

## Andy Rouse's Shots of the Month

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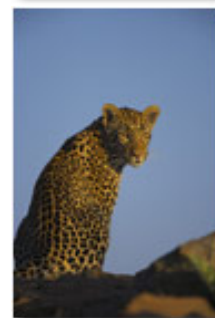
### Leopards

Something draws us all to cats. For some, like the tiger, it is their sheer power that fascinates humans, whilst others see a cheetah behaving in a similar manner to their domestic cousins; although perhaps not happily cleaning themselves on your new armchair. The leopard however is one cat that really evokes emotion within all of us; it is viewed as a creature of the night; a shadow in the grass, always lurking to pounce on the unwary. The leopard is a ghost, able to disappear at a moments notice right in front of your eyes, only to re-appear where you (and their prey) least expect it. This mystery and unpredictability draws me to leopards and few other cats instill such a feeling of achievement in me after a successful encounter and a gaining a nice selection of images. I've been working on Project Pardus for years now, slowly building up my collection of leopard images with the eventual goal of publishing the definitive book on the subject. If you check out my website you can see my progress so far, the African and Asian collections are starting to look really good but there are consistent challenges for me to try and document the rest of the *Panthera pardus* clan. By far the easiest (if you can ever call it that) leopard to photograph is one of the many sub-species on the African continent, and over the past few years I've spent a fair amount of time working with them. Getting great leopard pictures is simply a function of time, knowledge, and being able to convert a fleeting encounter into a stunning shot. Leopards require greater dedication than any other African big cat predator and most attempts to find them end in dismal failure and a long, unhappy drive home. Occasionally, I win and my patience, persistence, and downright determination can be rewarded by an audience with this most stunning of the big cats. I've just returned from one such privileged trip to South Africa, a week dedicated solely to leopards in one of the top leopard locations in the world. Here's how I got on...

### Wednesday

We arrive, my client and I, for a week of private photographic tuition, landing at a remote airstrip in the heat of the day. It's a beautiful camp, complete with satellite telephones, swimming pool and rooms that would be at home in the Hilton. Its clientele are exclusive, with a price to match, but I'm not interested in any of that, all I am here for are the leopards. The area holds probably the densest leopard population in the whole of southern Africa, and chances of daily sightings are good. First job is to unpack all the chargers, downloaders and digital paraphernalia that now accompany me on my travels, and within an hour everything is set up and ready.

3 PM arrives and we leave for our first foray into the surrounding bush. We quickly find a mating pair of lions, she is not quite ready yet, but he is flooded by testosterone and is very keen indeed. I know that with such lions it is a great opportunity for pictures so the hunt for leopards is temporarily suspended whilst we get some lovely interaction between them. But as time moves on we edge nearer the time of day which signals the start of the leopard activity period and we begin to comb the bush, looking for recent tracks and listening to the bush telegraph which might alert us to the presence of a leopard. Most animals are terrified of the leopard, and the merest glimpse or the briefest waft of scent on the wind, and they will give an alarm call to tell everyone else that the leopard is on the prowl. It's our best clue to the leopard's whereabouts, and we listen intently. The bush is alive with chatter, but free from alarm calls so we carry on driving. As the light falls we head into a rocky area and rounding a track I see a familiar shape on the side of a rock. In the fading light there is no mistake, I quietly tap the driver on the shoulder and we edge slowly closer to it. There is no place in leopard photography for haste, so we edge slowly up to the rock to see two 10



month old cubs and their mother reclining before us. They watch intently as we set up the gear, but the light is now too dark for daylight photography. I put the camera down and watched for a while, it was a beautiful scene, and I wanted to look at it with my own eyes unencumbered by the viewfinder. After an hour or so we left the leopards to it; the leopard safari has begun with a great success...

## Thursday

I'm awake early as excitement has kept my sleep to a minimum. At 6:30 AM sharp we head out into the biting cold of an African winter morning, the first mists are already rising over the river valley below. Baboons call from the nearby trees, happy to survive another night from the patrolling leopards and ready to soak up the first warming rays of the sun. Almost immediately an alarm call sounds across the valley, it's a Bushbuck so we know that a leopard may be nearby. Fresh tracks confirm our thoughts and we follow them slowly and carefully, all the time I'm getting the cameras ready for action and for even the briefest encounter. An hour later we are still following the tracks, it must be a male as they tend to patrol the edges of their territory incessantly; frequently scent marking along the way. Two more hours pass and the trail disappears into some rocks, by now it's hot and any leopard activity will be over until the evening when the temperatures plummet once more. Returning to the lodge, we find a herd of elephants bathing in the river; they rumble at us gently as we approach but they are local residents and almost oblivious of any approaching vehicles.

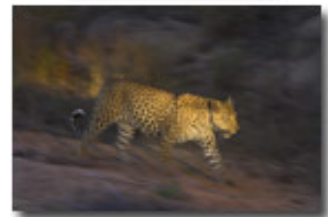
The afternoon comes and all is quiet until the last 20 minutes of daylight. Several alarm calls break the silence; we work with another vehicle to comb the area and are rewarded with a female leopard that stealthily emerges from the bush. She stares right down my lens; slowly I take a couple of exposures being careful not to move and potential scare her. An idiot in the other vehicle, with a new 1D MK2 for a toy, blasts away regardless and she hastily retreats back into the bush. I really hate this kind of photographer who has scant regard for their subjects; a kind of photographic trophy hunting and something that brings us all a bad name. The leopard moves down the bank and we get ahead of her, fighting continuously against the thick bush and the angle of the light. She gives us a few momentary opportunities then the fading light ends our foray.

## Friday

Today, we head straight for the rocks and find plenty of fresh tracks. A Klipspringer alarm call instantly gets our attention and we make a beeline for a small outcrop of rocks where they are standing. They are looking off to the right; my tracker sees the leopard straight away, the two cubs from before are sitting on some rocks warming themselves in the sun. Awesome! They are getting more independent day by day and the mother now routinely leaves them for a couple of days at a time whilst out hunting. They are supposed to keep quiet and stay hidden, as the area is full of Hyena, a potential and serious opponent of the leopard, but with the recklessness of the young they parade themselves on the rocks for all to see. We approach and park up at a distance, I much prefer to shoot with a long lens and have images of relaxed leopards than potentially stress them by getting too close. I'm rewarded with one of the best hours of leopard photography that I have ever had, perfect light, a beautiful setting and stunning cats. The downloader is constantly busy as I burn through cards, changing lenses to vary the composition and recording everything they do. When they interact together I'm there with my 500 to get in nice and tight; when parading on the rocks it's the job of the 300 and finally the 70-200 gets its turn for the wider habitat shot that I really love.

A distant cough from the bush ends the encounter, mother is calling them, and they race through the grass. We have no hope of keeping up and instead follow at a discreet distance, keeping them in sight at all times. In a hollow they greet their mother, out of sight of prying lenses, then she leads them for another hour with us following behind. I get some pictures and know that she is leading them to a fresh kill, the best is about to get a whole lot better. Then she emerges onto a track, the boundary of our reserve, and crosses straight over where we cannot follow. My heart sinks, she will be gone now for a few days, and we'll have to find another leopard to watch. Back at the lodge, I use RawShooter to edit all of today's work on my laptop, an essential task these days as it saves me days of editing time at home which I can ill afford. There are some real corkers there I can see and I create a second backup copy of them just in case!

The afternoon is quiet, we see all the usual suspects – Rhino, Kudu, Giraffe, and Lions, but the stunning activity of the morning has long gone. That evening we celebrate in the bar with traditional bush cocktails, a pint of beer and a crème de menthe. It feels good and we get progressively more inebriated as the evening progresses. Last year I watched a famous photographer and his tour



group in a Kenyan lodge all bring their laptops to the bar in the evening and proceed to talk about Photoshop and all kinds of technical drivel without a single mention of the animals that they had photographed during the day, whereas all we can talk about are the animals, albeit with increasingly slurred speech!

## Saturday / Sunday / Monday

A very quiet three days. We see leopards every day but they are either after dark or entering very thick bush. It's a frustrating turn of affairs but one that happens in the bush, you just have to keep trying and deal with it. I still pick up some beautiful shots of lions and the ever present Klipspringers, but my heart is really with the leopards. Monday evening - it all changes, we hear a definite alarm call whilst photographing a big male lion in the last rays of the sun. We race to the area and comb it carefully but nothing can be found, another alarm call further away tells us that the leopard is moving quickly and we head back to the track. On the way we have a disaster, a log sticks under the vehicle and refuses to budge. We jack the vehicle up but it still refuses to move, in the end our driver risks his life by crawling under the vehicle to heave it out. We're on our way again but by then we'd lost the light; the leopard is found and we follow her hunting for an hour after dark but that's our lot for the day.

## Tuesday

The last morning and it's the coldest. We're out very early and pick up fresh tracks straight away. As we stop to inspect them I pick up a movement in the bush out of the corner of my eye; a leopard is watching us from behind a termite mound. As we draw closer I can see that it is one of the cubs again, they have returned and are about to reward our patience. I work quickly with the light, shooting backlit and full frontal to make the most of the first red light of the morning. Over the next two hours we follow her every move, jumping up onto logs, sleeping and even catching a young bushbuck that mistakenly wandered into her path. It was a spectacular leopard encounter but the time eventually came to leave. As we drive off I watched the leopard recede into the distance and turned away with a real feeling of achievement. The trip had yielded some amazing sightings of leopards, with behaviour that I had never before witnessed let alone photographed. Safari is much about luck as knowledge and of course we had some rather quiet days, but everyone has these and that's what make going on safari so special – you quite simply never know what might be around the next corner or bush.

I hope that you've enjoyed this brief insight into our leopard safari; no words can really express the sights, sounds, and smells of the southern African bush. It is something that you must experience for yourself. We'll be returning for another dose of bespoke leopard photography with up to 4 photographing clients next year, so if you are interested in joining in our amazing experiences, simply sign up to our events mailing list on our website and be the first to hear of future announcements concerning private tuition tours. What next? Well, for the rest of the month I'll be chained to the office processing image and catching up on business before heading off to Alaska again at the start of September. Happy shooting, till next time....

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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](http://www.andyrouse.co.uk).