

## 1. When did you start photographing animals?

As a child, I was drawn to the beauty of nature, wandering fields, sketchbook in hand, learning to look. I remember sitting in a cornfield, completely immersed in my surroundings, when a bee flew past me. I could feel its energy through the sky as my pencil scratched across the paper. That moment of connection with nature has always stayed with me.

It wasn't until I turned 18 and enrolled in a one-year foundation course at East London Technical College, London, prior to my first degree, that I picked up a camera. I shot a roll of film at London Zoo for a project. It would take another decade before I could pursue animal photography more proactively and choose my own subjects without worrying about paying the bills.

For me, the defining question of our time is humanity's impact on the natural world. I feel a responsibility to stand alongside photographers and conservationists who seek to raise awareness and deepen our connection to the natural world.

The challenge is not simply to inform, but to touch the hearts and minds of people and inspire pro-environmental action.

## 2. Why do you often use plain backgrounds for animal portraits?

I often place my subjects against simple backgrounds to draw attention to their character and personality, making nature more personal and relatable.

I actively collaborate with social scientists and previously published a paper with Professor Linda Kalof and Associate Professor Cameron Whitley, on exploring 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 evoked greater empathy and a deeper emotional response and that such portraits were more likely to "galvanise public attention",

bringing the animals into the viewer's world and creating a more intimate connection.

Currently, I serve as a collaborator with Professor Cameron Whitley and the ACE Network (Advancing Conservation Through Empathy for Wildlife Network), partnering with zoos and aquariums nationwide on a \$500,000 National Science Foundation CAREER funded project.

The project examines how issue-oriented approaches and strategic anthropomorphism can activate empathy and encourage conservation behaviour. Together, we are testing how different visual approaches, from wildlife photography to portraiture, influence public engagement with biodiversity loss and climate change.

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

It's understandable that my work might be interpreted as anthropomorphic.

Rather than humanising animals to diminish their animality, I use portrait conventions to disrupt the hierarchy that places us above them, engaging in what is termed strategic anthropomorphism, a conscious, critical use of human visual language to challenge anthropocentrism itself.

My interest in visual perception informs the way I construct an image. I often isolate the face, guiding the viewer's eye towards salient areas such as the eyes or mouth through subtle shifts in tone, focus and edge. Concepts such as left gaze bias become important tools. They help intensify the emotional charge of an image, inviting recognition and, ultimately, evoking empathy. It is not about making animals more like us, but about narrowing the perceived distance between us.

### **4. How do you view the current impact of generative AI on photography?**

As President of the Association of Photographers, I see a profession in a state of profound transition. Generative AI is reshaping the landscape, raising urgent questions about authorship, ownership and sustainability. Trust in imagery is eroding, and the legal frameworks designed to protect creators are struggling to keep pace.

We are witnessing one of the greatest acts of theft in modern history: creative work absorbed at scale and treated as free raw material, without consent, transparency or remuneration. What is being taken is not abstract “data”, but the accumulated cultural and intellectual labour of generations of creators.

Photography has always adapted to technological change, and change itself is not the issue. What feels different now is the speed and scale of extraction.

Copyright is not a technical inconvenience; it is the mechanism that allows photographers to earn a living and retain control over meaning and integrity. Remove it, and the foundations of visual culture begin to erode.

The creative sector is not resisting progress; it is calling for a fair and principled framework that enables innovation to work with creators, not against them. The future of photography will depend on adaptability, yes, but also on protecting the rights and integrity that give the medium its value.

AI should support human creativity, not supplant it.

## **5. How does collaboration across disciplines shape your work, and why is that exchange important today?**

Across my last three book projects, key collaborators have been conservationist Jonathan Baillie, evolutionary biologists Rick Prum and Jonathan Losos, and neuroscientist Morten Kringelbach.

In a time of environmental urgency, interdisciplinary exchange feels essential given the challenges we face. Alongside my projects, I am undertaking research in conservation communication with social scientists Cameron Whitley and Linda Kalof, and the ACE for Wildlife Network, supported by the National Science Foundation. Together, we have explored how animal portraiture can evoke empathy and encourage pro-environmental outcomes.

As George Schaller observed, "You can do the best science in the world, but unless the emotion is involved, it is not really very relevant. Conservation is based on emotion. It comes from the heart, and one should never forget that."

## **6. How do you navigate the ethical considerations of animal photography?**

Animal welfare is always the primary concern. When working in the studio, particularly on commercial shoots, a qualified veterinarian is present for professional oversight.

For Feline, while many cats were photographed in their own homes, often seasoned show cats, well accustomed to travel, came to the London studio. It was essential to let them settle on their own terms before any photography began, however long that might have been. Quite often, most of the day!

For Birds, I constructed specialised aviaries designed to create a calm and secure setting in which the subjects could settle naturally. The aim was to allow them to behave as they ordinarily would, without awareness of the camera or my presence.

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

Zoos can have a legitimate role, but only if that role continues to evolve. Their purpose should be to foster connections between people and animals, educate, and ensure high welfare standards while promoting conservation. The central message must be the protection of wildlife in natural habitats, not entertainment.

Public attitudes toward zoos have shifted significantly. Practices once considered acceptable, such as elephant rides at London Zoo or dressing chimpanzees for tea parties, would now be widely condemned. In the UK today, holding a zoo licence requires demonstrable commitments to education, biodiversity, animal welfare, and conservation.

I feel that if zoos are to justify their existence, they must increasingly prioritise meaningful conservation work, particularly by supporting grassroots environmental initiatives and ecosystem protection.

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

Pablo Picasso's quote, "I do not seek, I find", has always resonated with me.

Practically, when working with animals, there has to be some kind of framework. I try to anticipate as best I can, but if you assume too much, you leave little room for things to unfold that might reveal new possibilities.

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

We are living in the Anthropocene, the proposed geological epoch defined by human impact, standing on the threshold of a sixth mass extinction. The urgency of this moment demands that we rethink how we inhabit the planet and commit to building systems that are not merely sustainable, but regenerative, supporting a perpetual, life-sustaining planetary system.

Through my photography, I aim to foster empathy and connection to inspire meaningful action in support of conservation. If we choose to care deeply, and act accordingly, we still have the power to pull many species back from the brink of extinction.

Within the broader community, photographers are using the medium not only to document, but to advocate. I am proud to collaborate with Ami Vitale, whose Vital Impacts initiative champions environmental storytelling, alongside many others working as stewards of the natural world.

## **10. Do you see chaos as an obstacle or an opportunity in your practice?**

People often say, "never work with children or animals." In many ways, I'm deliberately inviting a degree of chaos and uncertainty through my choice of subjects. Animals are unpredictable; you can't direct them in the conventional sense, and they rarely do what you expect. But that

unpredictability is what I find the most exciting and often leads to my strongest work.

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

For Feline, some of our stars had social media followings of over a million. These platforms became an invaluable tool, allowing us to connect with cats across the globe, from Japan to Canada.

More generally, for domestic breeds, I typically approach pet owners directly, often through recognised organisations such as The Kennel Club or The Governing Council of the Cat Fancy (GCCF). On commercial shoots, we generally collaborate with a professional animal agency and ensure that a qualified veterinarian is present at all times.

When sourcing subjects such as wild animal species, I work closely with respected conservation organisations. Wherever possible, I photograph animals within their natural habitat.

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

Photography is about problem-solving. Photographing the critically endangered Saiga antelope in southern Russia certainly meant overcoming a few challenges. Mid-summer, I lay camouflaged before dawn, only to discover that as the sun heated the air above the still-cool ground, the extreme temperature contrast created heat haze and atmospheric distortion, leaving every frame I had taken blurred.

I returned in winter, in  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$ , to a stark and unforgiving landscape. The Saiga's distinctive brown summer coat had turned to a pale grey and had thickened in anticipation of the coming snow. Being extremely nervous of humans, it allowed me just a few frames before then disappearing.

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

When beginning a project, a priority is to invest time in researching the best candidates to support the narrative. Across my books, I have reached out to the leading scientists and figures in their respective fields, and from those

discussions emerge the “must-haves”, species critical to the story, however difficult they may be to realise.

Each subject is chosen to contribute to the broader story, be it environmental, physiological, or cultural.

#### **14. What has been your favourite photograph that you’ve taken?**

Of all the images I have taken, some continue to resonate with me.

The fruit bats are among them. Suspended upside down, their eyes appearing above their feet, they quietly unsettle our habits of perception. The inversion renders them at once more familiar and more strange, prompting a subtle shift in viewpoint that echoes Thomas Nagel’s question, *What Is It Like to Be a Bat?*

The image also engages with predictive processing, the understanding that perception is guided by expectation. We do not simply see; we anticipate.

Horse Mountain, also for its ambiguity. Modernist architect Mies van der Rohe’s famous aphorism *Less is More* is called to mind with the simplicity of the image - just a white shoulder and mane on a black background, yet it might go so far as to suggest a pristine snow-covered mountain.

#### **15. How has your approach to developing a project evolved since your first book was published in 2008?**

My first book, *Equus* (2008), came at a technological turning point for photography. Although I began by shooting on film, we soon moved over to digital capture.

I remember photographing charging horses tearing through water on a medium-format Hasselblad H1 camera, set on manual focus at 1.5 fps. In marked contrast with the 30 fps on the Canon R5 Mark II, and its sophisticated animal eye-tracking autofocus that we use today.

My last book, *Feline*, was published in October 2025, and although the immediate challenge was the subject itself: cats are among the most

difficult animals I've worked with, something broader became clear. In the age of Generative AI, the way we read and consume images is shifting. We are experiencing an erosion of trust, a cultural recalibration in which what we see is increasingly questioned.

In response, we embedded feline-shaped QR codes within the book, linking to behind-the-scenes footage of the cats being photographed. In the past, the challenge was simply getting the cat onto the table, now it is proving that it was ever there in the first place.

It makes you wonder what Cartier-Bresson would call the "decisive moment" today, when the question is no longer just about timing, but about whether the moment itself ever really existed.

## **16. What distinguishes each body of work from the others?**

I have published eight monographs, representing six major bodies of work. While my projects have always been informed by science, they have evolved to engage more deeply with evolutionary biology, conservation and neuroscience.

My very first book was *Equus* (2008), the family of animals that goes from ass to zebra, followed by *Dogs Gods* (2010). They were more focused on our cultural relationships with animals, whilst *More Than Human* broadened this approach to include ethical and scientific perspectives.

*Evolution* (2014), created in collaboration with Stern Fotografie, is an anthology that reflects on the shared evolutionary threads that connect all life.

*Endangered* (2017) focused on animals that find themselves on the edge of extinction. Now more than ever, it is essential to connect people with nature - our future depends on it. *Who Am I?* (2019) extended that commitment to a younger audience. Aimed at 5-9-year-olds, it introduced endangered animals through accessible storytelling, seeking to spark curiosity.

*Birds* (2021) was a phylogenetic celebration of wonder, tracing a lineage from their dinosaur ancestors to the extraordinary diversity we see today.

At the heart of *Feline* (2025) lies a quest to unmask what it truly means to be a cat. Tracing their evolutionary journey, cultural history, and enduring mystique, it explores the paradox at their core, fiercely independent yet deeply entwined with human lives, reminding us that a cat is never owned, only accompanied.

### **17. Why was it important to include both culturally iconic animals and lesser-known species in *Endangered*?**

During my research for *Endangered*, I refrained from taking photographs for three months and instead engaged in conversations with conservationists and communicators across multiple organisations.

I wanted to understand the ecological drivers behind species decline, the underlying forces that shape ecosystems and determine survival, such as climate change, habitat loss through land-use change, pollution, overexploitation, and invasive species. That meant examining urgent issues, including coral reef collapse and the decline of vultures, pangolins, and saiga antelopes.

We had to determine which images would most effectively communicate those pressures to different audiences, and with only 160 images, I had to be selective about which choices served the narrative.

For example, I chose to feature the pied tamarin, a critically endangered primate from Manaus in the Brazilian Amazon. It's relatively unknown, yet it bears a striking resemblance to Yoda from *Star Wars*, a cultural reference far more familiar to many of us. That visual echo becomes a bridge, inviting connection. I also included insects, often overlooked despite being fundamental to ecosystem health, highlighting the Australian Lord Howe Island stick insect, once thought extinct and later rediscovered clinging to survival on a remote rocky outcrop.

Pandas were, of course, important to include for their powerful cultural symbolism, as well as their political and diplomatic significance.

Ultimately, the book became less about showcasing the most exotic or visually striking species, and more about representing the ecological forces shaping their survival. My hope was to create a body of work that not only informs, but inspires action.

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

I'm fascinated by the relationship between humans and non-human animals, particularly around the idea of sentience. We tend to see ourselves as exceptional, separate and somehow above other species.

*More Than Human* speaks directly to that assumption. It challenges the notion that humans are the sole holders of intelligence, emotion, or consciousness. Rather than placing ourselves at the centre, the title expands the frame, suggesting that other species possess forms of awareness and complexity that may differ from ours, but are no less significant.

I believe that to be alive, whatever the species, carries the potential for consciousness. The title reflects that challenge to human exceptionalism.

### **19. How does the choice of background or environment shape the meaning and impact of an image?**

For *Equus*, a large proportion of the work was photographed on location, with landscape being integral to the project; it speaks to the cultural heritage of breeds and how they are shaped by their environments.

For *Endangered*, the majority of animals were photographed on location in their natural habitats to better communicate the narratives of the respective ecological pressures.

In other bodies of work, however, I often remove environmental context to bring the focus onto the animal, their individual character and personality.

My aim is to make nature feel personal and to foster a deeper sense of empathy for the creatures with whom we share our planet.

## 20. How do you name your images?

In my book projects, when naming images of wild species, I use both common and scientific names.

Unlike breeds, which denote variation shaped by human intervention, species refers to a biological lineage that exists independently of us.

When naming images of domesticated animals, I primarily identify the subjects by breed and usually include their given names. The pet names reflect the way we relate to companion animals, not simply as animals, but as extensions of the family.

In certain art prints, the title is led more by the concept of the image than by literal description. A work such as Horse Mountain is less concerned with identifying the animal and more with evoking the sense of form and scale.

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## 22. Who are your influences?

Photographers such as Karl Blossfeldt, Stephen Shore, Bill Brandt, and Guy Bourdin were certainly early influences on my career, though I feel I might have been more influenced by painters such as Picasso, Turner and Rembrandt in particular.

More recently, the cognitive philosopher Andy Clark and neuroscientist Anil Seth have shaped my thinking, especially around perception and how we construct the reality we believe we see.

That said, I find collaborating and exchanging ideas with my peers to be equally crucial.

### **23. What should photographers consider when embarking on a project such as a book?**

Earlier in my career, many commissions were completed in a matter of days. They were rewarding, but nothing compares to the journey of a long-term project.

It requires a different mindset. I spend years on each of mine. It demands sustained enquiry, thoughtful storytelling and consistent attention. Above all, it calls for commitment, the patience to stay with the work as it evolves, deepens and becomes more reflective of lived experience.

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

Certainly, Nick Knight, for his willingness to experiment and embrace new technologies and Sebastião Salgado for his long-term commitment to conservation. Demonstrating how photography can contribute meaningfully to environmental awareness and restoration.

### **25. Do you use Photoshop?**

I primarily use it to adjust tonal values, refining luminance and edges, to guide the viewer through the image. This represents only a very small proportion of what Photoshop is capable of, but despite their seemingly minor nature, these changes can significantly impact the overall perception of the image.

As a natural history photographer, I'm mindful of the responsibility that comes with post-production and of safeguarding the integrity of the original capture as a document. In the era of AI and synthetic imagery, our visual lexicon is shifting, and the photograph no longer carries an automatic claim to truth.

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

The Canon EOS R5 MK2 is my go-to camera. However, it's not the technology that captivates me but rather what it facilitates.

## **27. How do you balance the demands of your projects with family life?**

Book projects unquestionably demand time and focus, and finding a balance with family is key, though never without its challenges.

Over the course of my career, my wife, Yuyu, and our son, James, have been remarkably patient and understanding. Whenever possible, I've tried to share the adventures with them, including travelling together to Antarctica while working on Frozen Planet to photograph whales and penguins, the monarch butterflies in Mexico, and joining me for exhibition openings in Japan and China as James was growing up.

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

While working on Feline, I met a ginger tabby kitten, the sole survivor of a feral farm cat's litter, and I photographed his early development from just over a week old. When he was ready to leave his mother, I brought him home. Now named Loki, he's part of the family, alongside Lila, a Savannah kitten with wild roots, who has certainly brought a lively energy into the home. They are the best of friends.

## **29. What's the best piece of advice you have ever received?**

Stay curious and be obsessive.

### 30. What's next?

Canine, dogs as a mirror to modernity. The work will explore ethics, wellbeing, and responsibility, exploring the lives of rescue dogs, medical and assistance animals, and the consequences of selective breeding, asking how we construct intimacy, negotiate loss, and understand the role dogs play in human flourishing (eudaimonia).

Often, they enter our lives through hedonia, through affection, charm, and emotional reward, but remain because they foster something deeper: a sense of purpose and connection.