

Andy Rouse's Shots of the Month

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Special note - Regular readers of NPN will know that I have a special relationship with Sri Lanka and so the events of the past few days have been very distressing indeed. The only thing that we can all do to help is to dig deep and give something to the organisations that are working on the relief effort. Personally we have made several donations and will be donating the fees from the first few NPN articles to these funds. If you feel that you can make a donation then these websites are for organisations that you can trust – www.msf.org (Medecines sans frontieres) and www.dec.org.uk (UK government central disaster fund). Andy

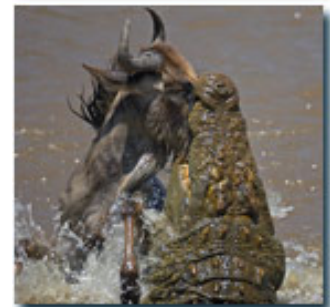
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I am very pleased to be back on NPN, and promise that I'll give you my very best work and lots of informative chat. For me 2004 was a very busy year, one that saw a lot of change in the industry. Many wildlife photographers found the increased competition and shrinking market (not to mention disappearing budgets) too much and several I know have taken alternative employment. 2005 promises to be equally tough and for me it will see an even greater change to the business at ARWP. I can't really tell you much about it this month, but next month you'll see details of a major project that I've been working on for the best part of a year. It's exciting and I'm bursting to tell you all about it, but that will have to wait. Photography wise I'm really going back to basics and having a heavy year photographing anything and everything that I can find. Foreign trips are already planned to the Falkland Islands (where I'll be when you are reading this), Alaska (twice), Europe (several), New Zealand, Florida (I'll be at PMA), Africa, Japan and finally Canada. In between that I've lots of plans this year to really improve my home collections, which are often overshadowed by my foreign stuff, and to generally just get out and about more like I used to. So all it remains for me to say is I hope that 2005 is a great year for you all and that you get the pictures you always dreamed of.

Undoubtedly the greatest show on earth, apart from The Cure live, is the annual wildebeest migration which passes through the Masai Mara. This spectacular event, played out over hundreds of miles with countless thousands of hooves, comes to an abrupt shuddering halt at the banks of the Mara and Talek rivers. Twice before I'd tried to capture the awesome spectacle of the river crossings and twice I'd quite simply been there a matter of days after the peak. Missing the drama of the massing throngs of wildebeest I was left with the odd group of bewildered zebra already commencing their return journey. The migration is a hit and miss affair and hopefully, armed with lessons learned from previous experience, I'd nail it good and proper this time. Here's an abridged version of my three weeks trying in 2004...

Wildebeest Junction

The wildebeest migration is a tale of life and death on the African plains. The migration is all about food; the wildebeest migrate to follow the seasonal rains and thus the supply of fresh nutrient rich savannah grass. The migration begins in Tanzania in March with the birth of the new calves; once they are strong enough the long trek north begins. Across the border into Kenya they walk, in long lines sometimes up to 10 miles long, until they reach the river crossings in the Masai Mara. Two wide flowing rivers stand in the way of the migration and natural fear has to be overcome to cross and reach greener pastures. But the instinctive desire for fresh grazing is a powerful one; one that they will risk their lives for.



The crossing points vary in size from a gently sloping bank to one at 60 degrees which they must jump to make it into the water. No crossing is the same, which I guess makes us keep coming back for more. All crossings are the same however when it comes to the behaviour of the wildebeest. They start gathering at the crossing point first thing in the morning and waiting by the river watching thousands of wildebeest gather up enough courage for the crossing is an amazing experience. The noise is almost deafening and the air filled with dust, as the wildebeest ebb and flow from the river's edge as if summoning up the courage to go. With more false starts than an Olympic sprint final, the wildebeest continually change position in an attempt to find the safest spot to cross.

At this time, it's vital for us photographers to hang back and wait away from the river as one unscrupulous driver can spoil the whole crossing for both the animals and ourselves. Don't forget the wildebeest are risking their lives with the crossing and the slightest doubt in their minds will make them abandon all attempts and try again another day. Disturbed too often and you are not only risking their lives during the crossing but are risking their lives on a long-term basis if they are late in reaching their chosen feeding grounds. Beware of greed to get those shots, we are after all observers and should not be responsible for changing the natural cycle of the events on the African plains.

Finally, however, one wildebeest will pluck up courage and make that all-important leap of faith into the torrent, triggering a huge increase in the volume of noise. More and more animals plunge in and as soon as wildebeest appear safely on our side of the river the engines start and it's a race to get in position. Options are limited as the needs of the wildebeest come first and we cannot cut off their path else the crossing will stop, so advance planning helps. With my driver John, we cased out the crossing points at quiet times, picking the best vantage spots and working out how to drive into them safely. In the heat of the moment, there would be no time for rational thought.

By the time we are in position, the water is awash with wildebeest and zebra, all fighting to reach the relative safety of the other side (lions often lie in wait for the tired individuals). Dust rises high into the midday sky, triggering animals to come running from all the surrounding hills to join the frenzy. They know that there is strength in numbers and now is their time to cross; because of this crossings can take well over an hour. It's a cliché I know but it is a photographers dream with countless great shots every few seconds.

The problem is that as an animal lover first I want to watch this spectacle with my eyes, rather than working like some machine to photograph it. I compromise, taking a few minutes here and there from my frantic photography to take in the scene, allowing my digital cameras to recover from the inevitable lockouts that I cause. I shoot with two cameras, my 1Ds and 1D MK2, attached to 500mm and 70-210 mm lenses. The longer lens is used to isolate individual animals whilst the zoom is used to record the sheer numbers of animals crossing and take in a wider-angle view. Generally, I shoot constantly with one camera until it locks out, then immediately pick up the other. My driver has control of the SmartDisk downloader and cards are thrown to him when either full or close to it; there is nothing worse than waiting for the last few images on a card to write before pulling it from the card slot. I'd rather change early than miss a shot. All this time I'm trying to think but the noise and sheer level of action means I shoot in a panic, all thoughts of composition goes out the window as I'm working purely on instinct.

Gradually the flow slows down and animals start to back away from the river, their crossing will have to wait for another day as the light fades and temperatures cool. I sit back, exhausted but elated at the amazing spectacle I have just witnessed and can't wait for the next one. The wildebeest, equally elated and relieved after their ordeal start to relax and feed, for them the worst days of the migration are over for a few months at least. Some however, will never see another day...

Crocodile Feast

The wildebeest have every reason to be scared of crossing the river; huge Nile crocodiles over 20 ft in length wait for them in the depths. The crocodiles were one facet of the migration that I really wanted to photograph. Although I found it emotionally quite shocking the reality is an essential part of the whole story of the migration. As a professional, I have to detach myself from situations like this so that I can record them to the best of my ability.



The crocodiles are ruthless killers, waiting for small groups of wildebeest to cross before they strike. When they see one in trouble or perhaps a youngster on its first crossing, they swim to cut off its path from the safety of the bank. It all happens in slow motion too; you can see the crocodile slowly closing in and the wildebeest frantically swimming to get out of the way. Sometimes they even succeed but mostly the outcome is always the same. The crocodile strikes violently, pushing the wildebeest into the air whilst it struggles to get a firm grip. The screams from the wildebeest, well, they are something that will stay with me for the rest of my life.

Fortunately, some do get away. We watched one determined adult wildebeest drag a crocodile that had hold half way across the river towards the safety of the bank. The life and death struggle happened right below our vehicle as the wildebeest refused to be dragged under and constantly prevented the crocodile from getting a firm grip. Grimly, they struggled until finally the wildebeest broke free, the wildebeest was too exhausted to move. So too was the crocodile, for a minute they stood staring at each other until the wildebeest finally struggled up the bank and away.

In all I watched 15 crossings; each was different and equally spectacular. However, something was missing, an angle that would show the migration in its true light and give me one of my most memorable African experiences. That angle was from the air; it was time to hire a plane...

AR-NPN 1153

Andy Rouse is a professional wildlife photographer based in the U.K. His professional credits include hosting the Discovery Channel's Wildlife Photographer TV series, and the publication of six books, including his soon-to-be-released *The DSLR Masterclass*. Andy's images are represented by NHPA and Getty Images and are sold worldwide. To learn more about Andy, check out his [NPN bio](#). To view more of Andy's work, visit his website at www.andyrouse.co.uk.

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