



Elephants caught on camera

In this portfolio, **Greg du Toit** reveals his tips on how to photograph these magnificent giants

I have spent the past four years working on the 'In the Footsteps of Giants' project, whereby I have enjoyed hundreds of hours with elephants. I have flown over wild country looking for giant tuskers in Kenya and I have descended into an extinct volcano in Tanzania in pursuit of these majestic beasts. I have been to the Congo Basin and the Skeleton Coast of Namibia in search of both forest and desert elephant. I have also traversed the Zambezi Valley photographing on foot and even from boat and canoe, all in search of my behemoth subjects.

It has been a spellbinding journey, and now that I have this body of work, I hope to share it with a wider audience so that these photographs can help ensure that elephants are always remembered. This is important – not just because they are sentient beings but because they are also a keystone species in the environment, meaning that should they go extinct, the entire ecosystem would collapse.

Sadly, Africa has lost 70 per cent of its elephant population in the past 40 years, and alarmingly, they are now being killed at a faster rate than they are being born. Hunters come out to Africa to shoot elephants, while poachers kill them just so that their tusks (merely teeth) can be turned into ornaments or medicines.

In a giant's footsteps

MASHATU GAME RESERVE, BOTSWANA

"Elephants are so big that they pose a bit of a photographic conundrum, as one never knows where to focus. Initially, one zooms out to capture the entire animal but an elephant's individual appendages can make for striking photographs on their own. Here, I focused just on the back legs of one after it had finished drinking and was moving off. Dust had turned into mud and, using a long focal length, I was able to capture the detail."

Nikon D5, Nikon 500mm F4 lens, F8 1/3200th, ISO 800





Essence of elephants

MASHATU GAME RESERVE, BOTSWANA
 "As photographers, we are also poets; I wanted to communicate the mysterious energy that one feels in the presence of elephants. To do this, I adopted unorthodox camera settings. By purposely using a slow shutter-speed and shooting with a cool white balance, a polariser and a flash, I created an image as mysterious as my subjects themselves. Sometimes, for a photographer to succeed, one must be brave enough to experiment."

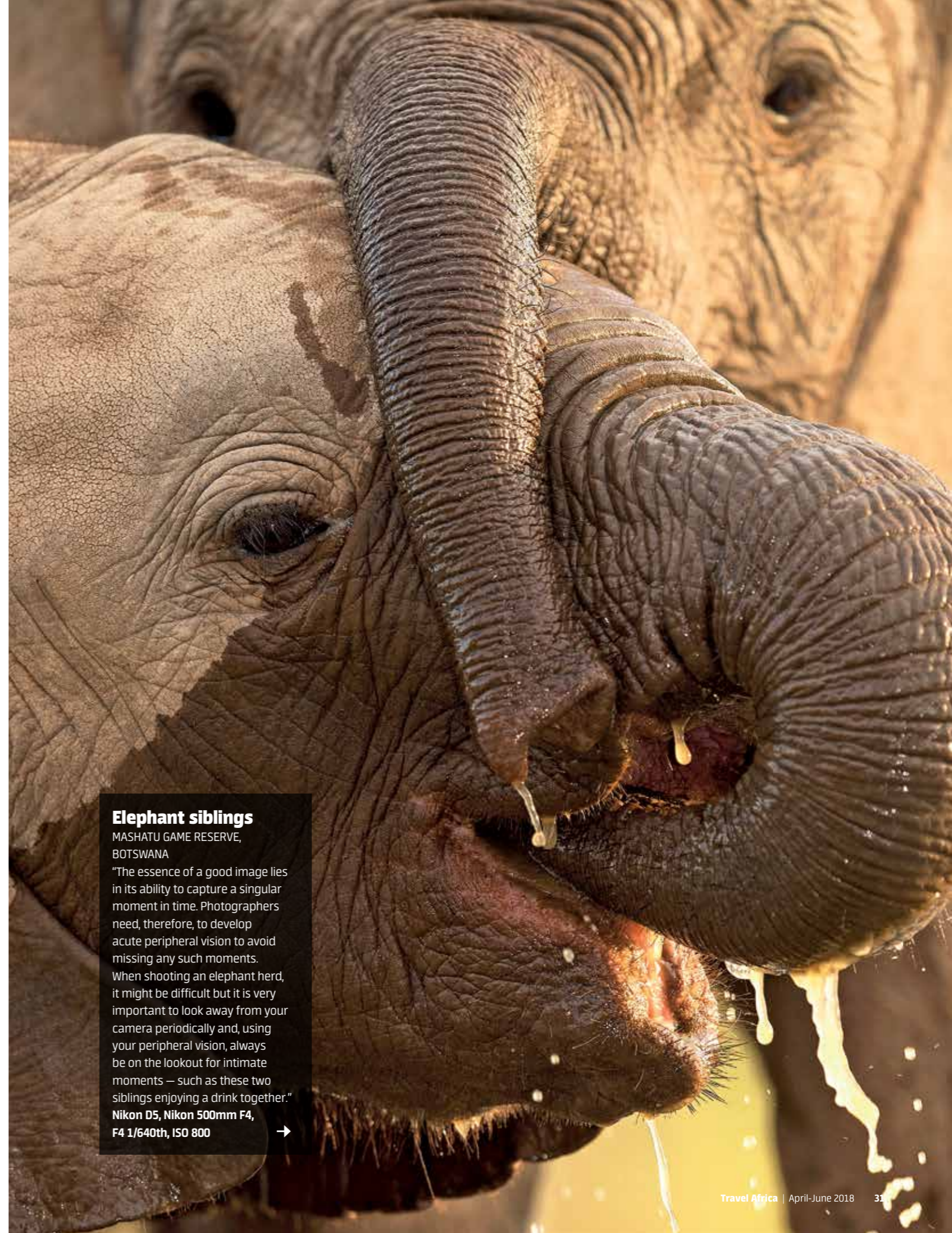
Nikon D3S, Nikon 16-35mm lens, F22 1/30th, ISO 800



On the charge

MASHATU GAME RESERVE, BOTSWANA
 "I have always said that sometimes all a photographer needs to do is just be there. When a baby elephant rushes towards you in full sprint and in golden light, this saying certainly applies. In such circumstances, the photographer's job is similar to that of a mirror, to simply reflect the reality that is before us. This is not the time to experiment – and using a fast shutter-speed and moderate aperture, so that there is separation between your subject and background, is usually the way to go."

Nikon D810, Nikon 80-400mm lens, F5.6 1/1250th, ISO 200



Elephant siblings

MASHATU GAME RESERVE, BOTSWANA
 "The essence of a good image lies in its ability to capture a singular moment in time. Photographers need, therefore, to develop acute peripheral vision to avoid missing any such moments. When shooting an elephant herd, it might be difficult but it is very important to look away from your camera periodically and, using your peripheral vision, always be on the lookout for intimate moments – such as these two siblings enjoying a drink together."

Nikon D5, Nikon 500mm F4, F4 1/640th, ISO 800

Cooling off

ZAMBEZI RIVER, MANA POOLS NATIONAL PARK, ZIMBABWE

"Elephants are awe-inspiring subjects and when we spotted this bull swimming in the Zambezi, I knew there was the possibility to create an extraordinary photograph. Lying down on the floor of the boat, I managed this eye-level portrait. My advice is to always remember that animals' eyes are the most important feature, and only by focusing on them can you get your audience to really engage with your subject."

Nikon D4S, Nikon 80-400mm lens, F5.6 1/250th, ISO 800 →





The herd's protection

AMBOSELI NATIONAL PARK, KENYA

"This was a tough scene to shoot as every shot of the charging elephant herd was potentially going to be the same — except that there was one very brief instant where a baby elephant lost its footing and temporarily tripped. The mother turned her head to investigate while an aunt kept an eye out from behind. It was a special moment, one communicating the strong parental bonds of these intelligent creatures. Photographers are storytellers; more than just getting your camera settings right, you need to tell a story in a fraction of a second. This is ultimately the skill of our trade."

Nikon D3S, Nikon 80-400mm lens, F8 1/1000th, ISO 400 →

Serengeti sunset

SERENGETI NATIONAL PARK, TANZANIA

"The one problem photographers experience is that our audience is never there when we create our imagery, so we need to help them understand more. To do this, we need to add scale to our photographs. For this shot, I wanted to capture an elephant in its habitat, which consisted of the great savannah. By stepping back and placing my subject in the bottom corner, I achieved my objective, so my suggestion to budding photographers is not to be scared of keeping your subject small in the frame."

Nikon D300, Nikon 80-400mm lens, F8 1/320th, ISO 200



Trunk stretch

LOWER ZAMBEZI NATIONAL PARK, ZAMBIA

"Perspective is an important word in photographic vocabulary. The temptation is often to zoom in and fill the frame. For this project, however, I wanted to show that elephants, being a keystone species, are inextricably linked to their environment. I also needed to show them as the wild creatures that they are, living in Africa and not in a zoo. My tip, therefore, is to include the subject's environment in the shot as often as possible."

Nikon D5, Nikon 500mm F4, F5.6 1/200th, ISO 200



Meet the photographer

Greg du Toit is a professional wildlife photographer and safari guide. He is also the author of two books: one entitled *African Wildlife Exposed*, a portfolio of his work in Africa, which contains a decade's worth of imagery. The other is a how-to book for photographers, entitled *Phototips: Getting it Right in Camera*. Greg is not only a passionate photographer but also a passionate African who communicates his personal appreciation and awe for wild creatures through his work.

To join Greg on a photographic safari or workshop and to see more of his work, visit gregdutoit.com.