



Drive Out PHOTO MECHANIC

BY VILLIERS STEYN

Zoom out

A good close-up of a wild animal or a bird is eye-catching, but sometimes you need to zoom out to capture that creature in its environment.



Photo of the month

Stalking a shrike

Willem Nel

Nikon D90 camera and Nikon 55–200 mm lens
(settings: F5.6, 1/160 sec, ISO 200)

"I photograph virtually everything – wild-life, nature, people – but this was my first serious attempt to photograph birds. We were camping at Koro-Koro Safari Lodge outside Bela-Bela, and I was struck by the abundant bird life. I patiently followed this crimson-breasted shrike and took a series of photos while waiting for it to move into the open so the sun could add a catchlight to its eye.



"Autofocus battled as the shrike hopped around among the branches, and it was difficult to get the composition right because

the bird never sat still. I took the photo at 200mm and cropped it a little on the computer to improve the composition."

Villiers says: Wow, I'm impressed – it's a remarkable result for a first attempt. Crimson-breasted shrikes prefer thorn trees, which is why they're difficult birds to photograph. There are usually thorny twigs between the lens and the bird.

Willem succeeded in focusing on the bird and the lighting is spot-on, but it's the excellent composition that makes this photo stand out.

The what and the where

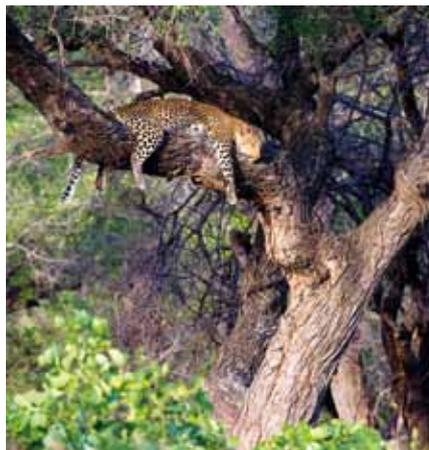
Most nature photographers tend to zoom in when they get a good opportunity to shoot an animal or a bird. The photo below of a leopard in a tree, which I took in the Serengeti, is an example.

I was so excited that I zoomed in to the



maximum of 400mm... and didn't notice that the cat's one paw wasn't completely in the frame.

Most of the time you're guaranteed a better photo if you zoom out a little and capture the entire scene, as with the photo below of another leopard in a tree, which I took in the Kruger National Park.



Willem's photo shows not only what he captured but also where he did so. The picture tells us something about the crimson-breasted shrike's habitat.

A central focus point

One of the main obstacles in trying to photograph birds is that they're always dashing behind leaves, twigs or branches, which makes it difficult to lock the focus. The best way to solve this problem is to switch from Automatic to Program and choose a central focus point.

The camera will focus exactly on the spot that's in the middle of your frame instead of on twigs, which are usually closer to the lens and more prominent than the bird in the frame. Make sure you get the eye of the bird in the centre of the frame so it's sharp in the photo. If your composition is not perfect, do what Willem did and crop the photo afterwards on your computer.

Tip: Camp sites are some of the best places to photograph wild birds, because these birds have become accustomed to people. Find a comfortable spot next to a bird bath and watch a specific bird to determine its routine. Once you're able to predict its next move, you have a much better chance of taking a striking photo.

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