



## **TAKE BETTER PHOTOS IN NAMIBIA**

**A step-by-step Online Training Course**

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## **MODULE 8: WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY IN ETOSHA**

**Make the most of specific photo situations to get the  
best wildlife shots**

### **Here's What You'll Learn In This Module:**

- The keys to great wildlife images: bringing it all together
- Using wildlife routines & signs for interesting wildlife behavior, to capture great images: case studies

Let's quickly summarize: The key to taking great wildlife images is to be there where the animals are when they show some interesting behavior and to capture it at the right moment ideally in great light and with a great composition. This requires that you know where the animals are, which we've covered in previous modules, and know which photo gear settings you need, which we also covered already. But the final puzzle piece for successful images is to know and anticipate the wildlife's behavior. The good news is that animals, just like us humans, have certain routines and that animals show signs & behaviors that lead to certain photographically interesting behavior. Therefore when you know these and know how to read them, you can anticipate the right moment, plan for it and capture it. This is what we want to talk about in this module. Of course, covering all possible behaviors that Etosha's wildlife

may display is just not possible in this course. But we want to talk about three things that will help you to be ready for photogenic moments, when they happen:

Firstly, certain behaviors are more photogenic than others and may also tell a story, this is what you want to focus on. We found it helpful to have a **'Best Wildlife Behavior Wish List'** of specific animal behavior that we wanted to capture in Etosha. This helped us greatly to look out for these behaviors & be ready to photograph them when they actually happen. You are welcome to download our 'Best Wildlife Behavior Wish List' PDF of interesting behavior or activities for various species to keep in mind what's possible and to select what you are most keen to photograph. You can use it as is and maybe highlight the images that you'd like to capture, or you can make your own list.

Secondly, of the interesting action behaviors there are some that are very difficult to get, e.g. play-fighting lions or lions fighting over a zebra foal carcass, and many others that are relatively easy to capture. In this chapter we'll discuss and show you examples of images of specific charismatic animals that you are likely to see and photograph on your visit to Etosha, especially when you follow our tips. We've selected typical situations you will encounter with elephants, lions, selected grazers & browsers, rhinos, scavengers and squirrels. We'll describe certain behaviors and photogenic moments you can expect to happen and how to photograph them.

Lastly, before we dig into these specific scenes, we would like to suggest that you observe the animals you'd like to photograph yourself as much as possible, when you're not shooting, e.g. during the un-

photogenic hours of the day. The more you study their behavior the better you can anticipate it.

Let's quickly recap the important equipment settings and camera techniques that will apply to all and every photo situation in Etosha. You can use this as a mental check-list that you go through during each photo session:

Firstly, always anticipate, understand and prepare for the 'action speed' of the situation. Choose the appropriate f-stop and ISO for a fast enough shutter speed for the specific behavior, follow the steps for each action (slow, medium or fast action) that we've explained in Module 6.

Remember to always watch your shutter speed and if it's too slow increase the ISO or widen the aperture if still possible. When your camera is hand-held, the image stabilization should be on, when your camera is on a tripod or bean bag support, the image stabilization should be off. Try to use horizontal & vertical orientation in most situations and use various focal lengths - long telephoto, a medium and a wide-angle lens - in situations where the animals are near, especially with large groups. Also keep the following in mind: practice patience and be willing to wait a bit longer for something more interesting to happen. It's often in Etosha that out of a situation that's not very exciting something very photogenic develops, and you don't want to miss these by driving off too early! And finally: you should be ready for the unexpected at all times. Etosha is a wilderness, after all, in which the element of surprise is a constant possibility!

But now let's get started with elephants:

## 1. Elephants

*and the Photo Situation we want to talk about is an Elephant herd at a waterhole, in the late afternoon, in the dry season.*

The estimated duration of such an event is often one hour or longer, as for ellies the visit to a waterhole is more than just having a drink, it's a big event. Their activities at the waterhole include quenching their thirst, of course, but also cooling-off with a bath maybe, being social by getting together with other herds and maybe talking about the latest ellie gossip in Etosha, who knows.... They also use their time at the water to establish their social hierarchy, who's higher up, who's the underling, and for taking care of their body hygiene by bathing, spraying water onto themselves and dusting. The younger ellies don't care much about these adult activities, but are very keen to use these get-togethers for playing time. We are going to show you which specific behaviors you can expect when, and how to capture them in great images.

### **Elephants walk in single file to a waterhole:**

Ellies walk on ancient elephant paths that lead to and from a waterhole, and that actually crisscross the entire park. On these they mostly walk in single file, but often fall into a run on the last meters to the waterhole in anticipation of their well-deserved drink. As your GET READY PROCEDURES & SETTINGS we suggest the following:

- Anticipate the best viewpoint and consider leading lines in your composition.
- Choose a long telephoto lens, since the herd is quite far away still.

- The action that you can expect is medium to fast, with very fast action towards the end, when they are getting close, so use the appropriate settings with fast action.
- And select your widest aperture.

### **Elephant herd lines up at water's edge to drink peacefully:**

When most herd members have lined up next to each other and have begun to drink the herd often becomes very quiet. This is a very peaceful & magical atmosphere, which usually lasts a few minutes. Their bodies are quite still, but they move their trunks up and down, to suck the water in and spray it into their mouths. Often the water runs down from their trunks and mouths and you can try and capture this nicely by freezing the drops with a fast shutter speed and if possible in backlight.

For you this means:

- Choose a viewpoint directly opposite or with a side view for more depth. Change your viewpoint if the herd position changes.
- Use a long telephoto lens and a wider lens, how much wider depends on your situation.
- You can expect slow to medium action for the scene, so choose your settings accordingly, but if you want to freeze the water drops running down use the settings for fast action.

### **Elephants spraying themselves with water or bathing:**

After the initial thirst is quenched and when it's very, hot some ellies spray themselves to cool off or even go for a bath, if the waterhole is sufficiently deep e.g. usually at Okaukuejo or Klein Namutoni.

- Choose a viewpoint with little background distraction, you want to focus on the spraying or bathing action. And change your viewpoint to get variations if time allows.
- Again use a long telephoto lens and a wider lens for variation. How much wider depends on your situation.
- The spraying is going to be fast action, the bathing is often rather peaceful and at the most medium action.
- Start with the widest aperture and go smaller for greater depth, if appropriate and if you have enough light and time.

### **Elephants dust-bathing:**

Some ellies, not all of them, like to throw dust onto their wet bodies, which is called dust-bathing. They do this to protect their skin from insects and the sun.

- Choose a good viewpoint with little background distractions and change it to get variations if time allows. At sunset try to get the sun behind the elephant for some beautiful orange light.
- Use a long telephoto lens and a wider lens if the elephant is nearby.
- The action is mostly fast, so use the fast action setting and
- choose your widest aperture.

Let's look at the elephant youngsters.

### **Play time for elephant calves & teenies:**

Young ellies don't have the patience for long drinks, they are excited about the get-together. Older youngsters sometimes like to show off and

demonstrate how impressive they can be and chase small birds off. Little ones like to play with each other and do silly things just like small kids.

- Choose a viewpoint with minimal distractions in the background and change it to get variations if time allows.
- Start with a long telephoto lens & use a wider lens if the little ones are nearby to get more young ones in the frame.
- You can expect medium to fast action, so it's best to
- use the widest aperture.

### **Mom's little baby:**

My personal highlight of large elephant herds are the tiny elephant babies, which are constantly protected by their mothers and other adults. These small calves cannot drink at the waterhole yet, as they cannot use their trunks, and drink mother's milk with their mouths. They are often still too small or shy to play and therefore stay close to their mothers.

- Choose a viewpoint that shows the tiny calf amidst the herd nicely; also change your viewpoint to get variations
- and use a long telephoto lens.
- It's going to be slow action, as the calf mostly stands still.
- Start with your widest aperture and go smaller if you'd like, although remember that you'd want the herd around the baby out of focus to draw attention to the baby.

### **Elephant herd moves off:**

Once the leading elephant decides that it's enough for the day, it tells the herd with a low rumble to get ready to leave. The herd members

group again and move off together, sometimes also in single file, but mostly not as orderly as on their arrival. When their path leads past you and close to you, stay dead still and use a wider lens to get great perspective. But be careful and back off, if they show you that they don't like you there.

- Anticipate the best viewpoint and think of leading lines.
- Depending on how close you are, use your long telephoto lens or a wider lens to get at least a few herd members in the frame when they move off and pass you.
- It's going to be medium to fast action, so use the specific settings and also
- your widest aperture.

The next species that you'll meet and very likely want to photograph are

## **2. Lions**

*Let's say the photo situation is that you've spotted sleeping lions on your game drive. Whether it's rainy or dry season, it doesn't matter.*

Lions will most likely be snoozing between mid-morning to mid-afternoon in the dry season and slightly less so in the rainy season, when it's cooler. Sometimes the pride members lie around scattered, but when there's limited shade under a tree for example they may lie closely together. This especially offers great opportunities for group photos with lots of body contact & the possibility of interaction, but all situations are great for portraits, close-ups of faces, paws, tails, or for yawning images. When it's extremely hot, lions will hardly move and will stay in the shade during the hot hours. But later, towards the evening, when it's cooling down, they'll start to change positions, the younger ones might get up to

play, the adults may roll over, stretch and lots of yawning may take place. The lions eventually do get up and walk to the nearest waterhole, so DO STAY WITH THEM or return in the cooler hours of the day: it's going to be worthwhile. Some advice for when you're very close to lions: be quiet and don't make hectic movements. Although lions are used to people in cars in Etosha and thus don't associate us with their prey animals, you don't want to give them new ideas and also don't want to disturb them in any way.

### **Group photos of snoozing lions:**

Let's talk about the best case scenario, when lions lie as a tight group in a shady spot. Then their bodies often touch, which expresses connection and family ties. This will give you a great chance for all sorts of wonderful images, but definitely focus on expressive facial shots and try to frame in a way that illustrates the bonds between the pride members. Since the lions will not do much else than snoozing, use the settings for slow action. When the lions lie in the shade of a tree, pay attention to how your sensor is handling the exposure on the lions' faces against a possible bright background. If it over- or underexposes compensate manually by giving less or more light.

This photo situation is also ideal to capture the

### **Lions' sleeping poses, portrait shots & close ups:**

Just like our house cats, lions have various poses when they sleep or snooze. Sometimes their poses and facial expressions look as if they really enjoy their snooze, for example when they lie on their back, with

their legs up. That's also why it's worthwhile to stay with lions, even when 'nothing's happening' and they just sleep, because they may change sleeping positions often and might display a really great pose.

Also take the opportunity for taking classical portrait shots and of close-up shots of paws, ears and tails. As before, use the settings for slow action, but experiment with different apertures, you've got a lot of time on your hand now. Also watch your exposure, if there is contrasting bright light.

Let's talk a bit about

### **Lions yawning:**

When lions start to wake up and before they become active again, they very often yawn. It's quite predictable and great for attractive images. There is even a position in which they mostly yawn, namely when they lie on their bellies with the front legs in front of them. They even give clear signs that they soon are going to yawn. They often twitch their nose, lick their lips and nose, and open their mouths, as if they want to yawn ... and then they finally do it. So pay attention to these signs and get ready to take many shots during the action. Start when they start to yawn and only stop when the mouth is closed again, choose the fast action settings.

Another desirable shot or set of shots is of

### **Lions' interaction.**

You don't see it that often in Etosha, but you've got a chance in the late afternoon, when the lions become active again. When it's time to get up, lions like to make body contact with the other pride members, not everyone with everyone, but special buddies like to do it. Since we don't know who's best buddies, we must observe all lions' behavior closely. Chances and signs for imminent head or body rubbing between lions are when one lion gets up and walks to another that's still lying flat, that's often followed by head rubbing. Or when two or more lions walk towards each other, this often leads to some short but nice action. Expect medium to fast action settings.

### **Lions get up and walk off:**

Once individual pride members are on the move, the others also get up one by one, and head off in the same direction, mostly to the nearest waterhole. As soon as the first lion starts to walk, get yourself in a good position, so that they walk towards you straight or in a diagonal line. If possible, keep on driving ahead of the pride again and again to get more possibilities for a variety of images. If lions stop to scan their surroundings for prey or start to roar, especially when it's close to sunset or sunrise, be ready. Use the medium to fast action setting.

### **3. Grazers & browsers**

Another photo situation that you will encounter when you visit in the dry season is the gathering of mixed herds at the waterholes from early morning until late afternoon. We'll talk about the common grazers, such

as zebra, wildebeest, springbok, gemsbok and hartebeest and about the common browsers, such a giraffe, kudu and impala.

The first thing you can photograph when you're waiting early morning at the waterhole is the way the

### **herds walk in single file to the waterhole:**

Just like elephants, most other herbivores (plant eaters) in Etosha walk on the paths that lead to and from the waterholes. When you select your viewpoint always consider leading lines & check for disturbing backgrounds. Use the settings for medium to fast action and keep a sharp focus on their eyes and heads as the animals get closer. But be aware that group compositions are very demanding as changes in the animal positions happen all the time. Therefore take many shots of the best moments.

### **Herds line up at the waterhole & drink peacefully:**

Upon arrival at the waterhole some wildlife species do line up nicely when they drink. Of the grazers it's zebra and springbok, amongst the browsers it's impala and kudu who usually do it. Often the whole group drinks except for one animal that looks up to keep a watchful eye, try and capture this interesting dynamic. When the herd is drinking peacefully there is a good chance of getting a clear or interesting reflection. Use the settings for slow to medium action.

### **Individual animals walk knee-deep into waterhole:**

Sometimes animals, such as springbok, gemsbok, or zebra like to walk into the water up to their underbellies to cool down, but also to drink cleaner, less disturbed water. Use the settings for medium action and avoid background distractions.

### **Burst of panic at the waterhole:**

Most animals are weary at waterholes, because predators such as lions are often lurking there for prey. But sometimes the herds are especially nervous, and you can sense this, for example when it's at a bush waterhole with dense vegetation that doesn't allow them to see far, or when the animal pressure is high, which would naturally draw predators to the waterhole. When lions have recently been at the water to drink, for example, the animals can smell it and are often very skittish. In between peaceful scenes, the animals at the water suddenly panic and storm off a few meters on some to us invisible clue. If you sense tension, get ready to photograph the action by selecting the settings for fast action. And stay longer, as this may happen again and again.

### **Animals rest in the vicinity of the waterhole:**

After they've quenched their thirst many animals stay in the area to take a rest. They often just stand in groups in the open, and zebra will even rest their heads on each other, which make for nice images. When it's very hot many animals will seek shade and shelter in tight groups under a tree. Use the settings for slow action, there is no rush here. You can also take the time to experiment with different f-stops, lenses, perspectives etc. But watch out for exposure differences between the

animals and the bright background, and compensate manually by giving less or more light.

### **Territorial conflicts around waterhole:**

At larger gatherings of animals the males of various species, such as gemsbok, springbok, impala and giraffe often spar with other males of their own kind to prove their dominance. This can be rather spectacular, especially when they kick up dust, so look out for these scenes, as they may happen at any moment without much of a sign to us. Use the settings for fast action.

### **Late afternoon moody shots:**

When there is high animal pressure at the waterhole and on top of this a low water supply it happens that many animals stay until the evening for a chance to drink. Then you often get very dusty conditions that are great for atmospheric shots, including sunset silhouettes. Use the settings for slow to medium action and low light.

## **4. Black (and white) rhinos**

Now we want to move on to another one of the big characters you'll meet in Etosha, the black (and white) rhinos. Let's talk about the photo situation where a rhino approaches a waterhole late afternoon and at also at night to drink. In Etosha rhinos are not often seen during the day, as we've talked about already. They either rest in the shade or feed in

bushy vegetation, so that they're mostly not visible from the park roads. The best chances for you to see rhinos (black or white) are at the waterholes from late afternoon until sunset, and at night at Etosha's camp waterholes, when you stay inside Etosha. And you may encounter them very early just after sunrise at or close to waterholes.

### **Rhino approaches the waterhole in a steady walk:**

When it's daylight in the late afternoon, and you spot a rhino approaching a waterhole in the distance, they usually walk with their heads low in a steady walk. To capture this scene choose the settings for medium action in low to very low light.

At night, when it's dark, it's often the sounds of a rhino coming to the waterhole that you'll notice first before you can see the animal. It's either a sound that goes 'clonk – clonk – clonk' when the ground is rocky, like at Okaukuejo waterhole. Or you may hear the rhino make snorting and puffing sounds in the distance, which means that it's upset because it has smelled or heard something disturbing. At night it's usually quite difficult to photograph rhinos approaching the waterhole, because there is so little light & too great a distance to the far side of the waterhole. But try, if there is full moon there may be more light, and use the settings for medium action in low light plus push your ISO way up. Now is the time to use the capabilities of your high ISO settings, ideally you would have tested them already at night to see how high you can go for acceptable results. How high you actually have to go depends on your lens' light sensitivity, the distance of rhino and the available light at the specific flood-lit waterhole. Don't use full-flash mode, as the rhino will be too far

away in most cases. But if the rhino gets closer you can experiment with fill-in flash.

### **Rhino stops and sniffs the air:**

When they get closer to the waterhole rhinos often stop, sniff the air and listen for signs of danger, before they walk on. These are typical rhino poses you may want to capture. When you're lucky enough to have a mother with her calf approaching, you'll even get more opportunities for interesting poses & interaction. Use the day and night settings, depending on your situation, as described before.

### **Rhino drinks at waterhole:**

When the rhino's at the water, it checks out and smells the air again and then starts to drink. Once they drink rhinos tend to drink for long periods of time. They sometimes lift their heads, again a photogenic pose, but often they don't change their body position before they continue to drink. Use the day and night settings, depending on your situation, as described before.

### **Rhino interacts with other rhinos or elephants at the waterhole:**

The serenity of the drinking rhino may get disturbed when other rhinos or elephants come too close for the rhino's comfort. The rhino then reacts with snorts and a few excited steps back and forward, or it may even make a short charge towards its rival, which is potentially a great photo opportunity, if you're fast enough. But mostly very little is actually

happening. Sometimes the rhino may run off, but it usually returns again later to continue to drink. Use the day and night settings, depending on your situation, as described before, but now change your settings to fast action, therefore use even a higher ISO setting.

Our next case study takes us to

## **5. Scavengers at a carcass**

*The Photo Situation is that during your early morning drive you spot vultures descending fast to one spot close to the road and you'll check it out and discover a carcass.*

Carcasses of herbivores are regularly seen in Etosha during the rainy or dry season. A carcass may be the left-over remains from a lion kill, or it may be of an animal that has died of anthrax, a disease that occurs naturally in Etosha and can affect all grazers & browsers in the park, including elephants. Oftentimes vultures are the first to spot a diseased animal from high up in the sky, that's why it's a great strategy to observe them and drive to where they are descending. Mostly spotted hyena and Black-back jackal will follow soon to claim their share of meat. Drive as close as you can to the carcass but stay on the road. There isn't a clear order of photo scenes you will encounter as it depends which species has found the carcass first and which scavengers are present. But you can expect the following scenes:

**Vultures descend & land at a carcass:**

After vultures descend they often land close to a carcass or may even land on top of a large carcass, such as an elephant. It's a sight that's often got some comical element, when vultures jump or stride in impressive steps closer to the carcass. Use the settings for fast action and try to keep the eyes sharp.

### **Vultures feed on the carcass:**

Sometimes more than 40 vultures may gather at a time around a carcass, which leads to lots of bickering for the best feeding positions. Lappet-face vultures are the biggest and most dominant vultures and mostly get the best pieces of the meat. At a big carcass some vultures may even enter the open belly completely to clean out the carcass from the inside. Use the settings for medium action to fast action

### **Mixed species of scavengers - hyena, jackal & vultures - at the carcass:**

It mostly does not take long before hyenas and/or black-backed jackals appear on the scene as well. Spotted hyenas are the most dominant species of them and demand the best feeding spots, but when the carcass is large and they are not starving, they will readily share with jackals and vultures. Black-back jackals will chase off a few vultures, especially when there are a few jackals together, but large groups of hungry vultures may become dominant over a few jackals. Mixed species of scavengers always result in some conflict, either between the same species or between different species. Sometimes the scavengers can become very agitated during their feeding. They may also become

covered in blood and gore, and drag larger pieces of meat off to eat away from the hectic scrambling around the carcass. All of these behaviors present fantastic photo opportunities to you, and great chances to also experiment with different compositions, close-ups and wider shots, as usually the spectacle will last longer. In general use the settings for fast action. It's definitely worthwhile to stay a few hours or even the whole day, or come back to the carcass again later in the afternoon, when there may be even lions that have chased off the other scavengers!

Now we're onto our last case study of

## **6. Ground squirrels**

*Let's assume the following Photo Situation: On your afternoon game drive you spot an adult ground squirrel next to the road.*

Ground squirrels are quite common in Etosha and often dig their burrows into the compacted gravel road. When you spot a squirrel next to a burrow, stop, switch the engine off and observe, ready to take photographs. There is a series of behaviors you may be able to capture, and where there is one squirrel there will be more as they usually live in family groups together. Mostly you would use the settings for slow or medium action, as the squirrels' poses are mostly quite still. If they display movements that are fast and sudden - sometimes they are quite lively and agitated - we recommend the settings for fast action. Be aware that the shots taken from a car looking down with a steep angle seldom look natural, we talked about it in Module 7. So rather back off a bit and photograph with a telephoto lens, if you're too close and would photograph down onto the animal.

You may be able to capture the following scenes:

### **Squirrel upright on the look-out:**

When squirrels check out a situation they stand upright on their hind-legs for a few seconds, often supported by their tail, to gain height and therefore see more. They are quite alert little creatures, and will regularly look-out for danger, so you'll have multiple chances of capturing this behavior.

### **Squirrel feeds on seeds of grass or shrubs:**

It's very likely you'll find squirrels feeding on seeds of grass or shrubs nearby. This is the typical squirrel pose, which is also quite photogenic. Often they use their tails as a sun umbrella, when it gets hotter, which adds a nice element to the photo.

### **Squirrel takes a sand bath:**

In sandy soils squirrels like to take sand baths. They lie flat on their bellies and throw sand on their backs. They may do this to cool down, like a cool shower, and additionally maybe to get rid of fleas.

### **Squirrel at the burrow:**

Squirrels often hang around near one of their burrow entrances to be able to hide quickly from birds of prey, who hunt them. They usually have more entrances and exits from their underground burrow system.

We suggest that you stay longer, as other members of the family may emerge from their burrow and pop their heads out.

### **Squirrel pairs & groups:**

When more squirrels are outside they may be busy with different activities, but every so often they get together and touch each other briefly, which may sometimes look like kissing. They also love to groom each other. Sometimes they resolve an argument in a quick fight with lots of biting & jumping around.

### **Squirrel babies:**

If you're visiting in the rainy season you may see squirrel babies which are extremely cute-looking. They are mostly hidden in the burrow, but do emerge once their parents give them permission to come out. They are wonderful to observe and photograph, especially when they are interacting and playing with each other.

This is the end of our case studies of animal behavior. We hope we've given you inspiration and good ideas of the photo opportunities that can arise out of a situation and how you can anticipate & capture them in great photographs.

This has been Module 8: Wildlife Photography In Etosha - Make the most of specific photo situations to get the best wildlife shots.

**Now we would like you to take action:**

- Download our 'Best Wildlife Behavior Wish List' (PDF)
- Mark your favorite wildlife behavior images you'd like to photograph on our 'Wish List' or make your own list

**Thanks for listening & see you again at Module 9**