



TAKE BETTER PHOTOS IN NAMIBIA

A step-by-step Online Training Course

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MODULE 6: WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY IN ETOSHA

Your Photographic Routine & Photo Gear Settings for best wildlife shots

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

- The conditions & regulations that will influence your photography in Etosha
- Your daily photographic routine and game drives
- Photo Gear Settings for best wildlife shots

Let's first talk about the photographic conditions & regulations that await you in Etosha.

1. Conditions & regulations that will influence your photography

Well, inside the Etosha National Park the animals are absolutely free to roam, wherever they like. On the other hand us humans are restricted to the camps, like Okaukuejo, Halali, Namutoni etc., and to the park roads & parking spots at the waterholes (you can again look it all up in the Etosha map PDF). The Park, outside the camps, is only open to visitors between sunrise & sunset, which means that at night you will either be staying inside the Etosha camps or outside the Park altogether. Also

you'll explore the Park in your car and you're NOT allowed to walk in the Park outside the camps, except at a few picnic sites & toilet points. The animals are quite used to people in cars and fairly relaxed, but they are quickly alarmed if you step outside, so DON'T.

What does this mean for your photography? It means that your wildlife photography takes place on game drives mainly along the Park roads and at parking spots at the waterholes, from inside your car. Inside the camps you can photograph on foot. It also means that your photography is limited to the time between the opening and closing times of the camps and Park gates, which are displayed at the gates. They are very close to the sunrise and sunset times, which you can look up again in our sunset & sunrise table PDF, if you'd like.

There are a few **exceptions** again: There are organized night drives possible, by Namibia Wildlife Resorts, which you can book when you're staying at one of the camps. And of course, if you stay at the Etosha camps inside the Park, you can photograph at night inside the camp and at the flood-lit waterholes.

2. Your Daily Photographic Routine & Game Drives

In terms of your daily photographic routine & game drives we recommend this simple schedule: You'll have a **morning game drive** from sunrise until mid or late morning, then you return for a break and maybe have lunch. Around mid-afternoon you leave again for your **afternoon drive** and return at sunset, just before the gates close, then it's time for a break again. Or, if you stay at a camp inside Etosha for **sunset & night photography** at the camp's waterhole or just inside the camp. Or you go on one of the organized nightly game drives. We

recommend that you do a daily **image download & review**, which you could do sometime between sunset and bedtime. This is a normal photo routine that most wildlife photographers adhere to, mostly because this puts your photo time into the times with the best light.

However, there are **exceptions** again, when you should extend your photography into the hours with less optimal light. For example you can stay longer, if the weather is overcast, as firstly the contrast will be less hard and the animals will be active longer, which gives you more opportunities for interesting behavioral shots. You can also stay longer out, if the temperature is quite cool, as the animals will also stay active longer into the day or earlier in the afternoon. Although the light is not optimal for great portraits or group images, it's worthwhile to look out for interesting action shots.

We also strongly recommend that you do some **research BEFORE each GAME DRIVE**, so that you don't go on a 'wild goose chase' all over Etosha and waste your precious time. First you should find out, if there has been something exciting happening, such as a lion kill. We've written about several ways of how to get the 'daily news of the bush' in our '7 Tips to Find & Photograph Wildlife in Etosha', which you may have read already, if not it's included as a PDF.

The best ways are to check in the sightings book at each of the Etosha camps, in the tourist office or at the reception, what's been happening in the vicinity of the camp and of course to talk to people, other tourists, tour guides etc. They are mostly very keen to share their exciting sightings. But, and this is very important, the sighting has to be either a

fresh sighting of something that is relatively short-lived or, if it's a sighting that's hours or a day old, it should be a sighting of something that lasts longer.

Let me explain this: A fresh sighting of something short-lived would be for example the sighting of a cheetah patrolling the plains near Salvadoria from half an hour ago. If you headed there straight away it's quite possible that you'll find the cheetah, either still patrolling or drinking at Salvadoria waterhole or resting in the shade. This is a sighting that's promising for you. If this sighting was six hours old or from yesterday it's not worthwhile pursuing as the cheetah will have moved on already.

The other news that's worth following up on is the sighting of something that lasts longer. If someone has reported seeing a lion on a zebra kill this morning it's worthwhile to head there on your afternoon drive. A zebra kill is something that can last for hours, if not days, depending on the number of lions feeding on it. On a very large carcass, such as an elephant for example - elephants sometimes die in Etosha from the disease anthrax - there will be a succession of animals feeding on it over several days. At first there may be lions or hyenas, then there will be jackals trying to steal bits whenever the larger predators are not looking or are gone. And finally you'll also get vultures joining in the feeding frenzy. This will all present you with plenty of chances for great images and it's a great sighting that you could visit repeatedly.

So after having inquired about the latest 'bush news' you should plan your game drive as follows:

PLAN A: if you know about an interesting sighting, go straight there

PLAN B: if there are no special sightings you know of, in the dry season: head for the waterholes, where you'll find your favorite animal species. In the rainy season: head for the animals' favorite grazing areas. Refer to our 'Etosha Road Map' and the 'Best Etosha Waterhole Sightings Map' (PDF).

There are a few important **TIPS** we would like to give you for your **ETOSHA GAME DRIVES:**

- Drive slowly, less than 30 km/hour
- Plan your route realistically, considering the speed & stops
- Bring enough water & snacks so you can stay on if you encounter something special
- Take time to observe the animals
- Be patient & wait at the waterholes for things to happen, it's often worth it

You'll greatly improve your chances of **predator sightings** if you:

- Look out for patrolling predators especially on your morning drives
- Check with binoculars along the edges of shrubs & under trees for predators that are on the prowl or just taking a nap
- Watch the animals for 'suspicious' behavior, like we mentioned in our '7 tips' eBook, for example when animals stand stiff & stare in one direction and in addition may emit whistling or barking sounds; this is usually an indication that they've spotted a predator.

Once you're done with your day's photography, or if you're overly keen also in between game drives, it's time for your **IMAGE DOWNLOADS.**

Download your images to your laptop and back it up to the external drive you brought, or, if you didn't bring a laptop, download the images directly to each of the external hard drives with built-in card readers. If you brought a laptop review and evaluate your images and consider ways to improve them on your next game drive. Delete the really 'bad' shots to make space and finally format the memory card or cards of your camera to clear and empty all images.

Now let's talk about your

3. Photo Gear Settings for best wildlife shots

Wildlife isn't usually very patient. You'll often only have a few seconds for taking a great shot, then they move on and your opportunity is gone forever. Therefore we advise you to have a few things set up and in place so that you can act quickly and capture these precious moments. Firstly, preset your camera and lens settings, we'll talk about it in a moment, secondly, keep your camera and main lens next to you, best covered with the cloth you've brought, thirdly, keep your car windows down (on both sides), fourth, be ready to stop your car at any time and switch off the engine before taking an image.

Let's talk in detail about pre-settings as we've mentioned. We recommend that you **pre-set your camera & lens settings** at the start of your game drive, so that if you stumble across a great sighting just outside the park gate you'll be able to capture it right away.

We recommend the following **camera settings**:

- Preset your camera mode to Aperture Priority, we talk about this just now, and set it to your smallest f-stop or widest aperture of your lens e.g. f /2.8 or f/4
- Preset the ISO so that you'll have a fast enough shutter speed of at least 1/800 sec at your smallest f-stop for some unexpected action. (The ISO setting you choose is dependent on the available light at the time)
- Select the continuous shooting mode and set it to the highest frame rate per second, your capture speed
- Select autofocus, use the 'non-tracking focus mode' with a small focus area size in the centre of your viewfinder

If you do this, you'll be ready for action at any time!

We want to quickly remind you of the **rule of thumb** for the shutter speed for hand-held photography to avoid unsharp photos. We've talked about it in Module 3. As we've said your shutter speed should at least be equal to the focal length of your lens, meaning that when you photograph with a 500 mm lens you need to have at least a 1/500 sec at the smallest f-stop (widest aperture) to avoid camera shake. If you use modern image stabilization you can work with a 2 to 5 stops slower shutter speed. But for action shots, no matter whether you use image stabilization or not, you need a much higher shutter speed to freeze the action in a sharp image, for example a 1/1600 sec or higher.

Let's also quickly recap on the **basics on lens aperture (f-stop)**, so that everything makes sense to you. With newer cameras/lenses you select the f-stop in camera. Your smallest f-stop, for example f/ 2.8, opens the

lens aperture the widest, letting in the most light. The consequence is that you'll get a small depth of field, but a faster shutter speed is possible. On the other hand your largest f-stop number, e.g. f/22, closes the lens aperture the most, letting in the least light. The consequence is that you'll get a large depth of field and greater detail in your image, but this slows your shutter speed as you'll have less light coming in.

Now to your **lens & lens pre-settings**: either put your image stabilization ON, if you want to handhold your camera or put your image stabilization OFF, if you use your camera on a bean-bag, for example if it's too heavy with your long lens to be handheld. For your wildlife photography in Etosha use your longest lens: a telephoto lens with a focal length of 300 mm or longer. If you happen to have brought two camera bodies, use one with your longest lens, and the other with a shorter lens. This is practical in that you don't have to change lenses if you want to take wider shots. Set your camera/lens to the smallest f-stop (widest aperture) to allow for the fastest shutter speed for unexpected action. But this is just your pre-setting for the start. You'll want to adjust your settings to specific situations as they occur and we'll talk about this just now.

But let's first refresh the theoretical background of the ideal exposure. There is the **exposure triangle**, meaning that the exposure of your image is made up of a combination of these 3 settings: your ISO setting, which determines your sensor's light sensitivity; the f-stop, which determines the aperture width and therefore how much light gets to the sensor and what's your depth of field, and lastly, the shutter speed,

which determines how long the shutter is open and let's light in, and thus also the chance of camera shake and of motion blur during that time.

As a photographer your **ideal image requirements** are a low ISO for least image noise - remember from module 3 the higher the ISO the more noise you get. You may also want a great depth of field for more detail and you may want a fast shutter speed for sharp images. All in all, since all three are interconnected, you often have to settle for a compromise. As we've said, the best light in Etosha & the rest of Namibia is in the early morning and late afternoon, when you have low light conditions.

Under these **LOW LIGHT conditions** you need to settle for the following compromise: You need to choose a higher ISO, meaning you'll have more digital noise. You also must choose the widest aperture to get a fast enough shutter speed, meaning you will have a narrow depth of field as a consequence, and precise focusing is needed. Because remember, if your shutter speed is too slow, you will have motion blur and camera shake. In general, wildlife photographers require foremost sharp images, therefore a wider aperture and a higher ISO are selected to get a fast shutter speed.

We therefore recommend that you put your settings on '**aperture priority**'. With 'aperture priority mode' you need to select 2 of 3 settings in the exposure triangle: you select the f-stop (determines the depth of field) and you select the ISO (determines the light sensitivity). The

camera then selects the appropriate shutter speed for a correctly exposed image. We recommend this because 'aperture priority mode' gives you more options to get correctly exposed images than shutter priority mode, especially in very low light or very bright light conditions.

The best **order of priority** for choosing your **camera & lens settings** is:

1. Select the widest aperture under low light conditions or your desired setting when enough light is available
2. Select a higher ISO under low light, and as low as possible a setting when enough light is available
3. Check the shutter speed and if it's not fast enough, increase the ISO or widen the aperture if still possible

We would like to mention that a small f-stop (a wide aperture) and therefore a small depth of field is often desirable in wildlife photography as it puts the focus on the animal with the background being out of focus and less distracting. But at the same time know that precise focusing on the eye is required, especially when using very long lenses for portraits.

So now, after our excursion into some theory let's get back to your game drive in Etosha. When you photograph animals in Etosha, you'll need to anticipate the '**action level of their behavior**', because your shutter speed mustn't be slower than their movement and you must adjust your settings accordingly. Let's start with **LOW LIGHT** situations, just before sunset & just after sunrise.

1. When you photograph **passive animals**, and you expect slow action and a low risk of motion blur, such as with resting lions, start out by

selecting your smallest f-stop (widest aperture) and set your ISO as required to get a fast enough shutter speed to avoid camera shake. When you've got time go higher with your ISO and play around with different f-stops to experiment with your depth of field. Select a single shot frame rate, as you don't expect action, and select your 'non-tracking focus mode' with a small focus area size positioned where the face will be in the composition.

2. When you expect **slowly moving animals to medium action**, with a medium risk of motion blur, for example when you photograph a walking or yawning lion, you need a faster shutter speed of at least a 1/800 sec to get a sharp image. Therefore, set a smaller (or the smallest) f-stop and a higher ISO according to the most appropriate shutter speed. One useful technique for photographing moving animals is to pan with the movement & focus on the eye and head. Select continuous shooting mode and a high frame capture rate and select the 'non-tracking focus mode' and a small focus area size where the face will be in the composition. And finally,

3. if you expect and want to photograph **fast moving animals**, and fast action bears the high risk of motion blur e.g. when a springbok is pronking, that means it jumps in fast & large jumps, then you need a very fast shutter speed e.g. 1/1600 seconds or faster. So set your f-stop to your smallest setting (which is your widest aperture) and the ISO as high as necessary for the desired shutter speed. Always remember that sharp images are the most important, which requires a fast enough shutter speed to freeze the expected action. Select continuous shooting mode at the highest frame capture rate and select your 'continuous focus tracking mode' and this time with a medium focus area size, not a

small one, where the face will be in the composition, because we don't want to lose the focusing with this fast speed.

There are exceptions for point 2 and 3, when you want artistic motion blur, that means you want to show action with a deliberate blur, like in this image of a moving zebra. This is a more difficult and advanced technique, where some experimentation is needed. What you need to do is the following: use a slow shutter speed for these partly unsharp images of less than 1/30 sec, pan your camera with the moving animal, keep the focus on the eye and head, and keep your panning motion as fluent and horizontal as possible. It's tricky to get a good result, and many tries may be needed, but you can get very creative results. And it's usually only possible with very low light in Etosha, because in normal day light in Etosha, you may not be able to get a shutter speed as low as 1/30 sec or lower without overexposing.

And lastly, let's talk about your **settings for various action levels** of animals, when you do have **FAST LIGHT**, such as later in the morning, during midday and early in the afternoon. At these times enough light is available, so you can choose the setting that results in the best image quality, but still allows for sharp images. Choose your f-stop so you get your desired depth of field. Select the lowest ISO possible for the least noise, and that is appropriate for the action speed and the necessary shutter speed to freeze the action. Select continuous shooting mode at a high frame capture rate during medium to fast action and select the most appropriate focus mode depending on the action, as we've talked about before.

This has been Module 6: Wildlife Photography In Etosha - Your Photographic Routine & Photo Gear Settings for best wildlife shots

Now we would like you to take action:

- Download and read the '7 Tips' ebook
- Download and read the 'Sunrise – Sunset Table' PDF
- Re-read your camera manual to understand all settings
- Download and read the 'Photo Gear Setting Summary Sheet' PDF

Thanks for listening & see you over at Module 7