Wide Angle Wildlife

Landscape photography is all about short focal lengths for wide vistas, and wildlife photography requires gargantuan lenses that can pick out a grain of sand on Mars. There you go, says **Kaleel Zibe**, photography neatly segregated

In the same way that landscape photography does not use short lenses exclusively, wildlife photography should not always be about more lens glass than the photographer's bodyweight. While it is true that most wildlife is not especially happy about a photographer poking a lens up its nose, wide angle photography is well worth exploring in certain circumstances.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of wide angle wildlife photography.

Lion Landscape

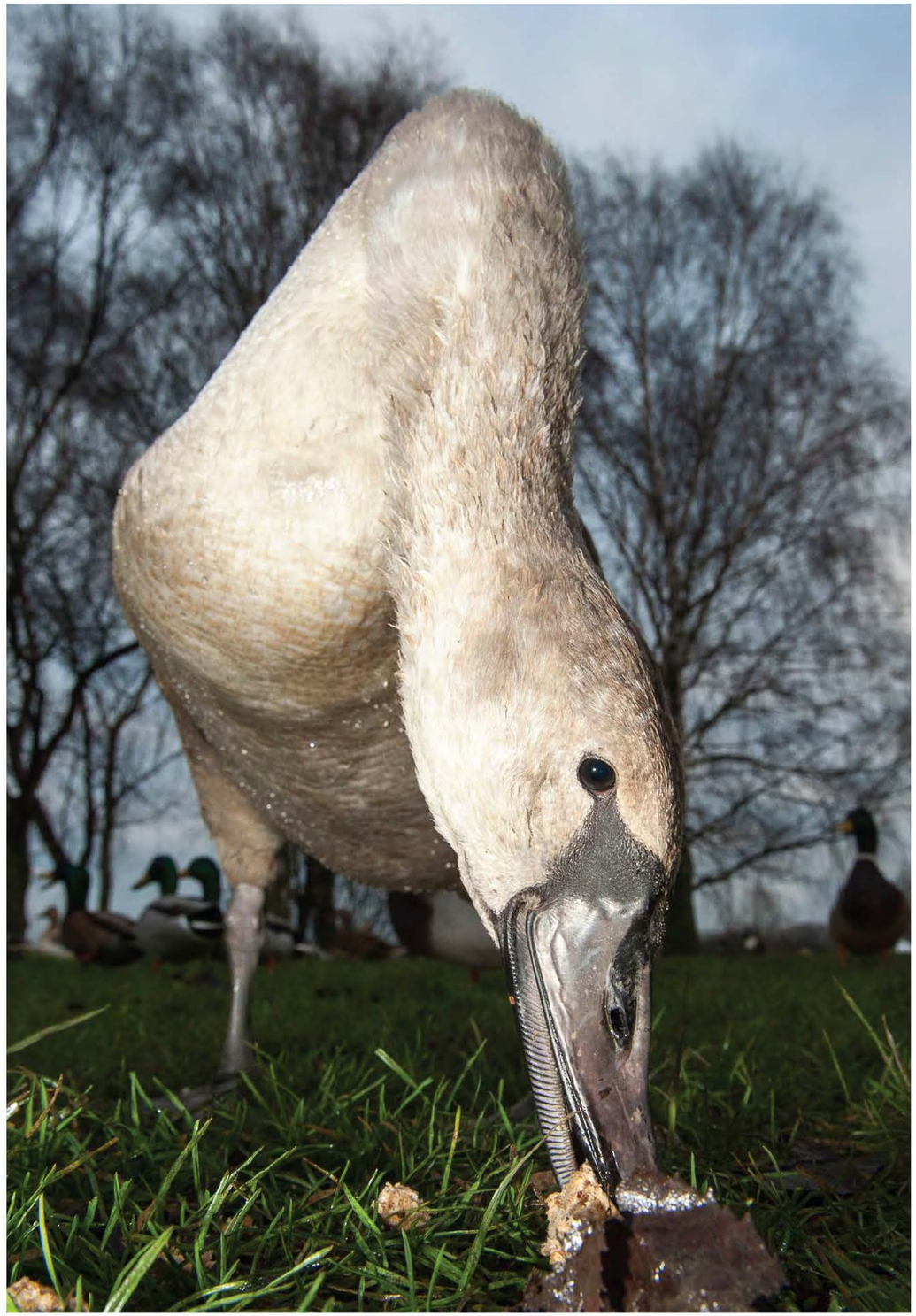
The first uses a larger backdrop and greater use of extra space around the animal than a normal portrait would. This incorporates more of the environment, be it a forest, the sea, sky, or an urban cityscape. Take for example the lions under the tree picture on page 180, which was shot with a 20mm prime lens on a full frame camera. The lions are in the picture, but this is certainly not a portrait of a lion. The emphasis is on the lions' environment; they are snoozing under a tree. I included a lot of the sky because I felt it added to the restfulness of the image and the sense of space.

The snowscape on page 179 also was taken with the same lens. I like to think of this image as a wildlife photograph. What animal created those mysterious animal prints?

Funnily enough, this form of wide angle photography does not necessarily require the use of a wide angle lens; indeed a very long lens like a 600mm can still be used if there is plenty of space around the subject; although that would mean breaking my glass to bodyweight ratio. The point is that the frame includes more of the animal's surroundings to show a habitat context: it tells a story of where it lives. The animal itself does not necessarily need to be especially large in the frame, as long as the background works with it.

Fisheye Squirrels

In contrast, the second type of wide angle imagery gives a completely different feel when using a short to very short focal lens, especially a fisheye, to create a close-up portrait with impact. This approach aims to fill the frame with a distorted image of the animal without much else to distract. 'Distorted' may sound awful at first reading, but the distortion caused by using a very wide angle lens can be extremely effective in creating intimacy with an unusual feel. By necessity, a short lens portrait will get you close physically to your subject and the result looks totally different from that when using a long lens to fill the frame. Because of the way perspective is altered by a short lens, it is obvious to the viewer how close the camera was, creating a sense of really being in the animal's space. »



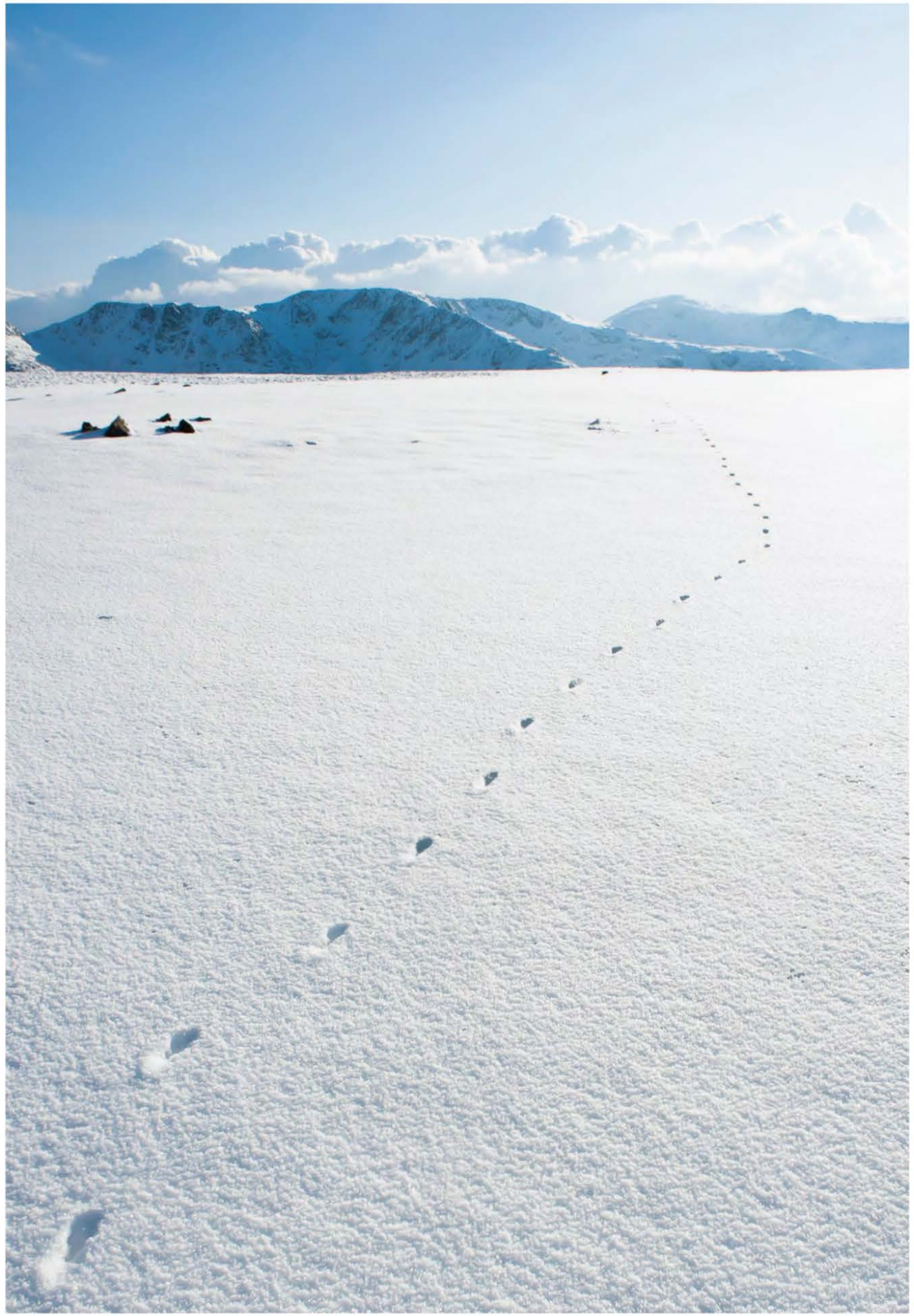
JUVENILE MUTE SWAN, TYNESIDE
Nikon D3
Nikon 24-70mm f/2.8 @ 26mm
f/11, 1/200sec, ISO 800
Matrix metering
Off camera TTL flash, hand held

» As you can see from the squirrel image below, the fisheye lens has created a very strange perspective on the world. The squirrel grabbed the hazelnut from a space that is shared with the viewer; putting the camera below made even more impact. »

ABOVE
Captive Harris hawk landing, Northumberland
Nikon D4
Nikon 16mm f/2.8 fisheye
f/16, 1/640sec, ISO 800
+0.3ev, matrix metering, TTL flash, hand held

RIGHT
Animal tracks in the snow, Lake District, Cumbria
Nikon D3X
Nikon 20mm f/2.8
f/9, 1/1600sec, ISO 200
+0.3ev, spot metering, hand held

LEFT
Red squirrel, Northumberland
Nikon D3
Nikon 16mm f/2.8 fisheye
f/16, 1/640sec, ISO 3200
+0.7ev, matrix metering, off camera TTL flash
Remote shutter release, manual focus, tripod



» Similarly with the raven, the extreme close-up (literally a few centimetres) made it look as though the bird might swallow the camera. Actually, in truth it was very tame and simply begging for food. The fisheye lens distorts the lines in the picture and the horizon is pronouncedly curved; I am hopeless at flat horizons anyway.

Portraits with Context

Having said there are two basic forms of wide angle wildlife photography, I am going to suggest a third, more a combination of the first two, where the photographer is very close to the subject with a wide lens, but the image also incorporates some of the animal's habitat.

In this second squirrel picture I still used a wide angle lens at 32mm, but nowhere near as wide as the 16mm fisheye. At this focal length, there is still a great deal of intimacy. I deliberately put the squirrel off to the left to allow the trees to fill the right hand background. This is not just a portrait of a squirrel it is a portrait of a squirrel in its environment.

Let There Be (more) Light

It is worth touching on additional lighting at this point. If the subject is not lit very well, particularly with respect to the background, it may be necessary to augment the lighting by using flash or a reflector. This is especially the case when the camera sensor will fail to record the wide dynamic range of the scene. With both squirrel images I used off-camera wireless flash to provide fill light on an otherwise under-lit animal compared with the background; this balanced the light difference between foreground and background. If I had exposed for the foreground, i.e. the squirrel, the background would have been too bright. If I had gone for the background, the foreground would have looked horribly dull.

In the fisheye portrait, the sun is directly in front of the camera and there are a lot of bright sky highlights in the wider picture; all these would have blown out to pure white with no detail if I had not used flash on the foreground. Also, the off-camera flash position allowed me flexibility with the direction of light. »

FAR LEFT
Captive Raven, Northumberland
Nikon D4, Nikon 16mm f/2.8 fisheye
f/8, 1/2000sec, ISO 800
Matrix metering, hand held

LEFT TOP
Red Squirrel, Northumberland
Nikon D3, Nikon 24-70mm f/2.8 @ 32mm
f/8, 1/250sec, ISO 800
Matrix metering, off camera TTL flash
Remote shutter release, manual focus, tripod

LEFT BOTTOM
Snoozing Lions, Masai Mara, Kenya
Nikon D4, Nikon 20mm f/2.8
f/11, 1/1250sec, ISO 800, Matrix metering, beanbag from vehicle

ABOVE
An ex-wildebeest, Masai Mara, Kenya
Nikon D4, Nikon 16mm f/2.8 fisheye
f/8, 1/4000sec, ISO 900
-0.7ev, matrix metering, beanbag on ground

BELOW
Shag on nest, Inner Farne, Northumberland
Nikon D3, Nikon 24-70mm f/2.8 @ 24mm
f/16, 1/250sec, ISO 400
Centre-weighted metering, off camera TTL flash, hand held

» How Close?

One consideration to bear in mind is how close a lens can focus. Not all lenses are created equally, and not all big manufacturers' lenses necessarily are the ones to go for. For example, I have a Nikon 16mm full frame fisheye lens. I have noticed since buying this lens that Sigma produce an excellent lens that focuses down to 15cm compared with 25cm with the Nikon. That would come in very handy for even more intimacy.

No Shrinking Violets Please

Concerning subjects, there are certain animals that will not allow you to get this close, so it is worth picking animals that either are captive, or habituated to human presence. The young mute swan and red squirrels were wild, but completely used to people being near them. The squirrels were so curious about us that one actually ran over my colleague's foot. I do not have any plans to try this with lions.

A Remote Chance

Using a remote release (especially a wireless one) is a great way of putting some distance between yourself and the wildlife while still allowing the camera to be very, very close to the action. Even though the squirrels were not shy, I think it is unlikely they would have come quite so close for the hazelnuts if I had been lying right behind the camera.

As you have probably guessed, it often helps to bait the animals with food. This may well take a lot of patience as your quarry gradually gets used to the free lunch while a noisy shutter is firing nearby. Depending on the species, this might take from seconds to days.

Focus and Depth of Field

Precise control of focus and depth of field is important in close-quarters photography because the sharp parts of an image are where the viewer's eye rests first. I often find it is easier to pre-set the focus manually and wait for the wildlife to be where I want it, particularly when using a remote release. Sometimes this works better than asking the camera to autofocus, but it really is trial and error per situation.

Depth of field is important for two reasons: one practical, the other creative. Practically speaking, the more depth of field you have, the greater the chance the right bit of your wildlife will be sharply in focus. Pre-focusing with a wide aperture is likely to result in failure, as the depth of field will be too small to accommodate any errors. However, the smaller the aperture, the slower the shutter speed. Unless you are photographing a snail, almost certainly this will be an issue.

Creatively speaking, the depth of field controls how much of the animal and its environment are in focus. Usually, it is essential to have sharp eyes in a portrait, but it is not necessary to have a great deal else in focus, unless that is what you want to show. The more depth of field, the more distractions you introduce into the background and the less creamy the background blur.

So, next time you are packing a bag for wildlife photography, try the rather liberating discipline of selecting the shortest lens you have and leaving the longest at home. I guarantee at least one thing: you are less likely to suffer a hernia.

ARCTIC TERN, INNER FARNE, NORTHUMBERLAND
Nikon D4, Nikon 16mm f/2.8 fisheye
f/16, 1/1000sec, ISO 400, matrix metering, TTL flash, hand held

Kaleel Zibe
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CAPTIVE GREAT GREY OWL, NORTHUMBERLAND
Nikon D4, Nikon 16mm f/2.8 fisheye
1/160sec, f/2.8, ISO 200, matrix metering, hand held