

Award-Winning Wildlife Photography, An Interview with Gabriela Staebler

German born artist Gabriela Staebler is a self-taught professional wildlife photographer with renowned success around the world. Her work, although international in scope, has a particular focus on Africa and the study of animal behaviour in the wild. Her photographs have appeared numerous times in National Geographic magazines and other prestigious publications such as *Terre Sauvage*, *Oasis*, *GEO*, *Nature's Best Photography*, *Universum*, *BBC Wildlife Magazine*, *Abenteuer und Reisen*, *Photography*, and *Naturfoto*.

Gabriela has travelled extensively and has photographed in Namibia, South Africa, the Serengeti National Park of Tanzania and Masai Mara in Kenya, and among many other destinations also the Okavango Delta in Botswana. Her photography has been exhibited widely since the 1990s.

She has published various books with her work, most recently with the National Geographic, Gabriela has co-authored „*On Location: Die Welt der Naturfotografie*“. Busy between workshops, photographic safaris, Multivision-Shows, TV and Radio interviews, Gabriela has even been seen giving lectures on Cruise ship MS Deutschland.

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Among many international awards Gabriela has been honoured several times at the BBC Wildlife Photographer of the year/England, Natures Best International Photography/USA, Melvita Nature Images/France, Oasis Photo Contest/Italy, The Trierenberger Supercircuit/Austria and Europäischer Naturfotograf/Germany.

- **How did your interest for wildlife and especially Africa arise?**

I believe that I was born an "outdoors person." Nature and animals interested me already as a child. I love to observe. 27 years ago, after many travels around the world (at that time I was working as a flight attendant), I set foot for the first time in the wilderness of Africa, and I realised that I "had arrived". The longing for Africa has never left me and step by step I turned my hobby "photography" into my job and received worldwide recognition for my photographs over the years.

- **Can you remember the very first photograph you took which inspired you to follow your passion professionally?**

It is the "Cheetah with cub", which can be seen on the front page of my website. I took the photograph in the Masai Mara national park in 1994. I have won several awards with this photo. Not only the success, but mainly the story behind this picture proved to me that I had the necessary patience, the zoological knowledge, intuition, the photographic skill and not least the "eye" for the subject to follow my passion to a professional level.

An image and its history (extract from Gabriela's website)

"It was a rainy day in Kenya's Masai Mara National Reserve. I was driving around with the off-road vehicle. In the morning I discovered a cheetah with three cubs under a bush. The animals were asleep. Only the cheetah lifted now and then carefully her head. There was not good light, no action – so I decided to wait in sight. During the next eight hours the animals did not leave their location. I watched patiently. The cubs suckled every now and then, played and took turns sleeping. Far away I spotted grazing Thompson's gazelles – the cheetahs' favourite prey. Behind me stood a termite mound in the tall grass, an ideal vantage point for hungry cheetahs.

In the afternoon the clouds started to move - could I hope for evening light? My tent was only a few kilometres away, so I decided to wait until nightfall. Cheetahs hunt almost exclusively by daylight. If the cheetah mother wanted to make a kill, she would go hunting before dark. And she would previously obtain a good view from an elevated point.

The belly of "my" big cat was narrow. She had to be hungry! And the gazelles had been coming closer by now. I drove to the large termite mounds in the direction of the gazelles and chose an observation post, which was very well suited for a frame-filling picture of a cheetah before a clean background. With my best lens a good picture could happen. Would my hope be fulfilled?



Indeed! - One hour before sunset, the cloud cover tore apart. I was ready. Then everything happened very quickly. The cheetah stretched and moved toward the termite mound. The cubs stayed behind. On the mound she observed as expected the surroundings - her gaze focused on the gazelle herd. And seconds later, my hope for evening light was fulfilled. A ray of sunlight was bathing the cat in warm light and let her eyes sparkle ambry. Maybe the cubs would follow sometime. I was lucky: suddenly one of the cubs showed up and sat next to his mother on the "stage". Although I captured this scene with four frames per second, there was only one image which showed the Cheetah with her cub with exactly the same attitude and with exactly the same facial expression: the ears pointing forward and the eyes shining in the evening light. This image succeeded not only technically perfect, but was mostly remarkable because of the expression of touching sincerity in the face of the young cheetah that was mimicking his mother.

Shortly after, the sun disappeared and the cheetah was on her way - towards the gazelles. When I came back the next morning to the same area, I met a cheetah family with bulging bellies."

- **What's the best advice you ever had on how to be more creative?**

"Never copy images of other photographers" and "always expect the unexpected".

- **Can you tell us about a typical day on a photographic safari?**

Usually I am together with my husband, who deals with the whole logistic of my safaris. We hire an off-road vehicle at the location and are equipped with camping gear (usually with a roof tent). We get up at least one hour before sunrise, around 5.40 am. Depending on the wishes of my client or my own specific objectives, I go to certain areas. In the beginning, the binoculars are more important than the camera. It is important not to lose attention even if apparently nothing "special" is in the vicinity. If I have found an interesting animal, I stay close to it - if possible, even over many days. The biggest part of my work consists of observing and waiting for the right moment. Many photos happen "in the head" long before they are captured on film. If, for example, animals should walk as silhouettes in front of the setting sun, I start already searching for matching designs and landscapes during the day. Such photographs do not happen randomly.

I spend most of the day in the vehicle, usually with enormous heat and often under attack by biting flies. I call it quits at around 7 pm. It is already dark when I dust off the camera, secure the compact flash card and cook dinner. Later, I listen to the voices of the night, which might tell me where I will find something exciting the next day.

- **What has been your most hilarious incident?**

Watching animals gives one the opportunity very often of surprises and funny incidents. For example: A cheetah was hunting a bat eared fox. Suddenly the little animal stopped running, turned round and run towards the cheetah. The totally surprised cat was now chased by the brave bat eared fox and ran far away out of the territory of the bat eared fox and its family.

- **Have you had any dangerous encounters with animals?**

Very few. There were elephants' attacks because I was accidentally too close to a herd with young animals. As long as you respect the animals and do not interfere with them or bring them into trouble, there is no danger. It is the very small animals that are dangerous: anopheles mosquitoes that can transmit malaria.

- **Elephant Minds has a particular interest in elephants as they possess skills and emotions that are also common in humans. Much research has been carried out on aspects of elephants' life such as sociability, great memory and tracking skills, mourning of the dead, instruction of the young, sharing of maternal duties, etc. Have you experienced personally any of these behaviours while observing and photographing these wonderful animals?**

All animals have feelings (see my coffee table book: *"How wild animals feel"*, which was published by Bucher Verlag), but for us the feelings of elephants can be seen most easily. I have watched as a large bull elephant changed its way in order not to step on a bird's nest on the ground, how a mother elephant tried lovingly to help her newborn calf to stand up with her trunk, how a whole family takes care of the young of the herd, or even how a herd reverses its route when a weak member of the family was left behind. I watched an elephant mother staying a few days with her dead calf and again and again ran her trunk over its lifeless body. I saw the joy of elephants when they found a waterhole after a long hike and how elephant bulls politely gave way to a matriarch with her own group. Elephants show simple pleasure if they can splash around in the water. I have also seen their anger when they chased away lions who wanted to attack a calf. Anyone observes individual elephants for a long time, finds out that each elephant has a distinct personality. Elephants are the better people - they are peaceful and never greedy.



Therefore, I am filled with horror and disgust knowing that in recent years thousands of these intelligent and beautiful creatures were killed because of our greed for ivory. I use every opportunity, including this interview, to enlighten people in the hope that poaching can be stopped as a result of

a lack of demand for this product. This must be the case before these majestic animals disappear from our planet.

Why are elephants increasingly being poached? Due to the increasing demand for ivory from predominantly Asian countries. 30,000 elephants were killed illegally last year. In 2011 40,000 elephants were killed and last year poaching could not be stopped. The animals are killed for their tusks, which are mostly used for ivory carvings, a status symbol for Asians. Ivory has become an investment for them. The illegal trafficking of ivory is a business worth hundreds of billions of dollars, behind which are cross-border networks of international bands.

Perhaps the killing of elephants can be stopped by comprehensive information, appropriate petitions (I will sign any of these) and donations (part of my book royalties I donate to the WWF and the Frankfurt Zoological Society).

- **When did you decide that working freelance was the best direction for your professional career?**

The answer lies in the word "freelance". To be free to decide what, when and where I photograph increases my creativity, my creative urge and ultimately my success. However, this requires some financial independence as a prerequisite.

- **What three pieces of advice would you give to anyone who wants to become a freelance entrepreneur?**

First, provide for financial security (through a "fixed" job). Secondly, forget about holidays, weekends and public holidays. Thirdly, never accept a "bribe" and become dependent.

- **Do you think encouraging people into 'social enterprises' would have a more positive impact on greater causes such as wildlife conservation?**

Without a doubt – to be on site, to participate, to help, to make something positive happen, to have success, to make new experiences - all that would change views and the attitudes of every human being.

- **What are your ideals and how do they transpire them into your work?**

Truth, love, emotion, freedom, individuality, strength, vitality, passion - all that is present in nature in abundance and flows into my pictures.

- **And lastly...do you believe 'Extraordinary' is possible?**

Not only possible, but present in all facets of our existence. In the positive and, unfortunately, also in the negative sense. Only the extraordinary attracts attention, stands out from the ordinary. All great movements on the planet were caused by extraordinary ways of thinking, feelings, and reactions. To preserve the elephants from extinction will also require exceptional procedures.



To contact Gabriela and follow her work visit her [website](#) or contact her at info@gabrielastaebler.de

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