria, Director of Wildlife Conservation Trust, and a renowned wildlife photographer, says, "My first decade in the field was spent visiting, understanding and learning by being in the forest." Armed with this knowledge, he was able to publish his first roll.

Moreover, merely owning a good camera doesn't always make for good pictures. Insists Swamy, "Learn the ins and outs of your camera at home; not on the field!" It is also important to acquaint yourself with both the aesthetic and scientific aspects of photography." The perfect picture might still elude you simply because a bird decided to fly in and out of a scene in the fraction of the second that you looked away or perhaps, you spent hours waiting for the tiger that never came. Nevertheless, it is important not to mull over missed opportunities lest you lose out on those that come your way while you sulk.

Unfortunately, in their quest for the perfect picture, photographers might be tempted to violate those values that drew them to the field in the first place. For example, the same person who was moved to the cause of the rhino that was left to bleed to death by poachers who made off with its horn, might venture too close to a mother and calf causing severe distress to both. It is very easy

LAST WILDERNESS MEDIA PVT LTD

251 Kewal Industrial Estate
S B Marg, Lower Parel
Mumbai 400013

+91 22 24990044
contactus@thelastwilderness.org
www.thelastwilderness.org



to get carried away by your subject; it is important not to.

However, an increasing number of photographers in India are willing to tide over these occupational hazards. Anand Chimalgi, a dealer in photographic equipment, attributes this phenomenon to the shift from film to digital photography. He says, “Technology is easily accessible and is easier to use. Previously, people shot with film and the cost of every photo counted. Now, the purchasing power of the customer has increased with the economic boom.” Agrees Dr. Andheria, “With a digital camera, you can take 1000 pictures of which one may be good and no one will know.” Today, with the Internet, people can upload pictures on Facebook and Flickr. There are also a number of websites that allow photographers to put up their pictures and also facilitate discussions on wildlife and photography through their forums. Moreover, magazines based on wildlife, travel and photography provide platforms for photographers to showcase their work. In fact, the shutterbug seems to be biting them young. Citing the example of a photography camp in Bandhavgarh that was attended by at least 15-20 children, Mehta says, “Parents today are also more inclined towards their children participating in nature-related activities.”

In the wake of these developments, it might thus be natural for people to consider wildlife photography as a serious profession. Swamy whose pictures have been featured in various magazines says, “Everything is more fashion and commercially oriented here. By the time you cover travel, stay and other expenses, the money you make is nothing.” Cautions Mehta, who was a journalist and a PR consultant before becoming a full-time photographer, “Unless you have the passion and are willing to risk and make the jump, it’s unwise to pursue it commercially.”

Regardless of its commercial value, this genre holds immense potential for both tourism and conservation. Images are a remarkable tool of communication for they are easily able to transcend the barriers of both the written and spoken word, thus opening up an array of vistas to the viewer which can in turn make for greater things. Whether it is the iconic picture of the tiger in a trap at Dudhwa or the National Geographic cover of Sita the tigress carrying her cub, both photographs made a case for the big cat. While the former is believed to have spurred the launch of Project Tiger, the latter would surely have elicited enough curiosity in a lot of people to go and see this spectacle for themselves.

It is important to remember that when taking a picture, the most that a photographer controls is what he will capture and how it will look. But the fact remains that the camera bears witness to what the photographer saw. Therefore, the photographer may consider using his image of animals scavenging on a carcass, to highlight the plight of the White-rumped Vulture, which is conspicuous by its absence. The point here is that in a world that is wising up to the reality of a deteriorating environment, the demand for those that document those dangers will only increase.

All set to go after that leopard, then?

-Kavya Chimalgi
Last Wilderness Media Pvt. Ltd

LAST WILDERNESS MEDIA PVT LTD

251 Kewal Industrial Estate
S B Marg, Lower Parel
Mumbai 400013

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contactus@thelastwilderness.org
www.thelastwilderness.org
