

Andy Rouse's Shots of the Month

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As you saw last month, the annual wildebeest migration is a spectacular event. I managed to get some great shots from the ground this year; there was another angle that I was keen to try – from the air. Getting aerial shots of the migration would allow me to tell the complete story of it, as I wanted to specifically photograph huge concentrations of animals crossing the plains.

I hired a plane. You'd be surprised how difficult it was to actually do it in Kenya. I emailed countless local air operators at the local airport but all were frighteningly expensive. I had the bright idea of speaking to an elephant scientist friend of mine who regularly took to the air for his research. A day later I was in touch with an experienced bush pilot named Harro, with a Cessna 206. Choosing the right plane for the job is important, you'll see why a little later that the 206 is the plane of choice.

Picking a good day to fly was also full of stress. I wanted to fly mid-morning, when the herds started to gather and there was the chance of a crossing. The problem was that we'd had several days of thunderstorms and to predict the weather a day in advance was a real gamble. As the end of the expedition approached, I knew that my time was almost up, so I took the plunge and arranged the plane for the next day. Fortunately, it dawned bright and clear and at 9 AM sharp a bright red Cessna dipped out of the sky and landed outside our lodge. I liked the pilot Harro straight away; he was friendly and knew exactly what I expected of him. When you're paying a few thousand dollars, it pays to be in control. Quickly we removed both back doors from the plane and turned the outside seat to face backwards. I would have a clear view straight down and backwards which is how I like to work from the air. It's practical too, as the wings and landing gear tend to get in the way of any photography. Safety is always an issue so in addition to my seatbelt I was tied firmly in place with a long piece of rope, which was in turn wrapped around the pilot's seat! Health and Safety, Kenyan style! Once I was set we all jumped in (clients included) and we were off, bumping down the runway for what seemed like an age before we were sky-born.

The plains looked beautiful below as we climbed to our minimum altitude of 1000 feet; this was necessary to avoid scaring the wildebeest and is a regulation of the national park. Twisting round in my seat, I could see ahead a group of wildebeest gathering for a crossing and motioned to Harro to circle the plane close by until they started to cross. We burned fuel for 10 minutes until without warning they started plunging across the river. Soon we were directly overhead, Harro tipped the plane over on its side and pulled back the throttle until the stall warning sounded; this put me in the perfect position for photography. One of the biggest mistakes that photographers make when shooting from the air is the air speed; whilst it may not look like you are moving fast relative to the ground, believe me you are. Therefore, you need to fly as slow as possible to allow an adequate shutter speed / aperture combination to be used. This ability gives the Cessna a great advantage over other aircraft for photography, if you can learn to ignore the stall warning screaming in your ear!

I chose to shoot AV between f8 and f11, this means that everything would be reasonably parallel to me if we kept up the acrobatic flying. Using ISO 200 I kept my shutter speed above 1/500th second, which was perfectly adequate to freeze all of the action. Composition, well that was another matter, one minute I'd have the crossing underneath me perfectly composed, the next I'd be jolted sideways by the rising thermals. One jolt took me half out of the plane; the much maligned rope saving me, as the seatbelt was about to give way. To get round this problem I shot as soon as an image presented itself in the viewfinder, making several passes over the crossing until I was satisfied that I had it in the can. I motioned to Harro to head out to the open plains and watched the



crossing wildebeest disappear into the distance.

I'd given Harro a list of shots to look for and one was a long line of migrating wildebeest. After a few minutes, he signalled downwards and banked the plane for me to look. There below me was a line of wildebeest in single file stretching at least 5km. Fighting the thermals, I tried my best to compose the image as I wanted it with the lines leading into one corner, but in the end just resigned myself to taking whatever I could grab.

Overall, we flew for three hours and I took in the region of 4 x 2GB worth of images. It has taken me about two weeks to edit and process them. Aerial shots present many challenges for lighting and composition. Most images just needed a little extra saturation or a tweak to the white balance here and there but some needed extensive cropping and resizing. Unfortunately, when I crop an image I cannot just leave it like that, it has to be resized up to 50MB for a commercial client to use. This takes time. I also took the step of converting some images to black and white for amusement. I'm not a naturally artistic photographer but do believe strongly in the medium of black and white, especially in nature photography. Of course for most subjects colour is better but for these aerial migration shots, a little black and white here and there really enhances the look of my collection as a whole. In case any of you are interested, I use the Lab Colour method for my black and white, using a simple S curve to bring out the black and enhance the moods.

So there ends my article on the migration this year, I hope that you enjoyed the experience and it gave you a flavour of being there. Of course it is really only half the story, since the predators that follow the migration for an easy meal are equally as important. However, I'll save that for another day.

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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