

ANDREW MAIN WILSON'S
EPIC ADVENTURE

ANGEL EYES XXVI
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A PASSION *for* PICTURES

Simon Stafford talks to wildlife and



travel photographer **Renato Granieri**

Driven by an insatiable wanderlust, Italian-born photographer Renato Granieri has carried his cameras to more than sixty countries across the seven continents in his relatively short but highly prolific career as a photographer. From the outset he has specialised in nature and travel photography, driven by a passion to document the remote regions and cultures of our planet through photography.

Renato has worked with a number of leading picture agencies and his photographs have been published in a variety of leading international newspapers, travel books and magazines; his images are also licensed for publication through a number of major photography libraries.

S.S. When did your interest in photography first emerge?

R.G. I came to photography quite late in life. I bought my first camera, a Nikon D40 with an 18-55mm lens in 2008, while I was working full-time in London as a senior manager for a major music-recording label. The following year I took my camera on a trip to the Faroe Islands. Finding myself in such a remote location, surrounded by a vast number of seabirds, in particular a huge colony of puffins, I experienced a tremendous

sense of isolation and freedom as I observed the birds. It inspired me to begin photographing the wildlife, and turned out to be the seed of the passion that now drives me.

After I returned from the Faroe Islands a friend saw some of my pictures and suggested that I should start showing my work, so I submitted some images to an on-line picture library. A few months later I sold my first image, a

picture of a puffin standing on a rock. Over the next few years I devoted as much time as I could to travelling with my camera, gathering as much material as I could to build up my stock of images.

Then, in 2014, I was made redundant from my job. After the initial shock, I began to come to terms with my circumstances, and I realised it was a now-or-never opportunity to pursue my



passion for photography; I decided I had to give it a go. One of the first things I did was to work as a volunteer for a wildlife conservation project in Kenya; the five weeks I spent there turned out to be one of the best experiences in my life. It was a wonderful opportunity, as I had the time to learn, observe, and understand more about the natural world and practice my photography skills in the field. Photographing wildlife is a way for me to increase my understanding of nature. So many species are now endangered, and many of the cultures in remote areas are being eroded; photography provides me with a means to show people their importance.

S.S. How do you go about getting your work noticed?

R.G. I realised at an early stage that I had to move on from shooting simple record shots of my subjects; I had to be more adventurous with my photography. I am something of a perfectionist, and appreciated the importance of studying my subjects, thinking about what it was I was observing, and planning how I could be more creative with light, while looking for new and unusual perspectives. The process of sorting and editing your pictures is also highly significant. You need to be your own strongest critic,



◆ Capocaccia cape and milky way, Sardinia



◆ Kirkjufell Mountain at night, South West Iceland

◆ **Left:** Tabular iceberg South Pacific, near Antarctica

and be very selective, as this will lead to an improvement in the quality of your images.

I believe entering photography competitions is important for any photographer. You will soon gain and understanding of how your work compares with that of other photographers, and it helps in learning how to shoot to a brief.

I also believe in the value of personal relationships within the industry, so I attend industry events to keep update with the latest trends and meet key people. Additionally, I contact tour operators and tourist boards directly to gain an insight as to what sort of images they are looking for.



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S.S. Do you see yourself as always being a travel & wildlife photographer?

R.G. Ever since my first experiences with a camera in the Faroe Islands I have concentrated on shooting pictures of wildlife and people, especially in remote areas – it is my passion for these subjects that drives me. I have collected a hefty number of images around the world in the past couple of years, and I feel my style has developed a long way during this time, being refined with each new experience, but my photography has remained focused on these same fields.

In the future things may change, because I see my photography as a process of constant evolution, as I learn more about the natural world and develop my skills as a photographer. I certainly hope to broaden my subject

range in time; for example, when I am in London, I enjoy nothing more than wandering around local parks, not only to photograph birds, particularly in summer when arrival of migratory species is guaranteed, but also to explore the potential for close-up photography of plants.

I am always looking for new situations and new opportunities. Recently I have started to enjoy shooting more editorial style pictures around some of the major European cities; ironically images of these locations do seem more saleable compared with pictures I have taken in extremely remote places!

S.S. Currently you do a lot of work in the Arctic and Antarctic; what led you to shooting in these extreme environments?

◆ Colony of king penguins, St Andrew, South Georgia

◆ **Right:** King penguins, Gold Harbour, South Georgia



R.G. I have always been drawn by the remoteness and silence of wilderness areas. The more I visit these places, whether it be the Arctic or Antarctica, the deeper my understanding and greater my excitement for these regions becomes. These are both unique and truly remarkable places, like no others; the lack of human habitation, the extreme environmental conditions, and the extraordinary light you can experience make them places without equal. Despite the fact that I have warm Sardinian blood in my veins, I find I am attracted to cold climates more and more. Since I will often find myself shooting is temperatures of minus 25-degree Celsius, sometimes even colder, I must be something of a masochist. When I return to my base, be it a camp or ship after a shoot in

these conditions, the first thing I do is walk straight into the sauna, still fully clothed to defrost!

S.S. Can you tell me a little more about how you cope with conditions in the Arctic and Antarctic in terms of your equipment, and the specific difficulties of working in such an environment?

R.G. It is important to appreciate that even in mid-summer the temperature can plummet a double-digit values below zero.

The first thing you need to do is plan what it is you want to achieve, so you can choose equipment accordingly. My D4s and a D810 cope well with the cold, but extra batteries are always needed in low temperatures. I always carry two cameras

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hours outside in these conditions it is essential to dress appropriately, not only for your survival, but also to ensure you feel comfortable enough to work effectively. Often this requires me to be completely wrapped up with only my eyes visible, so I can explore beaches, and glaciers covered in snow.

Part of the planning includes thinking about the challenges of composition, especially when confronted with a large number of subjects, such as a flock of birds. In this situation I would always stress the importance of choosing either a single subject or small group and sticking with it, otherwise

photographing thousands of subjects is never going to be easy if you're looking for an unusual shot.

S.S. What is your favourite location for shooting travel pictures, and why?

R.G. Generally speaking I prefer to visit remote destinations, where I find the sense of the unfamiliar, be it a culture or wildlife, truly inspiring. A place that has really struck me is Papua New Guinea. I made my first trip there during November 2015, visiting the islands by boat and making contact with many different tribes. The hospitality of the people, together with



and pre-select my lenses based on subject type and the sort of pictures I want to shoot; once ashore I never change lenses in the field.

I use covers for both cameras and lenses when it snows, and make sure everything is stowed in waterproof bags when transferring between ship and shore. It is also vitally important to allow your equipment to acclimatise to any change in ambient temperature, so I will often leave everything in my camera bag for a couple of hours before opening it, so the contents have time to adjust.

Bad weather makes atmospheric pictures, so as long as it's safe, I'll be out there. To spend several



◇ Caldera, Deception Island, Antarctica

their colourful traditional costumes, and the emotional experience I felt witnessing them perform their dances and playing their musical instruments left me speechless. It is like no other place I have travelled to; the people are so kind, generous and accepting of the camera, which obviously makes it much easier to engage with them.

S.S. What is your favourite location for shooting wildlife, and why?

R.G. Given the diversity of the locations I have been privileged to visit that is a difficult question! However, I would say

probably South Georgia, as the abundance of pelagic birds and king penguins really makes it a very special place. In addition to some fabulous subjects, it has everything a wildlife photographer could dream of; with beautiful light, awesome scenery and non-stop action, it is all there. The photographic opportunities are seemingly infinite, but at the same time very challenging, which really pushes you to come up with original ideas and shoot different images.

I cannot finish answering this question without mentioning my favourite place in the northern hemisphere,



◊ Elephant bulls, Masai Mara, Kenya



◊ Startrails altiplano near Dali's desert, Bolivia
 ◊ **Left:** White-tailed Eagle, Vesteralen, Norway

northern Norway, and in particular Svalbard. I fell in love with the region in 2012 – the peace and tranquility you feel in its fabulous landscape are unrivalled in my opinion, not to mention the sheer excitement of spotting a polar bear, which is unmatched. Going to somewhere such as Churchill, where you can observe polar bears in numbers, and with little difficulty, just does not come close. Consequently, unlike the vast majority of people who head for the warm climates, I normally spend my summers in Norway.

S.S. Which photographers have inspired you?

R.G. Sebastiao Salgado is my ultimate source of inspiration; in



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my opinion the impact of his images demands respect, because they transcend simply imagery due to message he communicates through his pictures. Their power enables him to use his images for so many positive purposes, raising people's awareness of global issues as diverse as poverty, conflict, conservation, and the beauty of our world.

I also follow a few other photographers, such as Paul Nicklen, who is a real expert in his field when it comes to working in the polar regions, and Richard Barnabe, who works primarily in Africa, particularly among remote cultures.

Last, but by no means least, is Bruno Manunza, a photographer and close friend from my home of Sardinia. I meet Bruno as often as I can whenever I visit my family, to

discuss photography and seek his advice. He photographs a broad range of subjects, and has won several international awards, and written a huge number of books on photography. I try to do plenty of close-up and astro-photography with him, to learn as much as I can.

S.S. What in your opinion is the essence of capturing a successful wildlife, or travel photograph?

R.G. A passion for discovery, an understanding of the subject and a determination to achieve the images I seek are my core values. You need to push yourself continuously in the search for new situations, looking for fresh perspectives and experimenting with your camera. Adopting this approach has prevented me from becoming complacent about my work.



One of the most essential aspects of my photography is the planning stage. I can be slightly obsessive about details, so I research my subject thoroughly, but this helps me prepare my plans carefully. I am always very determined to get the picture I want, so when the combination of pre-planning and patience in the field pay off the excitement I experience is very rewarding.

Regardless of whether I achieve the picture or not, I am always revising and refining my shooting technique in an effort to improve next time, and of course this goes hand-in-hand with the picture editing process, which is key to honing my skills in terms of composition.

S.S. What are the principal pieces of equipment in your camera bag currently?

R.G. As I mentioned, my first camera was a D40 Nikon and a 18-55mm lens, which was all very basic. Over the years I have constantly upgraded my equipment, and will continue to do so; technology improves rapidly, and quality is paramount. Currently I work with two camera bodies, the D4s and D810, together with a range of lenses, all Nikon: 14-24mm f/2.8, 24-70mm f/2.8, 70-200mm f/2.8, 80-400mm f/4-5.6 VR II, 500mm f/4, a Micro 105mm f/2.8 and a 16mm f/2.8 fisheye. My equipment also includes a pair of tripods, with different types of heads, a number of remote release and remote control devices, and a selection of filters, including graduated neutral density types for landscape work. The latest addition is a Cuddeback camera trap, which I am looking forward to using to capture a different type of picture.

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◇ Prayer St George church,
Lalibela, Ethiopia

◇ **Right:** Young girl wearing traditional
costume, Tolokiwa, Papua New Guinea

R.G. Learn the basic principles and rules of photography (for example, you must have an understanding of exposure), and then learn how to break them!

Experiment constantly and creatively; shooting digitally allows you to try different techniques, evaluate them easily and quickly. The more you experiment the more you will learn.

It's very important to study the work of other photographers, not in an effort to emulate them, but to gain inspiration, so you can apply your own vision as you shoot. Enter competitions to measure yourself against others, but don't be disappointed if you don't succeed; photography is highly subjective and the competition can be fierce. Constantly review your work, looking for ways to improve, and be very critical; there is nothing worse than becoming complacent about your pictures. It goes without saying you need to travel, travel and travel; by that I do not mean ticking off as many countries as you can from a list, as I often travel to the same destinations time and time again to improve my understanding of the place or the wildlife that inhabits it. You should always keep looking for new perspectives or different aspects of animal behaviour.

Last, but not least, you need to keep fit and hydrated whether you're in an equatorial jungle or a dry, cold place such as Antarctica; many remote

locations are physically demanding, so you need to plan and prepare for any trip accordingly if you are to shoot successful pictures.

S.S. Are there any other genres of photography, unrelated to your mainstream photography of travel and wildlife, which you enjoy, and how often do you get to shoot those subjects?

R.G. I enjoy close-up and macro photography a lot, as I find the whole process quite cathartic; it makes me appreciate nature and my environment. When I am home I spend a lot of time in my garden or local parks exploring life in detail, shooting pictures of flowers, insects, etc..

My other great interest is the night sky. My friend Bruno Manunza has inspired me a lot in this area, and whenever I return to visit my family in Sardinia I always take the opportunity to shoot the stars if there are dark sky conditions. In fact the night sky forecast and the position of the Milky Way is one of the first things I check when I visit any location, to see what opportunity there may be for star trail shots. For example, I have enjoyed some great experiences shooting this type of picture in the deserts of Chile or back home in Sardinia. If I am visiting areas such as north Norway I will also check for aurora activity, as this can produce some amazing pictures. ■

S.S. If you had to choose a "desert island" camera and lens, what would they be and why?

R.G. Without hesitation I would take my D4s; it is very sturdy, reliable and has all the qualities I need: speed, precision, the ability to cope extremely well in low light and survive in any weather conditions. Choosing just one lens is far more difficult, but I would say it would have to be the 14-24mm. Its optics are superb, producing crisp, saturated images, and its wide maximum aperture means I could use it in all light conditions, including shooting the night sky.

S.S. What advice would you offer to aspiring travel / wildlife photographers?







My favourite three pictures - behind the scenes

Salvin's albatross pair, Bounty Islands, New Zealand *(right)*

I was on an expedition cruise around the sub-Antarctic islands of New Zealand. The Bounty Islands, a collection of rocky outcrops in the Southern Ocean, are home to a breeding colony of Salvin's albatross. On that day, the sea was particularly rough and the captain gambled to get through the heart of the islands, potentially a relatively risky operation. With high swells, it was difficult to balance myself on the outer deck. I wanted to capture the flight of these magnificent birds and illustrate the extreme conditions of the place they choose for breeding. I was fortunate to capture a pair of albatrosses with a crashing wave in the background. You can gain a sense of scale that demonstrates the power



of the sea as it crashed onto rocks and the size of the wave splash, since the birds have a wingspan of 2.5m..

Buddhist monks at Swayambhunath Temple, Kathmandu, Nepal *(below)*

During April 2015 I visited Nepal on my way to Buthan for an annual festival in Paro. In Kathmandu, my guide took me to visit the Swayambhunath Temple, also known as the Monkey Temple. It is a truly spiritual place for Buddhism; here monkeys are fed and treated as divine creatures, hence

the name Monkey Temple. Monks, devotees and tourists walk around the main stela¹ several times to pray. It was a rainy day and I wanted to capture the strong sense of spirit and silence, so typical of daily life in the temple. I was standing in a corner having composed the shot I wanted, waiting for the right subject to show up. When I saw the two monks chatting under the umbrella, I decided to make the umbrella the centre of interest, and I shot once they had walked past. To convey movement to the image, I slowed down the shutter

speed aiming to keep the umbrella in focus. Tragically, two weeks later an earthquake struck Kathmandu and destroyed most of the temple.

Dancers in Lababia, Papua New Guinea *(page 22)*

I visited the remote destination of Lababia in Papua New Guinea in November 2015. The villagers performed a dance to welcome us. I picked up my fisheye to experiment with some distortion and unusual perspective. I tried taking a series of shots from different viewpoints, including standing on a chair, and also using a slow panning technique. However, once the other visitors had moved on, I realised I had an opportunity to get much closer, so I put my camera down quickly in between two of the dancers, tilting the camera upwards and carried on shooting until I was knocked over by one of them.

¹stela: An upright stone or slab with an inscribed or sculptured surface, used as a monument or as a commemorative tablet in the face of a building.

