

## Final Q + A's with an order

### **1. When did you start photographing animals, and why is it your subject of choice?**

As a child, I was drawn to the beauty of nature and spent countless hours exploring the outdoors, sketching and painting landscapes. I was always reflective, taking in the world around me with a heightened sense of awareness. One particular memory stands out vividly in my mind. I was sitting in a cornfield, completely immersed in my surroundings when a bee flew past me. I could feel its energy streaking through the sky as my pencil scratched across my paper. That moment of connection with nature has stayed with me, and I am always seeking to rediscover and communicate in my work.

It wasn't until I was 18 and enrolled in a one-year foundation course prior to my first degree that I picked up a camera. I shot a roll of film at London Zoo for a project, but it wasn't until ten years later that I was able to pursue animal photography more proactively and choose my own subjects without worrying about paying the bills.

But now, for me, the defining question of our time is humanity's impact on the natural world. It will ultimately determine the future of our species and every other species on this planet. It's important to me to be part of the community of photographers and conservationists working on raising awareness, challenging preconceptions and encouraging a deeper connection to the natural world. How do we create images that truly touch the hearts and minds of people, evoke empathy, and lead to pro-environmental outcomes?

### **2. Why do you often use black and white backgrounds for animal portraits?**

The reason I often choose to present my subjects on simple backgrounds is to emphasise their character and personality to make nature more personal. I collaborated with social scientists Professor Linda Kalof and Assistant Professor

Cameron Whitley to explore the effect of animal portraiture on empathy in viewers compared to more traditional wildlife photography. Our study found that creating an animal portrait taken against plain backgrounds and thereby removing the animal from its natural environment evoked greater empathy and deeper emotional response. Our research paper concluded that such portraits were more likely to “galvanise public attention.” Photographing animals in this way brings the animal into the viewer’s world, bridging the geographical distance and creating a more intimate connection. [Link](#);

### **3. How do you make your animals appear so human?**

I accept that it is certainly easy to see my work as anthropomorphic, to think that I have endeavoured to make them look like us, but I am actually far more interested in the notion of anthropocentrism and how we humans place ourselves at the centre of the animal kingdom. On a more practical level, I often compose my images to draw the viewer's eye to the regions of interest within my subject’s face, such as the eyes or mouth, to further enhance the sense of depth and dimension. I like to navigate the viewer’s eye to those areas that I find most interesting, and that, in turn, I want to share by changing edges and tone, developing character and personality, and evoking empathy.

### **4. Which animal has been the most challenging to photograph?**

Photographing the critically endangered Saiga Antelope was one of the biggest challenges I had ever faced. I first attempted to capture this elusive animal during the summer but encountered many difficulties. Saigas are notoriously shy, so I had to lie in camouflage on the ground before sunrise, waiting for them to make an appearance. Around 9:30 or 10, I was perplexed why my camera produced such blurred images. It wasn't until later that I realised the intense heat from the ground had distorted the light, causing the image to be warped. I returned in winter to try again, this time facing temperatures of -20. The Saiga

was just as hard to find, but I managed to capture a few frames before they ran away. Revisiting the shot in winter was worth it, as the animal's coat had changed, giving it a more magical feel. I chose to photograph everything from elephants to insects, and each presented its own unique challenge. Above all, our greatest challenge is to connect people to nature.

## **5. What animal would you most like to photograph?**

What's important to me is to take an issue-oriented approach to story-telling. When beginning a book project, a priority is to invest time in researching the best animal candidates from the many thousands of options to support the narrative. This involves interviewing leading figures in the field of conservation, asking them what needs to be in a book, what's missing, and what needs to be said on this topic. It's also asking them about the failures in this field that need to be addressed. Some of these are 'must-haves' that are essential to the project, and I often have to go to great lengths to realise them. Others are 'like-to-haves' that may cross my path along the way but are not vital but are still important to the project.

For example, when I was working on my recent book 'Birds', I knew that birds of paradise had to make an appearance, but I wasn't sure if it would be possible. It wasn't until the final stages of the project that an opportunity presented itself, and I was able to make my vision a reality.

## **6. How do you choose your subjects?**

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Before I even take a single photograph, the research helps me uncover potential stories, such as the pangolin or the saiga antelope, a survivor of the Ice Age, or subjects with a captivating case history, like the featherless chicken I photographed in Israel.

## **7. Where do you find your subjects?**

When it comes to sourcing subjects such as wild animal species, I will reach out to respected conservation organisations. I then photograph the species in their natural habitat or in a zoo environment. Depending on what animal, such as a captive-bred bird, I might be able to bring them into a studio, but only if this does not place unnecessary stress on the subject. For domestic breeds, I usually approach pet owners for domestic breeds, maybe contacted through animal bodies, such as The Kennel Club or The Governing Council of Cat Fancy (GCCF). We typically use an animal agency with a vet in attendance on commercial shoots.

## **8. Do you know what image you are going to capture before you take a photo?**

I have always liked Pablo Picasso's quote, "I do not seek, I find." I accept that one needs some kind of structural framework on a shoot, and I try to know the limitations while trying not to presume to know what will occur. In the realisation of work, you could break down the creative process into three stages. The first is planning, having a loose framework and a working idea. Second is the day of the shoot when I try to be present, allow things to reveal themselves, and maybe be surprised by what I find. The third is understanding the resulting image in terms of how it works for me and others. The end result will often operate differently from how I expected it to, and I have to be open to that.

## **9. When photographing animals so closely, how do you maintain the ethics of animal photography?**

The ethical considerations of animal photography are highly important. When I photograph in the studio for commercial purposes, I try to ensure that a vet is present on set to provide their expertise and help maintain optimal animal welfare conditions.

I have constructed specialised aviaries for bird photography to ensure that my subjects are relaxed and often unaware of the camera and me. This helps encourage natural behaviour and, most importantly, minimises any stress on these captive-bred birds.

## **10. Should we still have zoos?**

The question of whether zoos should exist or not is an important one to consider. While I believe there is a place for them, it is essential that their role evolves. We must find a way to connect people to animals in a way that encourages them to care for them while also ensuring that the conditions of the animals are acceptable. The main message from zoos should be to emphasise the importance of protecting animals in their natural habitats.

What is particularly interesting about zoos is how our perception of them has changed over time. For example, when my mother was a child, London Zoo had elephant rides, and when I was a child, they dressed up the chimpanzees and had tea parties - something that would not be accepted today. To hold a zoo license in the UK now requires educating people about biodiversity, having a higher standard of care and being seen as a centre for conservation.

Personally, I find it difficult to see a gorilla in captivity, and as someone who has seen them in the wild, it is heart-breaking to see them locked up. I hope that zoos will increasingly become involved in conservation efforts, particularly in supporting grassroots projects with a focus on environmental ecosystems.

## **11. Can humanity survive the Anthropocene epoch?**

We find ourselves in the age of the Anthropocene - a proposed geological era defined by man-and; we stand on the brink of the sixth mass extinction. It is essential that we strive to create a perpetual planet system that can sustain us all.

Through my photography, I seek to bring animals into direct view to evoke empathy and create an emotional bond. My goal is to inspire people to take action for conservation. If we truly care about these creatures, we can pull them back from the edge of extinction before it is too late.

## **12. How do you see your role as a collaborator with other professionals, particularly scientists - and why do you think that's important?**

Collaborating with scientific professionals is integral to my work as a natural history photographer. As I continue to witness the environmental challenges that lie ahead of us, I understand the importance of working with the broader community to bring the pressing issues highlighted by scientists into the public consciousness.

To truly move people and engage them with often complex scientific information, we need to evoke emotion. As George Schaller once said, "You can do the best science in the world, but unless the emotion is engaged, it is not very relevant." This quote resonates with me deeply, and I strive to incorporate it into my work.

I believe that artists should collaborate more closely with scientists to bridge the gap between the conscious and the subconscious. By creating meaningful change through stories that truly touch people's hearts and minds, we can inspire action and make a difference.

### **13. What has been your favourite photograph that you've taken?**

Some of my images I have grown away from, and some I have grown towards. There are, however, some constant favourites that will always hold relevance for me, such as the fruit bats, which I've chosen to display upside down with their eyes above their feet. This photograph plays with our habits of perception; by turning the bats on their heads, the bats are anthropomorphised, making them seem both more and less *normal* at the same time. This switch might also call into question our perception of life and ask, like Nagel, *What is it Like to be a Bat?* They become more human and more figurative in their gestures.

Another image, titled Horse Mountain, was one I constructed to be both just abstract and just recognisable enough to keep the viewer guessing. Modernist architect Mies van der Rohe's famous aphorism *Less is More* is called to mind with the simplicity of the image. It says so much by having so little in it; it is just a white shoulder and mane on a black background, yet it suggests a detail of a beautiful horse and, at the same time, a pristine snow-covered mountain.

### **14. What have been the key differences between your different book projects?**

My debut book, *Equus* (2008), the family of animals that goes from ass to zebra, but mostly horses, was my introduction to the world of publishing. It was a wonderful journey of discovery into the cultural history of horses. With *Dogs Gods* (2010), I combined studio and location shots of working and show dogs, exploring how they have transitioned from the kennel to the sofa and become predominantly companion animals. *More than Human* (2012) delved into the ethical, scientific, and political debates surrounding our relationships with the natural world and highlighted the importance of all animals, whether rare, common, defenceless, clumsy, or dangerous.

Evolution (2014), a collaboration with Stern, was created with the intention of showing great respect for animals, nature, and creation as a whole. This led to my most thought-provoking project to date, Endangered (2017). Through juxtaposing images with a narrative, this book reveals the heartbreakingly fast pace of change our natural world is experiencing. Now more than ever, it is essential to connect people with nature – our future depends on it.

In an effort to encourage an interest in the natural world from a young age, I created Who Am I? (2019). This book was a way for me to introduce some animals that need our help to the younger generation in the hope that it would lead to more people connecting emotionally and helping to implement change.

Finally, with my Birds (2021) book, I wanted to showcase the grace, intelligence, and humour of these creatures and to tantalise the human imagination.

Through sharing the wonderment and beauty of these birds, I hope that people will relate to them through their character and personality.

## **15. What's the key thing you took from your work on each project?**

My first book project, *Equus* (2008), presented a daunting challenge: how could I create 180 unique horse images that would captivate the viewer? Despite my initial fears, I gained confidence as I worked on the project and ultimately succeeded in bringing it to fruition.

In my second project, *Dogs Gods* (2010), I learned a valuable lesson about the importance of keeping both the dog and its owner happy. If the owner is stressed, the dog may become agitated as well, making it difficult to capture the best possible images.

*More than Human* (2012) opened my eyes to the incredible ways in which nature inspires and influences our world. Everything around us is interconnected and bio-inspired, from the smallest microorganisms to the largest mammals.

*Endangered* (2017) was a sobering reminder of the precarious state of our planet's wildlife. As I witnessed so many animals on the brink of extinction, I couldn't help but feel a sense of urgency about the future of humanity.



Finally, *Birds* (2021), I had no idea that birds' ancestors were actually dinosaurs. This realisation led me to structure the book in a phylogenetic sequence, showcasing the evolutionary development of birds. The book begins with the archaeopteryx fossil, a feathered dinosaur, and concludes with our modern-day poultry, which has been heavily shaped by human intervention.

#### **16. What do you hope people take from each project?**

My aim, with all my books, is to evoke empathy and a strong sense of appreciation and stewardship for animals and the natural world. I hope to inspire readers to take action to protect and preserve these precious resources.

#### **17. In *Endangered*, you have not only focused on the popular endangered species but also on the less-charismatic faces of the endangered species world. What was the reason for including these less attractive yet equally endangered species?**

During my research on ecological drivers, I refrained from taking photographs for three months. Instead, I engaged in conversations with conservationists and communicators from various conservation organisations. Through these interactions, I learned about the effectiveness of certain images in reaching specific audiences. I inquired about the stories that needed to be told, ranging from climate change to land-use change, Coral, Vultures, Pangolins, and Saiga Antelopes. With only 300 pages and 160 images to work with, I had to be selective in the stories I chose to tell.

For instance, I chose to feature the Pied Tamarin, a critically endangered primate from Manaus, Brazil, in the Amazon, which is relatively unknown. Interestingly, it bears a striking resemblance to the sci-fi character Yoda from Star Wars, which in fact, is likely to be more familiar to us. I also included insects, as they are a vital part of our ecosystem. I wanted to highlight the Lord Howe Island stick insect, which was once thought to be extinct before being rediscovered in a bush on a rocky outcrop near the island.

Furthermore, I featured pandas to illustrate the strong cultural significance we attach to them and their connection to conservation. Ultimately, I selected animals that represented different ecological drivers and told compelling stories rather than merely choosing the most exotic and beautiful creatures for the book.

In summary, my research involved engaging with experts in the field and selecting animals that would effectively communicate the message of conservation. By doing so, I aimed to create a book that would inspire people to take action and protect our planet's biodiversity.

**18. Nineteenth-century collections of rare and exotic animals were instrumental in scientific advances. Today the focus is less on discovery and more on the recovery of rare and endangered species; what part do you think photography plays in the conservation of endangered species?**

We are living in an era of unprecedented visual ascendance, where photographs have a more vital role to play than ever before. Interestingly, in recent years, more image makers have been exploring the connection between people and the natural world than ever before in history. We are witnessing a seismic shift, one that is occurring rapidly, and we must do so to confront the challenges we face. Can we respond quickly and with enough urgency? Will we recognise when we reach the tipping point?

**19. Why did you choose the title More Than Human?**

I selected this title due to my fascination with the relationship between humans and non-human animals and the concept of sentience. We humans often consider ourselves to be exceptional and distinct from other animals. I would share the view that to be alive, whatever the species, carries the potential of being conscious.

**20. When you have worked with wild animals, have you ever felt threatened?**

As a photographer, I am acutely aware of the potential risks that come with photographing certain animals. To mitigate these risks, I usually have a highly skilled team, which includes animal experts, by my side. This helps to ensure that I am well-prepared to handle most situations that may arise.

**21. Did you encounter unexpected obstacles or challenges? How did you deal with those?**

In the case of the *Birds* project, each species had to be captured at the optimal times of the year when their feathers were in their prime, and they were most likely to display their best behaviour. To achieve the best representation of each species, I had to understand how each unique feather reacted to light and its direction.

To ensure the birds were as relaxed and natural as possible, we built specialised aviaries to help minimise any stress on the captive-bred birds. In some situations, turntables were used to rotate perches, ponds were constructed for ducks, and lights were suspended high over a tank of diving penguins. This allowed me to capture the birds in their most natural state, mostly oblivious to the camera and me.

**22. Why did you choose to shoot birds in a studio instead of out in the wild?**

Many of the birds I photographed were taken in the studio and were captive-bred. I choose to photograph animals often separated from their natural habitat because I want to emphasise their character, personality, and kinship. I strive to make nature personal, and I'm always fascinated by how the viewer can transform images into meaning whilst evoking empathy towards the animal. By capturing these animals in a studio setting, I hope to create a connection

between the viewer and the subject, allowing them to appreciate the beauty of nature in a more intimate way.

### **23. How do you name your images?**

As an author and photographer, my initial works focused on domesticated subjects, namely *Equus* (2008) and *Dogs Gods* (2010). In these books, I predominantly named the animals by breed, occasionally including their human-given names. However, I adopted a different approach when it came to capturing images of wild species. Whenever possible, I utilised both common and scientific names for all the animals featured in my work. This practice is evident in my recent publications, *Endangered* (2017) and *Birds* (2021).

### **24. What would you advise photographers who would want to commit to in-depth projects like your books?**

For many years, I worked on commissions and small projects, which, although rewarding, could not compare to the experience of working on a book. Immersing myself in a single subject for an extended period of time allowed me to embark on a journey of discovery, broadening my horizons in ways I never thought possible.

### **25. Would you say you work in the fine arts or the applied arts?**

My career is based in the applied arts and began with commercial practice in design and advertising. However, I now spend a significant portion of my time on research-based book projects and presenting my work through public exhibitions, museums and galleries worldwide. In my case, there is a fluid boundary between what could be defined as fine art and applied art.

### **26. Who inspired your work, and who are your greatest influences?**

My work is mostly informed by painters rather than photographers, such as Picasso, Turner, and Rembrandt, as well as the broader cultural space. To

produce images that resonate with the audience, you must be mindful of how they are being interpreted and imbued with meaning. To do that, you must be curious about the world around you.

When it comes to photographers, Karl Blossfeldt, Stephen Shore, Bill Brandt and Guy Bourdin were certainly an early influence on my career.

## **27. Who is or was your greatest mentor?**

My interest lies in the language of visual storytelling; I believe it's so important to be interested in the broader cultural fabric. I've always felt it's more important to engage and understand the cultural landscape and heritage rather than have a specific mentor. Having said that, the likes of Picasso, Turner and Rembrandt have inevitably influenced my practice and thinking.

In addition to studying the greats, I have found that collaborating and exchanging ideas with my peers is equally crucial.

## **28. Who among your contemporaries today do you most admire?**

I am continually astounded by Nick Knight's creativity, whimsy, and determination to keep creating photographs. He is never afraid to explore and challenge his work. Bill Brandt has been a major source of inspiration in the past, and Wolfgang Tillman is a current photographer whose work I admire and respect.

## **29. Do you take photographs outside of work?**

If I'm climbing a mountain, I like to get to the top, breathe and take in the experience. I don't always carry a camera with me. I like to feel first and reflect after.

### **30. What camera do you use?**

Recently, the Canon EOS R5 has become my go-to camera for work. On occasion, I still use the Hasselblad H6D-100c. However, it's not the technology that captivates me but rather the ideas it facilitates.

### **31. When do you use flash or natural light?**

In the past, I often used flash to augment daylight and create a more stylised look. However, there are times when introducing flash can be too stressful for the animal, so I must rely on natural light. For instance, when photographing the Rufus Hornbill for my *Bird* project, placing a flash above it would most likely have been too scary.

For my Dog book, I took an image of a Springer Spaniel with pheasants flying up from the bracken on a misty morning. To achieve the desired look, we combined flash with colour-balanced gels that matched the scene's ambient light.

When shooting in the studio, I often need to freeze movements, such as a bird in flight or an animal leaping, with a flash system that captures speeds up to 1/10000 a second. Although I sometimes use continuous light sources for stills, it is mostly used for capturing motion.

### **32. How much do you use Photoshop?**

I use Photoshop for most images; it is an incredibly powerful tool. I primarily use it for adjusting tonal values, such as luminance and edges. Which only represents a very small proportion of what Photoshop is capable of. Despite the seemingly minor nature of these changes, they can significantly impact the overall perception of the image.

### **33. Do you have any pets?**

At present, I don't have any pets, although I would love to. I believe it is essential to be able to dedicate your time and attention to taking care of them; however, my career path and, consequently, the unpredictable schedule means

it would not be fair to them. Nevertheless, I look forward to the day when I can provide a loving home to a furry companion.

### **34. What is the future of photography as a career?**

The question of what the future of photography holds is difficult to answer; it's like trying to peer into a crystal ball! That being said, we have seen the migration of print and television to the online realm, which has made it ever more difficult to make a living out of photography. As we progress, we encounter fresh challenges with the advent of Artificial Intelligence and the new era of vast multi-modal data sets, with human creative endeavour inevitably being pitted against machines.

### **35. How will Artificial Intelligence change the future of photography?**

Although AI has been a nascent idea since the 1960s, it is only now that we have a sense of urgency that concerns the threats posed by these developing technologies. Only last week (March 2023), I challenged a generative AI platform to create a “Tim Flach Tiger image.” What was both disconcerting and intriguing was that the image that it created had the characteristics of my stylistic approach, a tiger gazing straight towards the viewer set against a black background while replicating both the quality and the direction of my lighting. What it didn't achieve so well was the representation of the fur, which looked evidently airbrushed in its appearance. I have to ask myself how long it will be before the AI tiger image in my style is almost indiscernible from my own images. Given this, if I have invested time, resources and risk in realising this image, is there rights protection in place? And will there be in the future to protect me from AI scraping digital copies of my images to create a synthetic version of its own? The answer currently is; not yet. With livelihoods at stake, there is understandable concern from the creative industries.

### **36. What's next?**

At present (March 2023), I am in the process of starting a new book about the domestic and wild species of cats titled *Feline*, scheduled for publication with Abrams in the Fall of 2025. This book will provide an in-depth look into the fascinating world of cats, from their unique behaviours to their diverse habitats.

I am excited to explore the many mysteries of these beloved creatures and share my findings with readers.