

# Photo Tips - getting it right in camera

In his latest book, award-winning wildlife photographer **Greg du Toit** passes on his expert camera tips. In this exclusive extract, he tells you how to get your focusing right in camera. And don't miss your chance to get your own signed copy!

## Focus, focus, focus

When photographing a scene, it's very important to decide what, exactly, in your frame is going to be your subject. Your subject is the area of your image on which you would like your audience to focus, and as such it should be the sharpest part of your frame. Knowing exactly what, where or who your subject is, is the starting point of effective autofocus.

## General tip

Remember that when you photograph people and animals, the eyes of your subject should always be sharply in focus. This rule even applies when photographing insects with a macro lens. Getting the eyes sharp is critical. This is one 'rule' that is very seldom broken.

*"Knowing exactly what, where or who your subject is, is the starting point of effective autofocus"*

## Pro tip

Remember that using a converter (also called an extender or doubler) does not change the MFD (minimum focusing distance) of your lens. This can come in handy when doing macro work.

## How do I diagnose poor focusing?

Almost all photographers know the feeling of capturing a blurred image. But how do you tell the difference between motion and incorrect focus? The movement of either your camera or your subject causes the former, while placing your focus selector in the wrong place causes the latter. If your subject is completely blurred across the entire frame, then you know that you have a motion blur issue, not

a focusing problem. If your image is blurred but contains, nevertheless, an area of sharpness, then you know that you have focused incorrectly.

## Beginner tip

Photographing wildlife in action is tricky, as you have very little time to frame and shoot. The photograph you see here captured something that took place within a fraction of a second. You need to get to know your camera and become very familiar with framing and shooting before you can shoot wildlife effectively. Practice, practice and more practice.

## Pro tip

If your subjects are in the same focal plane, you can use a wide aperture and still get both in focus.

**Greg du Toit** is a professional wildlife photographer and safari guide who has photographed some of Africa's wildest, remotest and largest ecosystems.



He has exhibited with the National Geographic Society in London and his Authentic Africa collections have been exhibited across the globe, from New York to Singapore. Greg was named Wildlife Photographer of the Year in 2013, the same year that he published his first book, entitled *Awe*, which went into its second print run after just four months. *Photo Tips* is Greg's second book.

[www.gregdutoit.com](http://www.gregdutoit.com)



**How you can take a similar image**

**Lens:** Telephoto lens

**Settings:** Large aperture and high ISO to achieve a fast enough shutter speed

**How:** Success occurs when preparation meets luck. We sat watching this leopard, waiting while she stalked a herd of impala. My camera was set and ready so that when the action happened I could capture this image. Wildlife photography is a unique genre in that our wild subjects give us little warning and move incredibly quickly. I made sure that my shutter speed was faster than 1/1250 second to freeze this moment.

## Technique

### Set your camera's autofocus

Your camera comes out of the factory with all of its autofocus points active. This setting does not allow you to select a specific point or a place in your frame to focus on. Every camera is different, but check your manual under 'autofocus' and set your autofocus so that you have one active sensor in the middle of your frame. In other words, when you look into your viewfinder you should see one selector in the middle that illuminates when you partly depress your shutter button (the same button you use to take a picture).

### Beginner tip

If your subject is stationary, set your autofocus to 'AF-S' (Nikon) or 'One Shot' (Canon). Other camera manufacturers will have similar names, so check your manual.

### Pro tip

You can customise your camera to allow you to back-focus. This means that your shutter button trips the shutter only, and you use a separate, dedicated button to autofocus. According to one school of thought, you can autofocus more responsively if you use a dedicated autofocus button.

### How you can take a similar image

**Lens:** Telephoto lens

**Settings:** Large aperture and high ISO to cope with low light levels

**How:** Not all rain is visible in a photograph, but when I was in Kenya, the tropical raindrops were large enough and there was enough sunlight for them to be clearly visible. A beanbag provided critical support as I focused on the face of the buffalo. I shot this image in colour and later converted it to black and white.



## Technique

### Half-depress, then focus, then recompose

When you pick up your camera and look through your viewfinder, place your focusing sensor, which appears as a dot in the centre of your frame, over your subject. Then, gently depress your shutter button halfway. Remember that your shutter button serves two purposes: when pushed halfway, it switches the autofocus on; and when fully depressed, it trips the shutter and takes the photo.

### Beginner tip

Once you have half-depressed your shutter button and autofocused on your subject, you can recompose your shot and your focus will stay locked on your

subject. The key, though, is to keep the button depressed halfway. If at any point your finger lifts off your shutter button, you need to refocus before recomposing. Remember that this technique only works if both you and your subject are stationary.

### Pro tip

Sometimes showing an animal in its environment is more effective than shooting a tight portrait.

### How you can take a similar image

**Lens:** Telephoto lens

**Settings:** Large aperture. High ISO

**How:** Photography is all about light and colour. The twilight period can offer a blue colour cast, often imperceptible to the human eye. On this cold winter morning, a thick mist added further mood to the scene. The challenge, though, was that there was not enough light, so shooting wide open (with a large aperture) and with camera support was critical.



## Technique

### What if my subject is moving?

If your subject is moving, it is critical to change your autofocus from 'AF-S' to 'AF-C' for Nikon, or from 'One Shot' to 'Servo' for Canon. Other camera manufacturers will have the same setting to change, but each will have slightly different terminology, so check your manual.

### General tip

Keeping your moving subject in your viewfinder, pan with it while trying to keep the centre focus selector on its head. For as long as you have your finger depressing the shutter button halfway, your camera's focus will track and even predict your subject's movement. Every few seconds, it is important to remove your finger completely from the shutter button and to refocus on your subject.



### How you can take a similar image

**Lens:** Telephoto lens

**Settings:** Medium aperture. Fast shutter speed

**How:** While tracking my subject, I tried my best to keep the sensor on my subject's head. This is very difficult, so it is better to stop your aperture down as much as possible and then increase your ISO to get a fast enough shutter speed – which, in this case, would be a minimum of 1/500sec, but preferably 1/1000sec, or even faster. By closing your aperture, you give yourself more depth of field should you not be able to keep the sensor on your subject's head.

## Muscle memory

The good news is that in time, the focusing techniques above will become second nature. All you need to do is practice shooting until you develop muscle memory, allowing you to focus and shoot without having to think about it consciously. Just like driving a car, it will feel awkward at first, but keep practising on the family pet until it becomes easier.

## Pro tip

You can customise your autofocus so that it holds its focus for longer. I find this handy when shooting wildlife, as it ensures that my focus does not hop onto a bush or grass stalk should my subject run behind one. Do this in the autofocus menu. Nikon calls it 'focus tracking with lock-on'; move the setting towards 'long'. Canon calls it 'tracking sensitivity'; move the setting towards the minus side.

### How you can take a similar image

**Lens:** Telephoto lens

**Setting:** Low ISO. Slow shutter speed of less than 1/60sec

**How:** This technique is known as motion blur. It is exactly the same as shooting any other moving subject in that you follow and pan with your subject, but with a slower shutter speed. The background movement is recorded as intentional blur, but your focus still tracks your subject.

### SUMMARY

First, decide what, exactly, your subject is within your frame. If you are shooting a portrait, then the eyes of your subject are where you should focus. The next step is to assess whether your subject is moving or stationary.

If stationary, focus and recompose before shooting.

If your subject is moving, make sure that you change your autofocus settings; then pan with your subject and shoot at will.

Remember not to lift your finger off the shutter button completely between frames to keep your autofocus engaged.

## SIGNED BOOK OFFER!

Get your autographed copy of *Photo Tips*, by Greg du Toit, the 2013 Wildlife Photographer of the Year, by visiting [www.gregdutoit.com](http://www.gregdutoit.com)

Not only will Greg sign your copy, he will ship the book to you personally!

