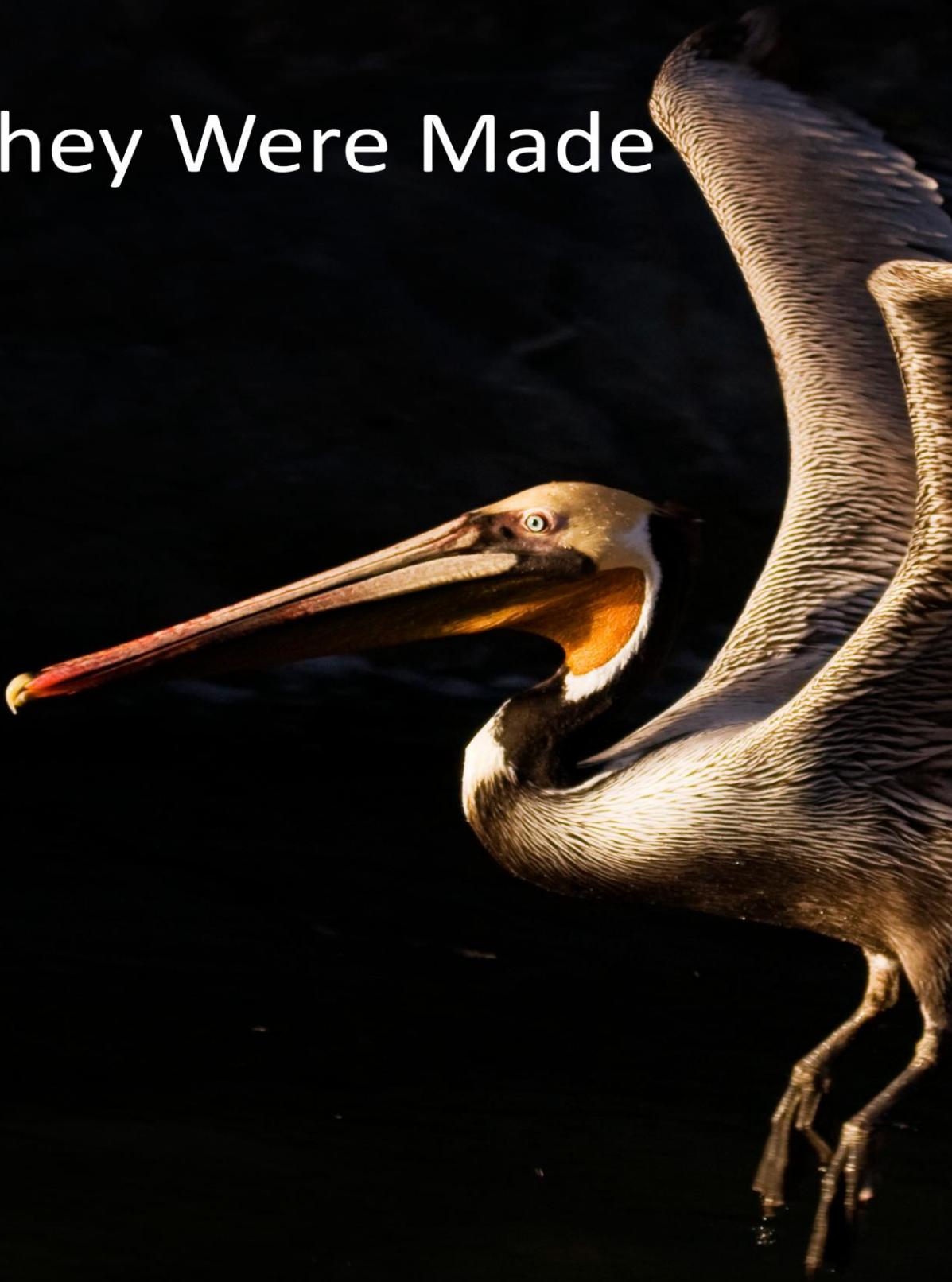


My Ten Favorite Wildlife Pictures And How They Were Made



SEBASTIAN KENNERKNECHT

My Ten Favorite Wildlife Pictures and How They Were Made

Some Background

I have always had a true fascination with the wildlife that surrounds us, from when I was hiking in the Bavarian alps during my childhood to seeing the incredible biodiversity that the United States has to offer when I moved here with my family when I was ten years old.

I have always wanted to learn as much as I could about animals, so I studied behavioral ecology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. During this time, it also became quite apparent to me that it was immensely important to protect the endangered animals that were declining in numbers as well as the habitats that were being degraded or disappearing altogether. I wanted to play my part in helping to turn these negative processes around and I found that taking and sharing pictures has been the most effective tool for me to do so.

I therefore concentrate on photographing endangered species, showing the animals themselves, the threats they face, and the conservation actions being taken to protect them. For a few years now I have gotten even more specialized, taking pictures of wild cats. The reason for this, besides their obvious awesomeness (and my complete fascination with them), is that they are apex predators. This means that they are at the top of the food chain, by protecting them, you not only save them, but subsequently conserve the whole habitat in which they live.



Why Did I Write This E-book?

I have been very fortunate and am very thankful to have traveled to many amazing places in the world. These opportunities have allowed me to share unique encounters with a lot of different animals. I wanted to write this e-book to share some of my favorite experiences but also to provide insight into my thought process when I took the photograph.

Each picture is accompanied by the story behind the image, the gear used, the technical details of the photograph, and the reasons for why I chose those camera settings.

(The photograph above was taken while I was on assignment in Malaysian Borneo in 2013)



White Tern (*Gygis alba*) male pursuing female in courtship flight, Midway Atoll, Hawaiian Leeward Islands, Hawaii

Story Behind The Image

Fairy Terns or White Terns (*Gygis alba*) are extremely inquisitive birds; individuals would routinely fly up to me for a closer look while I was on Midway Atoll (which are islands in the middle of nowhere, reached by a five hour flight west from the main Hawaiian Islands). Knowing this, I stood in the middle of a field and waited on the last day of my stay. Within minutes the first terns started to come and check me out. In this picture I was able to show a behavior called 'wandering flight' which is a type of bonding ritual for breeding pairs. The male never left the female's side, even when she flew only inches from my face.

Gear

Canon 30D Camera, 24-70mm f/2.8L USM Lens, No Flash

Technical Details

Shutter Speed: 1/640 sec Aperture: f/11 ISO: 200 Mode: Manual

Since I wasn't sure exactly how much of the frame the bird, or in this case birds, would take up, I switched to manual mode to ensure an accurate exposure. I knew I could do this because I'd always be pointing at the sky and the light wasn't going to change. The fact that this picture was taken during the middle of the day allowed for a fast shutter speed, along with a smaller aperture (larger f-stop number), leading to a sharp picture with a large enough depth of field to have both birds in focus. Once the female (in the front) flew in, I had to start thinking about composition. At first I included all of her body within the frame but as soon as the male came close enough I wanted a more drastic look. I didn't mind cutting off her right wing because the overall image tells the story of the courting behavior, and in fact I think it's a stronger composition because of it.



Bay Cat (*Pardofelis badia*) gray morph male in lowland rainforest, Tawau Hills Park, Sabah, Borneo, Malaysia

Story Behind The Image

This photograph was one of the hardest to capture in my career thus far. It took two separate trips to the island of Borneo, for a total of nine weeks, all to try and get a picture of this extremely elusive cat. That's one of the many reasons I love felines: they don't make it easy for you. Working together with my good friend Andrew Hearn, who [studies the wild cats on this tropical island](#), we set up four camera traps in the lowland rainforests near Tawau. This male passing by one of the cameras literally made me dance in the jungle when I saw the image. To date this is the only photograph that exists of a WILD Borneo Bay Cat (there was one male that was held captive and photographed for a few days previously).

Gear

Canon 30D Camera, EF 10-20mm f/3.5-4.5 USM Lens, Two Flashes, Triggering System, Waterproof Housing

Technical Details

Shutter Speed: 1/80 sec Aperture: f/8 ISO: 1000 Mode: Manual

Some photographers would argue that camera trap photography is not real photography. If they ever build and set-up their own rigs, I have a feeling they would change their minds. Finding the right place to set up the cameras is the first challenge, and a difficult one it is (you also have to try to predict the direction from which the animal will be coming). Then you have to estimate what time of day the animal moves through the scene and adjust your exposure accordingly. Then you have to balance your flashes to illuminate the cat and the environment properly, and finally you have to make sure everything is water proof, rodent proof, ant proof, and people proof. (See more camera trap images [here](#))



Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) in surf at sunset, Hawf Protected Area, Yemen

Story Behind The Image

This Grey Heron would routinely hunt in the reef outside of our biological research station along the coast of Yemen. Being able to watch this pattern unfold allowed me to prepare for this picture as I set myself up so the reef and the setting sun were in front of me, without me having to move after that point, possibly scaring the bird away. As per its usual routine, it arrived in the evening, looking for fish, making this picture a reality.

Gear

Canon 40D Camera, EF 500mm f/4 USM Lens + 1.4x Extender, No Flash

Technical Details

Shutter Speed: 1/160 sec Aperture: f/8 ISO: 400 Mode: Aperture Priority

Knowing that I wanted to show detail in the bird instead of a silhouette, I needed to incorporate a few factors. One, the sunset had to be soft, aka there needed to be haze or mist in the air to make the light less strong allowing me to expose for the bird without blowing out the sun. Then, by overexposing by a full stop I allowed enough light to come into the camera to show the plumage and color of the heron. The shutter speed may seem slow, but I wanted there to be some movement in the waves so they wouldn't distract from the bird, yet fast enough to freeze the heron. I obviously had to use a tripod to obtain this picture with such settings.



California Condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*) three year old male in chaparral, Pinnacles National Park, California

Story Behind The Image

I had spent a whole year trying to get a decent picture of a California Condor for an upcoming exhibition I was doing at the Museum of Natural History in Santa Cruz to no avail. Then I went to Pinnacles National Park with my friend Jeff Swanson to try and get pictures of California Red-legged Frogs there, but after not finding any in the morning we decided to go for a hike. We spotted this juvenile male perching in the tree you can see in the background of the picture. We were shooting away, totally excited how close he was to us. He then took off, did a small circle, and *decided to land about ten feet from us*. We couldn't believe our luck. After shooting portrait after portrait I switched to a wide angle lens, laid on the ground, and couldn't believe it when he approached us even closer. When I took this picture, he was a mere five feet away, allowing me to show him in his chaparral habitat. Sometimes, you just need luck.

Gear

Canon 5D Camera, 24-70mm f/2.8L USM Lens, No Flash

Technical Details

Shutter Speed: 1/320sec Aperture: f/7.1 ISO: 160 Mode: Aperture Priority

Since I was shooting in aperture priority mode in evaluative metering, I knew I had to underexpose the photograph to not blow out the overcast sky (since the white sky takes up less than 50% of the image). I underexposed by a whole stop, which was enough to keep the sky grey and still show plenty of detail in the condor. After having the exposure figured out, I needed to place the bird in the right part of the image. I wanted to make sure his body wasn't coming out of the rocks in the background and would shift the camera slightly to make sure there was nothing distracting 'coming out of his body'.



Sea Otter (*Enhydra lutris*) researcher Karl Mayer bathing rescued pup while wearing disguise to dissociate the care it receives from humans, Monterey Bay Aquarium, Monterey Bay, California

Story Behind The Image

Sea Otters are an endangered species. In fact, the southern population of this marine mammal hovers around 2600 individuals. To try and help protect and conserve them, the Monterey Bay Aquarium has created the SORAC (Sea Otter Research and Conservation) program to help them anyway they can. Their surrogate program does so by taking in stranded pups, performing medical check-ups, hand rearing them during the recovery and then placing them with a surrogate sea otter mother. In this picture, Karl Mayer, the director of the program is wearing a disguise to dissociate the pup from human help while bathing it. This image means a lot to me because it was one of the first pictures I took that showed a conservation action, something that was always important to me, but something I wanted to show in photographs from this point on and beyond. (You can read all about the SORAC photo project [here](#))

Gear

Canon 5D Camera, 70-200mm f/2.8L IS USM Lens, No Flash

Technical Details

Shutter Speed: 1/125sec Aperture: f/4 ISO: 1600 Mode: Aperture Priority

What may be hard to tell in the picture is that this was taken in a rather dark room, so I had to deal with very little light. This meant I had to bump up the ISO to 1600, which was at the top of the range with which I felt comfortable for the Canon 5D. Karl and the otter pup are on the same focal plane so I knew I could keep my aperture pretty large (a small f-stop number). This left me with a shutter speed of 1/125th, not great, but fast enough as long as I could hold the camera still. By resting the camera on the fence you see around the pool, I wasn't going to get any camera shake, leading to a sharp picture.



Bobcat (*Lynx rufus californicus*) juvenile, Santa Cruz, Monterey Bay, California

Story Behind The Image

As many of you know, I am totally cat obsessed. This addiction, if you can call it that, probably started with this bobcat and his mother. They allowed me to spend a lot of time with them at a very close range (often less than fifteen feet) and would even nap in front of me. These cats were completely wild and after the two-week period I sadly never saw them again. The juvenile, whom I named Henry, was shy, yet bold. When his mom was around he had all the confidence in the world, but chose to hide in the grass when she was not by his side. In this picture he is looking back at her, seemingly for reassurance that everything is all right. Sharing these moments with them was truly breathtaking and they are experiences I will never forget.

Gear

Canon 30D Camera, 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6 IS USM Lens, No Flash

Technical Details

Shutter Speed: 1/125sec Aperture: f/5.6 ISO: 1000 Mode: Aperture Priority

The decision process for making this image was pretty straightforward. I bumped up the ISO to get a fast enough shutter speed in order to freeze Henry, while keeping the f-stop low enough to blur the background. I was shooting in evaluative metering mode in aperture priority, but I didn't have to compensate the exposure because both the bobcat and the background are a very neutral color. By placing Henry in the left part of the frame, I am allowing the viewer to look where Henry is looking. This creates a calmer atmosphere compared to if I had placed him on the right side. (As a note, this image was shot at 275mm, showing you how close Henry really was, I didn't even have to use all 400mm.)



Brown Pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*) taking flight from creek, Big Sur, California

Story Behind The Image

This image means a lot to me due to many factors. Most importantly of all, I shared photographing this Brown Pelican with a very good friend of mine, Jeff Swanson, with whom I also saw the California Condor and who has recently passed away. He fought a long, tough, and brave battle with melanoma. He was an amazing photographer and an even better person. Please check out his work at [Interfacing Nature](#) – if you decide you'd like to buy a print of his, the profits will go towards melanoma research. If you go to his website, you can see that Jeff was primarily a landscape photographer so photographing these pelicans was not his preferred choice, but seeing the amazing opportunity that it provided to get a good picture of a Brown Pelican, he selflessly told me to go and shoot my heart out. That was the kind of guy he was.

Gear

Canon 40D Camera, 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6 IS USM Lens, No Flash

Technical Details

Shutter Speed: 1/500 sec Aperture: f/7.1 ISO: 400 Mode: Manual

I knew I wanted to underexpose the image to make the cliffs in the background darker and to make the pelicans pop out against them. By switching to manual mode (normally I shoot in Av) I could guarantee myself a consistent exposure no matter what part of the cliffs I was shooting against. I played around quite a bit with shutter speed (there were many pelicans taking off) to get a bit of movement in there and finally settled on quite the high shutter speed of 1/500sec.



Illegal bushmeat seized by National Park guards during roadblock check, Lope National Park, Gabon

Story Behind The Image

At Lope National Park in Gabon, bushmeat hunting is regulated. I took this photograph two weeks after the season had closed. The National Park guards set up a roadblock to check vehicles for illegally caught animals. After a few empty cars, a pickup pulled up. In the back were two plastic bags containing a White-nosed Guenon (*Cercopithecus nictitans*), a Gray-cheeked Mangabey (*Lophocebus albigena*), and an African Brush-tailed Porcupine (*Atherurus africanus*). The dead animals were seized and the owner of the car was ticketed. To make sure the carcasses were not picked up after the roadblock finished, the guards needed to destroy them. In this picture they are carrying them away from the roadblock to a river, where they discarded the dead animals to be eaten by crocodiles.

Gear

Canon 5D Camera, 24-70mm f/2.8L USM Lens, 580EX Canon Flash

Technical Details

Shutter Speed: 1/250 sec Aperture: f/16 ISO: 1000 Mode: Aperture Priority

Technically, this was a difficult image to produce. This is mostly because the action happened very fast, leaving little time for adjustments. I knew I wanted the photograph to be backlit to give it a more dramatic and moody feel, but that also meant that I had to use a flash to show any detail in the dead animals and the park rangers. So I popped on a flash and quickly increased my f-stop to get a shutter speed below the maximum sync speed for the 5D. I may have decreased the ISO to achieve the same thing, but I like the grittiness that the high ISO provides in this picture. To get the flash power right I took one quick test shot and made adjustments from there, after that the guards were already in action.



Southern Royal Albatross (*Diomedea epomophora*) pair gliding over ocean, Kaikoura, South Island, New Zealand

Story Behind The Image

I think photographers have a bias towards certain pictures in their own bodies of work because they were challenging to get or because they mean something special to them. This is definitely the case for this image as it was taken in New Zealand a few days after I had asked my then girlfriend to marry me. We went on a pelagic birding trip together to see the seabirds off of the coast of the South Island and it was truly a spectacular experience. The Southern Royal Albatross is the second largest (by wingspan) flying bird in the world and seeing one come straight at you is simply amazing. It was a special trip with the most special person in my life.

Gear

Canon 1D Mark IV Camera, 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6 IS USM Lens, No Flash

Technical Details

Shutter Speed: 1/1250 sec Aperture: f/8 ISO: 400 Mode: Aperture Priority

The biggest thing I had to watch out for with this image was not blowing out the body of the albatross since it's a very white bird. Shooting in aperture priority mode, with evaluative metering I knew I had to underexpose the image to keep the bird from losing all detail in the whites. I underexposed by a third of a stop and that was all that was needed. Having the second bird in the background completes the picture for me as it balances the composition nicely.



Brown Pelican
(*Pelecanus occidentalis*)
sub-adult on contaminated
water sign, Santa Cruz,
Monterey Bay, California

Story Behind The Image

Telling stories is what photography is all about. Some wildlife photographers try to stay away from anthropomorphizing the animals, which I understand, though I think it does a disservice to the animals. If we can help wildlife by making people connect emotionally to them then does it matter that we make them look more human at times? I don't think so. I wanted to tell a story and make people aware of how pesticides have an impact on Brown Pelicans. What better way than to show a bird perilously balancing on top of a sign that reads that the water below is not safe for body contact? If it's not safe for us, it's not safe for the bird. Is the bird reading the sign? Of course not, but the story still comes across.

Gear

Canon 30D Camera, EF 500mm f/4 USM Lens + 1.4x Extender, No Flash

Technical Details

Shutter Speed: 1/640 sec Aperture: f/6.3 ISO: 800 Mode: Aperture Priority

Choosing a large aperture (a smaller f-stop number) was the highest priority for this photograph as I needed to make sure I blurred the background to let the viewer concentrate on the bird and the sign. After that it was just a matter of making sure that the shutter speed was high enough to get a sharp picture. Compositionally I didn't have to show all of the bird to tell the story; instead I gave priority to the sign.

Want to connect with me? I would love to hear from you! You can find me here:

Google Plus (+SebastianKennerknecht)

A screenshot of a Google+ profile page. On the left, there's a circular profile picture of a man with short brown hair. Below it, the name "Sebastian Kennerknecht" is displayed, followed by a bio: "Works at Sebastian Kennerknecht Photography Attended University of California, Santa Cruz Lives in London, England". It also shows "418 followers | 7,825,911 views". To the right of the profile information is a large, high-quality photograph of a clouded leopard walking through dense green foliage. In the bottom right corner of the photo, there's a small logo with a person icon and the text "SEBASTIAN KENNERKNECHT" and "WWW.PUMAPIX.COM".

Facebook (pumapix)

A screenshot of a Facebook page for "Sebastian Kennerknecht Photography Artist". The profile picture on the left is a white square containing a black silhouette of a puma walking. The main cover photo shows a puma walking through a dark, wooded area. The page title "Sebastian Kennerknecht Photography Artist" is centered above the timeline. Below the timeline are standard Facebook navigation tabs: Timeline, About, Photos, Likes, and More. On the right side of the timeline, there are four buttons: "Liked" with a count of 246, "Following" with a checkmark, "Message", and three vertical dots.

Twitter (cbassk)

A screenshot of a Twitter profile for "Sebastian K". The profile picture is a portrait of a man. The main tweet features a large, high-resolution photograph of a caracal cat standing in a sunlit forest. Below the tweet, the Twitter interface shows the user's stats: 246 tweets, 4 photos/videos, 628 following, 286 followers, and 10 favorites. There are also links for "Edit profile" and "Who to follow". At the bottom, there are buttons for "Tweets" and "Tweets & replies".

Interested in participating in one of my workshops?

There is always an array of workshops and photo safaris that I offer. This includes everything from focusing on salamanders on the Central Coast of California to the birds of New Zealand. I limit the number of participants at five (or fewer) so everyone can get the attention they deserve. Want more info? Check out [the workshop page!](#)

