



TAKE BETTER PHOTOS IN NAMIBIA

A step-by-step Online Training Course

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MODULE 5: WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY IN ETOSHA

Inside knowledge of where to find & photograph wildlife

In this module you'll learn:

- The Insider's knowledge that's crucial to your photographic success
- Understanding the wildlife's seasonal & daily habits
- and the knowledge & strategies on how to find & photograph Etosha's wildlife

Etosha is a natural system & highly dynamic. With an estimated 65000 large mammals that are free to roam in an area of over 22,000 km², it can be somewhat difficult & unpredictable to find the animals. Whilst expecting surprises on your game drive is also part of the magic & thrill in a wilderness, you would want to predict as much as possible to make sure you'll capture stunning images. Therefore knowledge is king! When you understand the preferences & habits of Etosha's wildlife, it's going to be much easier for you to make great encounters happen. This is what this chapter is all about.

1. Environmental preferences of Etosha's wildlife

We know that where Etosha's wildlife hangs out is determined a lot by their feeding habits. For one we have **herbivores** (plant eaters), which are divided into grazers (grass eaters) and browsers (leaf eaters).

The main **grazers** are zebra, springbok, wildebeest & gemsbok, and you find them mainly on the grass plains of Etosha. Other grazers are red hartebeest and eland, which are less abundant, and hang out rather in shrub & tree savannah. If you want to see where in Etosha these grass plains and bush areas are, look it up on the Etosha Road Map, where we've indicated the main vegetation types.

The **browsers** of Etosha are giraffe, kudu, impala and also elephants & rhinos. You find them mainly in shrub and tree savanna. Aagain you'll find them on the map.

Etosha's **predators** (the meat eaters) are lion, cheetah, leopard, spotted hyaena and jackal (the black-backed jackal). They are mainly where their prey animals, all the herbivores, are hanging out, preferably in larger numbers.

The last group is the **scavengers**, which feed on dead animals. It's mainly the spotted hyena and jackals again, plus vultures, mostly white-back vultures & leopard-face vultures, that you find wherever there is a carcass. They also often hang out close to large predators, especially lions, hoping for a chance to get a bite of a fresh kill.

By the way, a gallery of images of each of these species is also included in the Etosha Road Map, so you can look them up if you like. This knowledge of what the wildlife feeds on is a reliable guideline of where to find the various animal species in the Park.

There are some exceptions, we want to mention. The first is that herbivores need to drink regularly, thus walking to and back from

waterholes to the feeding areas may take them through vegetation types that they normally avoid & do not feed in. So don't be confused when you see a wildebeest in the bush, and think it's all nonsense what we taught you ;-), this wildebeest is mostly just crossing, and maybe just nibbling here and there a bit. Grazers will also look for grazing in shrub & tree savanna, especially during the hot dry season, when food becomes scarce. And browsers like giraffe are sometimes searching the short grass plains for animal bones that they chew on to get more calcium minerals, so don't be surprised when you find them on the grass plains.

In addition to their environmental preferences, Etosha's wildlife also has seasonal habits.

2. Seasonal habits of Etosha's wildlife

We've talked about the distinct changes between the rainy season & dry season in Namibia already. In Etosha the seasons are THE driving force and we're going to talk about this now. But before we dive in, we would like to refer you to our book 'Etosha. Rhythms of an African Wilderness', where you will also find great information & more photographs on this theme. We've included a PDF of the book in the course.

Let's talk about the **rainy season** in Etosha first, which lasts from **January to April**. In the rainy season rain falls in individual storms, not daily but spread out and not the entire day, but mostly in the afternoon or evening. The plants react quickly and within days often there is green grass and fresh leaves on shrubs & trees.

Etosha now is a paradise on earth for both **grazers & browsers**. There is enough food, enough water, they are relieved from the constant need to get enough to eat which is their main drive in the dry season. At the

beginning of the rainy season many herbivores , and predators like jackal & hyena, give birth to their offspring, as it's a good start for a life now. By the end of the rainy season the herds on the plains and in the bush may count numerous young animals.

In the rainy season many grazers migrate to the open grass plains between Okaukuejo, Okondeka & M'bari, which have only water now in the rainy season. They feed anywhere & drink anywhere, as now there are rain water pools everywhere, at least in a normal rainy season. They don't undertake major daily walks between food & water, as they have in the dry season - we're going to talk about this just now - and this is very important: they don't hang out and don't gather in high concentrations at perennial waterholes.

Predator and scavengers follow plant eaters to their preferred feeding areas and do not hang out around permanent waterholes any more, as there are hardly any prey animals drinking there.

In the **dry season**, from **May to December**, things are quite different in Etosha. Between May and August, the plants become progressively dryer, as the rain has stopped , but there are still cool nights and just warm, not yet hot, days. But from September to December the plants become extremely dry as you get hot to very hot days and warm nights.

This means, that the **plant eaters** have to walk further as food becomes sparser and they drink more & more often as their plant food becomes dryer. They visit the perennial waterholes regularly and gather at the waterholes in high concentrations, especially from September to

November, during this hot & dry season. This is the time when it becomes very hard for the herbivores.

But now **predators & scavengers** have an easier time to catch prey as they just hang out near waterholes where the game comes in to drink daily.

Sometimes this very hot & hard time is broken briefly in November & December, when local & individual rain storms are possible. If they happen this draws the wildlife temporarily away to the areas where the rain has fallen, but it's highly unpredictable.

At this point we'd like to mention that we designed a special Etosha Map for you, which we call the 'Best Etosha Waterhole Sightings Map' and it's available as a PDF again. Here we indicate at which Etosha waterholes you mostly find which charismatic animals in the dry season, in which direction you will photograph, which waterholes are great sunrise or sunset waterholes, which are very scenic waterholes and also which animal sightings you get at night at the Etosha camp' waterholes.

3. Daily habits of Etosha's wildlife

Understanding what's going on during the different seasons is the foundation, but knowing about the daily habits of Etosha's wildlife is knowing where to find the best opportunities for getting great images during every part of each day.

In the **rainy season**, as we've heard, most herbivores are more relaxed and have no drinking routine, food is in abundance and rainwater pools are everywhere to be found. The consequence is that the herbivores' days are made up of a loose mixture of relaxing, feeding, snoozing,

drinking & playing, without a very fixed routine as in the dry season (we'll talk about this just now).

Generally in Etosha all animals, herbivores, predators & scavengers included, will be more active in the morning and in the afternoon, and less active during the hottest midday hours. But during rainy weather at midday and in general when the temperatures are cool the animals may be more active than usual, even predators.

For your **DAILY PHOTOGRAPHIC STRATEGY during the RAINY season**, this means:

- visit the animals at rainy season feeding areas early morning & late afternoon
- stay with them as much as possible
- if it's cloudy photography is also possible during midday hours
- if you find herbivores with young, stay with them as long as possible to get more photo opportunities – you won't be disappointed
- if you find predators always try to stay with them as long as you can

But now to the **daily habits of Etosha's wildlife** in the **dry season** between May and December. Most animals DO have a very clear daily routine based on their need to drink regularly, which you can make use of to get specific behavioral images. We now walk you through the typical day of each of the main species of Etosha, so you'll know when and where you can photograph various activities. We've also compiled a table with this info, called the 'Daily Activity Table for Etosha's wildlife in the dry season' which is available as a PDF again.

Let's first talk about the **grazers (springbok, zebra, wildebeest, gemsbok) and browsers (giraffe, kudu & impala)**. Grazers and browser have very similar daily habits, the only difference is that grazers usually gather in much larger numbers in herds and at waterholes than browsers do. Grazers also prefer grassland habitats and not shrub & tree savannah areas as the browsers, as we've said before.

The daily habits of Etosha's **grazers and browsers** are as follows:

- at sunrise until mid morning (from about 6h00 - 9h00) they usually feed and start moving to the waterholes;
- from mid morning until late morning (between about 9h00 and 11h00) most animals are arriving at the waterholes to drink in large numbers. You get the highest animal concentrations usually between 10 and 12 o'clock and in the month of September and October.
- between late morning and late afternoon (from about 11h00 to 16h00) the animals rest, and they will have longer resting times with the progressing dry season and increasing heat.
- from the late afternoon to sunset, that means from 16h00 to sunset, they will feed, take their last drink at the waterholes and then purposefully move away from the waterholes to avoid predators.

Now let's talk about **elephants**. When elephants are feeding in the shrub & tree savanna areas they are mostly not visible from the roads. But sometimes they can be seen when they are close to the roads, especially in August when they feed on Acacia shrubs that have flowers.

Elephants drink very regularly in the dry season at the permanent waterholes, but not necessarily daily. When we talk about the daily habits of elephants we have to distinguish between individual bulls or bull groups and elephant herds with young ones, because they have different habits.

Individual bulls & bull groups often visit waterholes throughout the day or in the early evening. They also hang out at certain waterholes during midday, see the 'Best Etosha Waterhole Sightings Map' again. There, drinking and other behavior and interaction shots are possible at any time, but remember the best light times (more in the next modules). Bull groups are usually very relaxed with little action taking place, but sometimes older bulls are challenged by rivals which may result in rare confrontations.

Elephant herds with females & youngsters love to visit waterholes often at the end of a hot day, but may also visit at any time of the day or at night. This is dependent on how far their feeding areas are away from permanent waterholes. There are great images possible of all behaviors at a waterhole, we talk about this in the next modules, but again remember the best light times. At a waterhole the herds are often joined by large bulls and different herds often get together at the same time, then you may get 50 to 70 elephants together at a waterhole and great photo opportunities.

The next animal you'll certainly be interested to photograph is the **black rhino**. We'd like to mention that there are also white rhinos in the Park, which were reintroduced, but actually very few. There are no differences

regarding the photography of both species, so we stay with the black rhino now.

Black rhinos are day and night active, but will rest during the midday hours, and also take long rests during the night. They are feeding in the shrub and tree savanna areas and are therefore mostly not visible, but sometimes they are seen close to the roads when feeding on Acacia shrubs, or when they are crossing grass plains to nearby bush areas. Rhinos drink very regularly in the dry season at Etosha's permanent waterholes, but not necessarily daily. They often drink in the late afternoon, when there is best light for photography, but mostly at night or very early in the morning. The rest camps in Etosha have flood-lit waterholes that are fantastic to observe rhinos and elephants drinking at night.

Now let's talk a bit about the daily routines of Etosha's **predators** like the **lion, cheetah, leopard, spotted hyena** and **jackal**. As we've said already predators follow their prey animals to a certain extent, and are mostly not far away from where large numbers of prey species congregate. Predators are also territorial and will defend their areas against other groups or individuals of their own species, and lions will actively chase and sometimes kill competing predators of other species. All predators are opportunistic, and if prey walks past very closely while they are resting during midday for example, they may very well take the opportunity to hunt, especially if they are very hungry.

First we want to tell you a bit about the daily habits of Etosha's **lions**. Lions are mostly night active and may cover over 20km per night during

their hunts. They are partly day-active on cloudy and cooler days, or when the hunger forces them to hunt longer. Great sightings of lions at night are again possible at the flood-lit waterholes inside Etosha.

During the day Etosha's lions are usually only active from sunrise until the early morning, and from the late afternoon until sunset. They often take an early drink after a nightly hunt for prey, or before their night action starts, and the males often spend time patrolling and marking their territory. Lions often hunt during this time, especially in the early morning, if a nightly hunt did not result in any kills, and they also love to socialize with pride members, especially when they are well fed and when they have young.

The rest of the day, from early morning over midday until late afternoon, lions in Etosha mostly rest and sleep in the shade, the hotter it is the earlier and longer the resting time. And even though the light is not so good then, you'll still have good photo opportunities (which we'll talk more about in the coming modules).

Contrary to the night active lion, **cheetah** are mostly day active. They will drink at any time during the morning or late afternoon, and also patrol and mark their territory. They will also actively hunt during this time, often in small family groups along the edges of the savanna and grassland, along the Pan's edge and on open grass plains. From the late morning to midday until late afternoon cheetah are mostly resting, the hotter it is, the longer the resting time. And we want to mention that resting cheetah are not easy to spot. But cheetah are also opportunistic and will hunt even during the hottest hours if a very promising chance of making a kill presents itself. However, because of a high number of lions

and hyenas in Etosha, cheetah often lose a kill to their competitors, when these become aware of a cheetah kill.

The most elusive predator in Etosha is the **leopard**. It is also night active, like the lion, and much less seen in Etosha. It rests and hides during most of the day. Sunrise until early morning, and late afternoon until sunset are nearly the only times to see and photograph leopards in Etosha. They take quick drinks at waterholes, check out the 'Best Etosha Waterhole Sightings Map' again for the best waterholes to see them, and they carefully look out for prey and danger such as lions, which are their main food competitors. You may be lucky to see a leopard hunting at these times, and your best chances to see a leopard are at the flood-lit waterholes at night, mainly at Halali & Namutoni, rarely at Okaukuejo.

The **spotted hyena** is another predator you'll see in Etosha. They are social group animals that are mostly active at night but also during early morning and late afternoon. The rest of the day they sleep in burrows and thick vegetation or under road culverts. Sunrise until early morning, and late afternoon until sunset are the best times to see and photograph hyenas, especially at or close to waterholes. They are always on the look-out for carcasses, but also hunt themselves. They also follow lions to scavenge on what remains of their kill's carcass and they are often seen at the camps' flood-lit waterholes at night.

The last predator we'll talk about is the **black-backed jackal**, which is night and day active. During the midday hours they often sleep in their dens or in the shade of bushes, and are difficult to see. From sunrise

until mid morning, and from mid afternoon until sunset it's the best times to see and photograph jackals, often also close to waterholes. Jackals are always on the look-out for carcasses, also follow large predators to get a piece of their kill and will look for opportunities to hunt themselves, usually small animals like ground squirrels. They are also often seen at the flood-lit waterholes at night and even inside the camps where they search for left-over food from us visitors.

So now that you know about the daily habits of Etosha's animals, what is **your DAILY PHOTOGRAPHIC STRATEGY during the DRY season?**

We suggest that:

- you visit the animals you'd like to photograph at their dry season habitats especially in the early morning & late afternoon
- focus on the waterholes and the areas around the waterholes
- ideally decide on which animal species you'd like to find and photograph in the morning and afternoon photographic settings, but of course be flexible when other opportunities present itself

This has been Module 5: Wildlife Photography In Etosha - Inside knowledge of where to find & photograph wildlife.

Now we would like you to take action:

- Read or re-read the eBook "Etosha. Rhythms of an African Wilderness" & download it
- familiarize yourself with the Etosha Road Map to get a good feeling for the roads, waterholes and vegetation types of Etosha

- study the 'Best Etosha Waterhole Sightings Map', which gives you great info regarding your photographic opportunities at the waterholes, and last
- look at & print out the 'Daily Activity Table for Etosha's wildlife in the dry season'

Thanks for listening & see you again at Module 6