

# OUT OF AFRICA

Fans of the BBC's *Big Cat* television series will be familiar with the work of professional photographers JONATHAN and ANGELA SCOTT. Although a close-knit husband-and-wife team, they bring their individual approaches to photographing wildlife. TOR McINTOSH caught up with them to see how they work together to capture animals in the wild.

**P** HOTOGRAPHY DUOS HAVE ALWAYS INTRIGUED ME. IN FACT, EVERY TIME I SEE A PHOTOGRAPH CREDITED TO TWO PEOPLE I'M SLIGHTLY PERPLEXED AS TO HOW THE SYSTEM WORKS. Does one person focus and the other one press the shutter release? Or do they simultaneously do everything in a ridiculous confusion of hands? I had no idea, but I'd always wanted to ask them. So, when I was given the chance to interview husband-and-wife photography duo Jonathan and Angela Scott, I knew I would finally work out the enigma surrounding the art of dual picture-taking.

Many will be familiar with Jonathan through his television work, appearing on and presenting wildlife programmes such as *Nature Watch* in the 1980s, *Wild Things* in the 1990s and the BBC's long-running and hugely popular *Big Cat* series. In addition to his broadcasting credentials, for the past two decades he has been one half of a prolific partnership with his wife that has seen them write numerous books, produce many pen-and-ink drawings and travel around the world as wildlife and travel photographers. ►

Sunrise over Musiara Marsh, Maasai Mara, Kenya. Topi and impala are silhouetted in the mist as sacred ibis fly overhead. It pays to be up early to catch the best of the light.

ANGELA SCOTT



ANGELA SCOTT

Through a slightly crackly long-distance Skype call to their home near Nairobi, capital of Kenya, in East Africa, I launch straight in and quiz them about the logistics of working as a team. "I think that's the one thing that everybody is fascinated by; and the fact that we haven't strangled each other yet," laughs Angela. Her husband chips in: "It's an extraordinary thing to take two people who are very much individuals and put them in a confined space, which is often our 4WD vehicle, and expect them to produce great photographs, when photography is such a one-person show most of the time. You don't really think of it as being something that people can combine in doing because, after all, only one person can have their face behind the camera and click the button."

Well, that's precisely my confusion with his 'n' hers photos - how on earth can they both get a credit on one image? Sensing my bafflement, Angela continues by explaining the intricacies of life in the Scotts' 4WD. "We seem to work in incredible synchronicity and harmony, because whenever Johnny picks up one lens I'll instinctively, with no fuss or dilemma, pick up

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the complementary lens to the one he's using. Also, if he sees that I'm shooting some action he'll get the car into the perfect position for me, rather than pick up a lens. So even if I've pressed the button we actually consider all our photographs as 'our' shots because Johnny has perhaps facilitated the wildlife aspect and enabled me to press the button in the perfect position, or vice versa."

The key advantage of working as a duo is that there is always an extra pair of hands and eyes, which enables them to focus on a subject in its entirety - quite a feat for an individual photographer, especially if the working environment is the expansive African plains and the subjects are unpredictable wild animals. As husband and wife for nearly 20 years Jonathan and Angela also have the uncanny ability - some would call it a sixth sense - to silently read what the other

person is going to do. "It becomes very intuitive after a while, as you know what the other person is thinking, which means you can help in making life easier for them when all panic lets loose," explains Jonathan. "There's only so much equipment one person can deal with at a time, so the way it tends to pan out is that one of us handles the big lenses while the other takes the wider view, which means you can get a really good coverage of your subject."

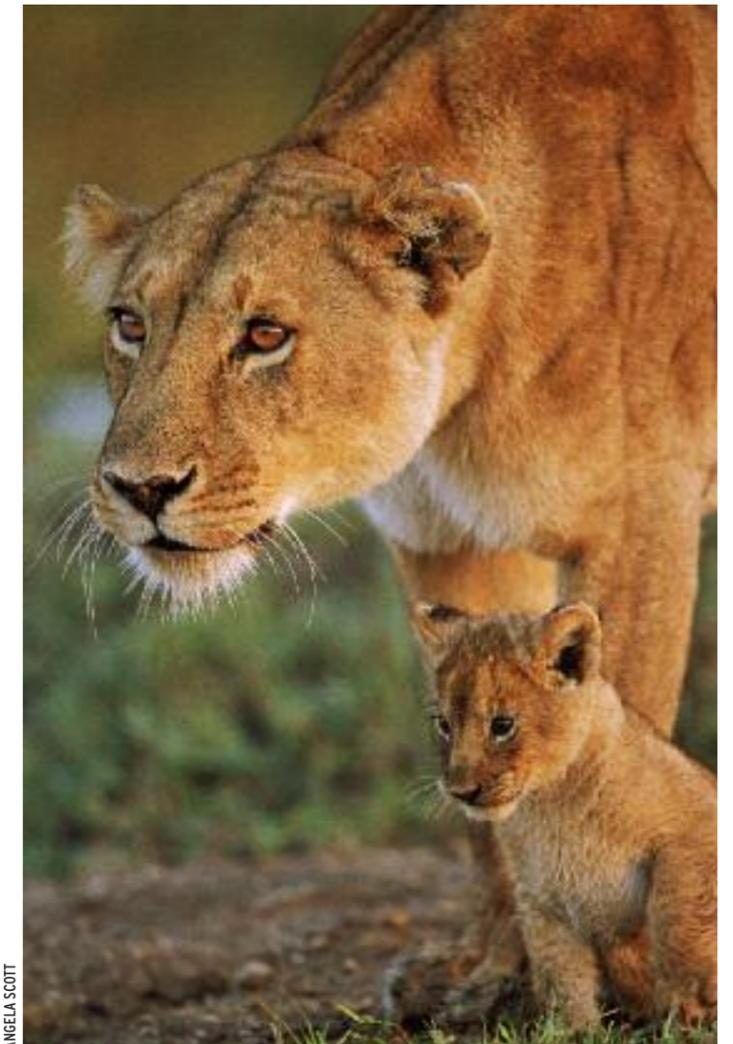
Photography is inherently a selfish and competitive profession, but what makes it easy for Jonathan and Angela to work together is that these traits aren't part of the way they work in the field, which is in stark contrast to the pushy and macho characteristics of some photographers clamouring to capture the moment. At the end of the day we love each other's photographs," says Jonathan. "I get as much pleasure out of looking at a great shot that Angie has taken as I do of my own shot; I'm just delighted that she got it. Whether I took it or not isn't the point. And if I missed it and she got it, boy am I happy!" Perhaps only a doting husband can take this attitude, nevertheless ►

↑ Two young male lions stand proud on Paradise Plain, part of a powerful coalition of six males that dominate the lion territories in this part of the Mara.



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**BIOGRAPHY**

Wildlife photographers Jonathan and Angela Scott live in Kenya, just outside the capital, Nairobi.

Big cats have been the focus of much of their work, including three books accompanying the BBC’s *Big Cat Diary* television series and its successors, which Jonathan co-presents. Angela takes the production stills for the series and is also a game spotter. They have both won the Wildlife Photographer of the Year Award.

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it’s refreshing to hear one photographer admire another photographer’s work, especially in an industry where many photographers are too quick to disparage a competitor’s work.

Until quite recently wildlife photography has been a male-dominated profession (in the past 20 years Angela is one of only three women to have been awarded the top prize at the annual international Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition), so I carefully broach the subject that having Jonathan at her side has perhaps helped Angela to succeed

↑ **Wildebeest plunge into the Mara river on their annual migration through the Mara-Serengeti in East Africa. The vast herds (numbering nearly two million wildebeest) roam an area of 25,000 sq km.**

in this macho field. Gently brushing off Jonathan who, ironically, starts to answer the question for her, Angela agrees with my observation, before adding: “Often female photographers have asked me what my best advice is to them, and I often laugh and say, ‘Get yourself a really great husband, especially one who can help carry your kit!’” And when your favourite piece of gear is a hefty 800mm lens I can understand Angela’s need for extra muscle. However, she is quick to point out that although Jonathan is allowed to carry her prized lens and set it up on the tripod, “other

than that I won’t let him have his sticky paws on it!” Jonathan is the first to admit that compared to Angela, photography was never his number one passion. Although they both “messed around at school with black-and-white film and the fun of the darkroom,” their paths to becoming wildlife photographers differed greatly. “My interest in photography was actually because I wanted to record animal behaviour; my prime passion was wildlife, whereas Angela’s passion has always been photography,” explains Jonathan. After completing a degree in ▶

➔ **The leopard is the most elusive of all of Africa’s big cats – to see one is the icing on the cake for a safari.**

➔ **Khali the lioness (a member of the Marsh Pride) stands watch over one of her four 10-week-old cubs. The cubs were later killed by new pride males who had taken over the Marsh Pride territory.**



zoology from Queen's University in Belfast, Jonathan spent four months travelling overland from London to South Africa - a trip that ended in disaster when the lens he had bought for his first proper camera (a Canon EF) didn't sync, resulting in reels of blank film; he has not made that mistake again. After spending two years in Botswana he moved to Kenya in 1977, where he has lived ever since. In those early years he worked as a guide and naturalist at Mara River Camp on the north-west boundary of the Maasai Mara National Reserve, but his dream was to become a wildlife artist - living and working near such a wildlife hotspot meant he was in the perfect place to refine his skills as an illustrator and he began to take photos of the animals so he could draw from them.

It was meeting Angela, a kindred spirit who shared his love of Africa, art and photography, in Kenya in 1990 (they married two years later) that triggered the creative side of Jonathan's photography. "With my wildlife background I had a clear agenda with my photography, which was to record animal behaviour. In fact, I was a lazy photographer. It was so easy for me living in this amazing place to press the shutter release and get a saleable picture,

but I wasn't being creative and most crucially, I didn't understand light. I would look at somebody else's picture and think it was amazing, but I didn't get that the reason it was so beautiful was because the photographer used light in an interesting way - sidelight and backlight were alien to me, I just looked at where the sun was and put it over my shoulder, which made for some very dull photos!" It was Angela's open-minded and creative approach to photography that helped him to switch from having the eye of a naturalist to one of a photographer.

By the time the couple met in 1990 Jonathan had already had several books published, presented live television documentaries, and been named the 1987 Prudential



↑ Cape petrels swirl around the foot of an iceberg off Antarctica in search of prey stirred up by the ocean currents.

↓ A pair of emperor penguins perform their beautiful greeting and courtship ritual, Ross Sea, Antarctica.

Wildlife Photographer of the Year for his photograph of a wild dog catching a wildebeest. "I was quite well-established when I met Angie and although she'd been taking pictures for many years, she hadn't had the opportunities or the equipment that I'd accumulated," explains Jonathan. "However, I remember this defining moment - and this just shows how cocky one can be at times - when we went to visit friends in America and they asked us to take some pictures of their kids out in the garden, so we both took some photos and I remember looking at Angie's and thinking, 'Wow! These are so much better than mine!'"

Born in Alexandria, Egypt, Angela spent her childhood in Tanzania and it was there that her lifelong love affair with photography began. As a child she made her own darkroom beneath the stairs of her parents' house where she experimented with black-and-white images and started to develop her intimate and imaginative style of photography. The couple have both been inspired by photographers such as Henri Cartier-Bresson, Sebastião Salgado and Steve McCurry, but for Jonathan it's clear that his greatest inspiration is his wife. "Angie always tries to be creative. I remember

ANGELA SCOTT

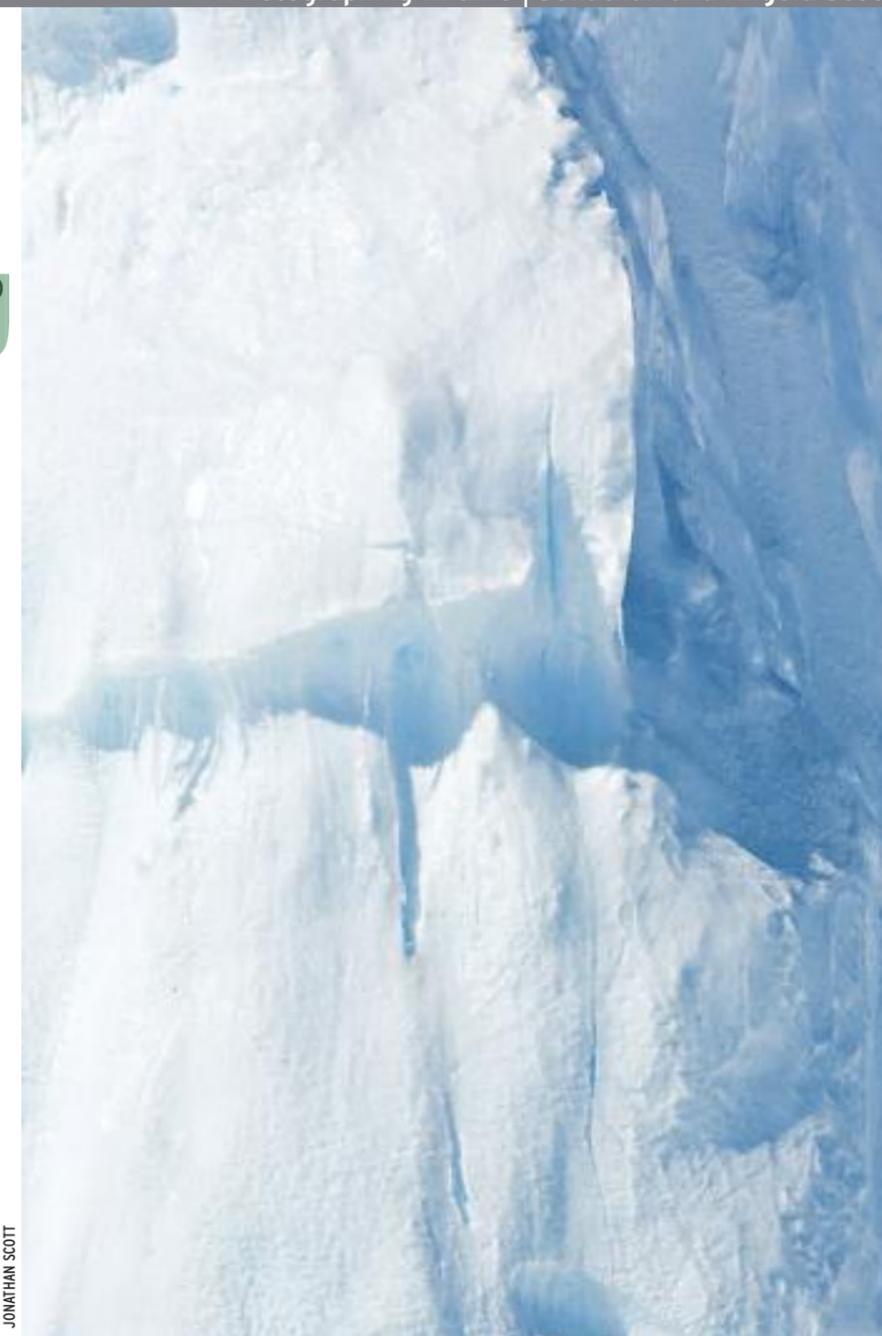
"WHAT I LIKE IS WHEN IT GETS FRANTIC - WHEN ALL HELL BREAKS LOOSE AND YOU'VE GOT TO PICK UP YOUR CAMERA AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE AND GRAB THE ACTION..."

one particular day when the wildebeest were streaming into the Mara and I was thinking, 'Okay let's photograph the wildebeest milling around the plain', but Angie saw some cattle egret that were jockeying for position on the backs of the wildebeest, because they were stirring up insects with their feet, and she captured some beautiful backlit images of these egrets - it was a detail that I hadn't seen. Using lenses creatively she manages to create a particular point of view or sees a subject in an interesting way."

It was this unique way of seeing that earned Angela the title of British Gas Wildlife Photographer of the Year in 2002 for her image of an elephant family drinking in the Luangwa river in Zambia. But it's amusing to learn that if she had listened to her husband's opinion that day she might not have won such a prestigious photography award. "I can remember trying to convince Angie as to where best to photograph the elephants," recalls Jonathan. "I was sure a low-angle shot was the way to do it, but she just brushed me away like an irritating fly and continued to use her 500mm lens. Then she went on to win with one of the shots she had taken that day. When I looked at my photos from that shoot they were a joke compared to Angie's beautifully composed shots."

However, not wanting to take all the credit, Angela admits that without Jonathan's knowledge of wildlife she wouldn't have been able to take many of her photographs. "He is supreme in his understanding of animal behaviour," she acknowledges. "For instance, if there's an eagle on the tree he'll clue me and say it's just pooped so it's going to fly... now. Although I've picked up a lot through osmosis over the years, it's nothing quite like being with Johnny in the 4WD.

JONATHAN SCOTT



↑ Snow Hill Island in the Weddell Sea, Antarctic Peninsula. Emperor penguins raise a single chick each year - if it survives the Antarctic winter. Adults recognise each other and their chicks by their voice and feed only their own offspring. Consequently one of these chicks went hungry.

Because I come from a much more bohemian and artistic background I wouldn't know that key information, so for me it ups my game hugely because he puts me in the right position and gives me the clue at the right time of exactly what behaviour is going to happen."

It's their very different approach to photography - and their different personalities - that seems to help them rub along so easily as a team. "What I like is when it gets frantic - when all hell breaks loose and you've got to pick up your camera at a moment's notice and grab the action or move the car or get into

position," explains Jonathan. "Whereas Angie likes to be away from all the cars and people, spending hours looking for the perfect shot. Angie is a much more centred and calm person; I live more on the adrenalin side of things. I like mayhem."

It's difficult not to place a gender stereotype on their different approaches, but even Angela agrees with me when I tentatively point this out. "I think we have very different styles, but they're also very complementary. We're so lucky to get a portfolio of images that has both a sense of the female and ▶

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Dead Vlei (Dead Marsh), Namibia,  
southern Africa. The baked earth of  
Sossusvlei (famous for its towering  
sand dunes) is one of the harshest  
environments on the planet and a  
landscape photographer's paradise.

ANGELA SCOTT



ANGELA SCOTT

the male within our pictures, so we can offer a broad body of work."

Intrigued by this, I ask if it's obvious when looking through their portfolio who has taken particular shots. "Yes, I think you can tell the difference. Part of it will be because a lot of the big lens shots will be Angela's - she uses big lenses to create a more intimate photo - and a lot of the wide-angle shots will be mine, because I love the wider view that takes in the whole landscape," explains Jonathan. Angela says: "I tend to do things that will make Johnny's heart shatter, like chop ears off and get terribly close into the picture, which he would never naturally do. I was actually editing some of his pictures of giraffes earlier today; there were about 12 giraffes and every single one was perfectly placed, whereas I would've probably gone in and chopped their heads off." "Basically, Angie likes to break the rules, whereas I tend to be a lot more, how would I put it, obedient," adds Jonathan.

While Africa is at the heart of much of their work, they've travelled widely over the years and have visited all seven continents. And if there was ever going to be a place that stimulated both of them as much as Africa, it was Antarctica.

"With the surname Scott I've always felt a huge connection to Scott of the Antarctic, but also to his son Sir Peter Scott, who was one of the founders of WWF [originally the World Wildlife Fund], a wildlife artist, a naturalist and a TV presenter. In many ways he covered all the fields that I wanted to do and has inspired me greatly. Through him, Antarctica was always somewhere I wanted to visit, and also because it was such a contrast - the colours, the landscape and the wildlife - to Africa," says Jonathan.

It was in 1992 that he and Angela made their first journey together to Antarctica on the expedition cruise ship *MS Explorer*, and since then they've returned regularly, visiting the Antarctic Peninsula, the Falkland Islands, South Georgia and the emperor penguin breeding colony at Snow Hill Island in the Weddell Sea. Their book *Antarctica: Journeys to a Fragile Eden*, published in 2007, celebrates this wilderness of a continent that they've fallen in love with over the years. In stark contrast to the mainly uninhabited continent of Antarctica, India also ignites their joy at being photographers. "When we first started with our photography in Africa, Angela was

↑ **A family of elephants slake their thirst in the Luangwa river, Zambia. The elephants were fascinated by the arrival of a grey heron searching for fish, attracted to the spot by the ripples of water. [The image earned Angela the 2002 Wildlife Photographer of the Year Award].**



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doing some people photography, but for me it was all wildlife.

But then we got incredibly involved with the Maasai people who live in the Mara and began photographing them and the beautiful ceremonies. So for us, travelling to India we experienced the amazing colours, the people and the wildlife; although the emphasis in India is on the people more than the wildlife."

Jonathan and Angela's success as a photography duo reads like any relationship between two individuals, whether it's personal or professional; if there are strong foundations, a willingness to make compromises and utmost respect for each other then there's a high chance of longevity. Few people could, and would want to, work as closely as they have over the past two decades, but they're acutely aware that what they have is a rare thing. As Jonathan says to me at the end of our conversation: "The combination of the two of us sharing this core thing, which is the love of life in all its forms - its people, its wild places and its wild animals - and doing something together with it creatively to make a living is an incredible blessing. We are terribly, terribly lucky." ■