

King of the mountains

Duncan Parker has waded through leech-infested waters and braved precipitous climbs to capture the world's most elusive animals on film. Here he tells all about life behind the lens





This was the unforgettable moment the team behind *Planet Earth II*'s 'Mountains' episode realised that they'd captured a world first: footage of snow leopards mating. 'We were so excited when we saw it,' says camera operator Duncan Parker. 'It's hard to get any footage of snow leopards at all, so getting the first-ever sequence of them mating? That felt incredible. I love this photo because it shows the often unsung heroes of the piece: the sherpas, spotters, trackers and guides.'

As Parker points out, you can't just show up on location in Ladakh, India, and expect to find an animal so elusive it's known as 'the mountain ghost'. Local trackers provided a treasure trove of information. 'They would say to us, "The leopard rubs its cheek here once every fortnight" or "They jump from this rock to this rock." It takes decades to build up this intimate knowledge,' he says. Parker was thankful for his climbing background. 'We were tracking the snow leopards up mountain passes, shuffling along tiny ledges a foot wide, above a 300m drop, with big heavy packs on our backs.' ▶





Camera traps capture incredible scenes. That's what we used to film the snow leopards. Camera traps are triggered to film or shoot when they detect movement, grabbing footage or stills of animals mating, fighting, marking

territory or caring for their young. Scenes we would never, ever get otherwise. When setting them up at the site, I'm meticulous about the settings, the positioning, whether they're going to have the best use of light. I quadruple-check everything. You'll often leave them there for six months, so you want to get it right. There's now even a smartphone device and app called Triggertrap that turns your phone into a camera trap. You can get great low-angle shots of birds taking flight from bird tables, or of urban foxes snuffling around the lens. Remember to put a completely waterproof casing on your phone.

Contact the experts. We talk to international experts on the particular animal we're filming. If you're shooting in an American national park such as Yosemite, the rangers should be your first port of call. Politely grill them before you even think about picking up your camera.

A mosquito bite can be a big problem in the jungle. Such a tiny ailment, but when you're five days' trek from the nearest medical facility, it

can become a really worrisome wound if it gets infected. Similarly, leeches seem so insignificant, but you can come home from a trek through deep forest looking for bears, and find 50 of them on your feet. Despite wearing leech socks! In the jungle, you need to dab every single tiny cut with iodine to stave off infection. The little things can become big things. Another tip for shooting in the mountains is to sacrifice shooting time for getting altitude-ready. If you rush up to the summit, you'll get altitude sickness, which is potentially life-endangering. Take. Your. Time.

Get closer

- Do a 'knowledge recce' without a camera, before any wildlife shoot.
- Trust is built slowly. Don't erect your hide right next to an animal's habitat straightaway. Get closer and closer, as they grow more comfortable.

Sometimes the locals shame you with their hardiness. When I was filming *Wild Japan* on the Okinawa Islands, we were honoured to be able to film the elders sea snake hunting – a tradition that's dying out. We went to the water's edge and these two 72-year-old women were giggling at us. There we were, wearing thick wellies and thick gloves, while they were barefoot

and bare-handed. The team and I watched, open-mouthed, as they plucked the deadly reptiles from the water as if it were nothing. You die within 20 minutes if you're bitten by a sea snake – no doctor can save you. It was pretty funny, us standing back in our protective gear, out-braved by these women the same age as our grandmothers.

My golden rule is to leave things as I found them. I trained in conservation, which furnished me with a background on wildlife tracking, field craft and

A first for the Siberian tiger

This was taken while filming *Operation Snow Tiger*. The mother had been killed by poachers, so we tracked the orphaned cub and saved it. It wouldn't have survived on its own. The cub was later released back into the wild successfully, the first time that had ever been done.

Tell a story with your images

Photos can shine a light on important issues. This shot may be beautiful, but it shows how 90 per cent of the forest in Madagascar has been lost. With landscapes, I tend to do long exposures with wide-angle lenses on tripods. This paints in the image, giving it more depth.

If serendipity strikes, be ready

I got this shot by accident. I was in a hide in Peru trying to film capuchins cracking nuts open. I must have disturbed this anteater from its slumber because it shuffled out and looked at me, startled, for a few heartbeats. Maybe I was the first person it had ever seen. I was just as surprised to see it, but I managed to take the shot. It was a lovely moment when we locked eyes.



how not to disturb fragile habitats. While filming *Expedition Burma*, we used solar panels and batteries, rather than fuel-powered generators. Not only is this more environmentally friendly, it also helped us be more stealthy, since hydrogen fuel cells are silent. I always bring batteries home from a shoot since you don't know for sure if the country you've been in will dispose of them properly.

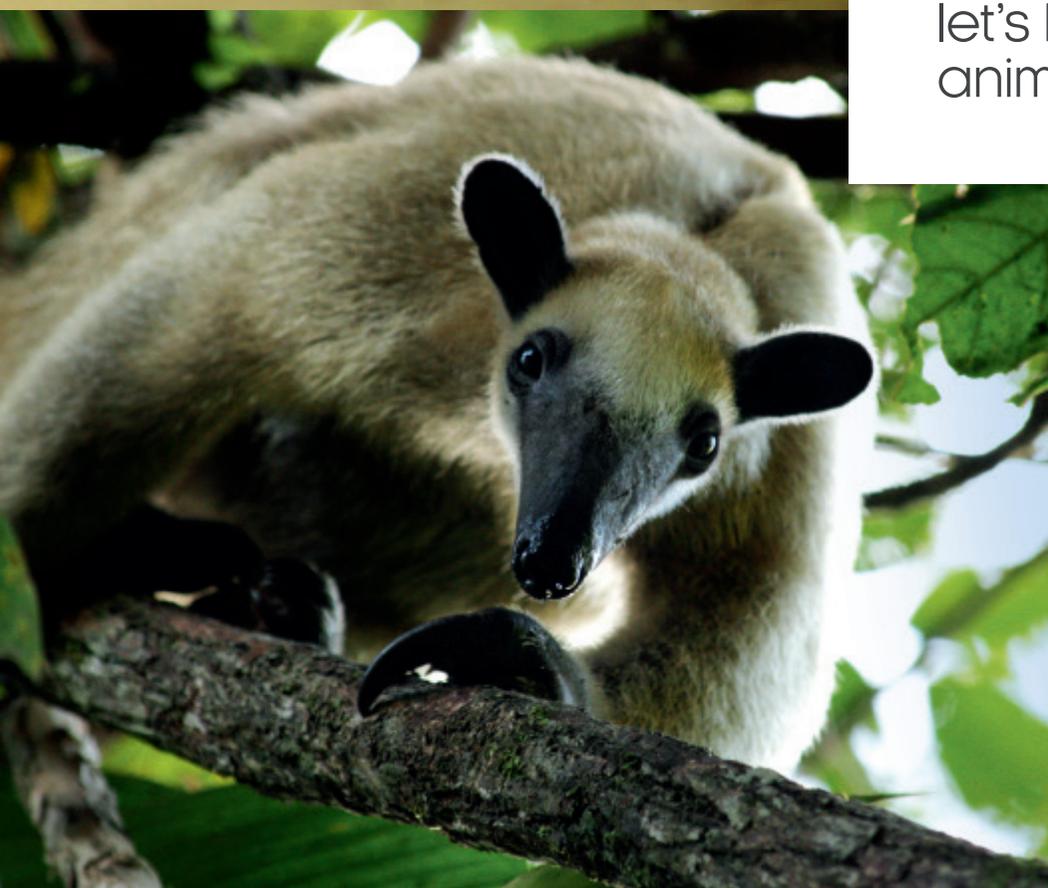
Adapters and vintage lenses are a godsend.

Top-performing camera lenses from Canon or Cooke can cost a fortune, putting them beyond the pocket of most beginner photographers. But you can pick up a set of vintage secondhand Olympus Zuiko lenses on auction sites for a steal. Back in the day, these lenses would have been the ultimate kit: they're very well crafted. You can get really beautiful cinematic looks with them, similar to what you get with a set of Cookes.

I wish more cameramen and photographers

would take home data, as well as spectacular footage or shots. Conservation-oriented films are gaining popularity because the general public now cares more, but we could go even further. I'd love to see more filmmakers working in tandem with conservation researchers, bringing home data about the health of habitats or population insights. It's not all about glossy images or lovely rushes of film. Instead of just watching, let's help keep these remarkable animals from extinction as well. For instance, we were recently in Namibia filming hyenas, which are pretty ugly and unpopular, but fascinating. They were living in a town among people in this dwelling that had been engulfed by a gigantic sand dune. Though the sequence was cut

'Instead of just watching, let's help keep these animals from extinction'



from the final edit, we gave the footage to a local research team, who are able to use it in their work.

I want the animals to be totally unaware of

me. It's about not unsettling them, as well as not unsettling their habitat. You want to be invisible. One morning in India sums this up for me. We'd gone out looking for elephants and were perched next to this lake, when we heard a deer alarm call nearby. Ten metres in front of us, we saw a beautiful male Siberian tiger, stock-still, staring at a herd of buffalo. He was so close we could see the hairs on his neck peel up as he surveyed his prey. He crouched there for three whole minutes, which felt like an eternity, before stalking off. We just tried to be as motionless as possible. The reason this morning stands out for me? He had no idea we were there. That made me feel incredibly privileged, to observe that powerful moment. Without disturbing it. That tiger will stay with me forever. 