

THE ART OF WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY

A Creative and Philosophical
Guide to Capturing Natural Artistry

with Rachel Bigsby



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INTRODUCTION

Wildlife photography is more than capturing an image.

It is the art of witnessing, of storytelling, of learning the language of nature through patience and presence.

There is a moment, just before you press the shutter, when the world falls silent. The wind carries only the sound of wings, the light shifts, and for a brief instant, everything aligns. In that moment, there is a story waiting to be told.

**This book is not just another guide to wildlife photography.
It is an invitation to see differently.**

My approach to wildlife photography is to capture the 'natural artistry' of wildlife.
But what does that really mean?

To me, natural artistry is not something imposed. It is already there, waiting to be seen.

It exists in the fluid grace of a seabird riding the wind, in the delicate interplay of light and feathers, in the stillness before a dive, and the chaos of a storm-tossed colony. It is not just about beauty, but about essence, about revealing the deeper story of a species through light, movement, and perspective.

I like to think of my work as an intersection of art and science, where composition and mood are as important as an understanding of behaviour, habitat, and ecology. It is this fusion that allows me to create images that are both artistically profound and scientifically informed. Not just beautiful pictures, but meaningful ones.

In the pages ahead, I will share with you not the technicalities of how I achieve this, but the mindset behind it so that you, too, can discover the natural artistry of wildlife through your own lens.

Let's begin.

CHAPTER ONE: MY PATH TO A **WILD** LIFE

From my earliest days, my life was entwined with the wild.

My late grandfather, a naturalist and fisherman, instilled in me a reverence for nature. He taught me not just to look—but to truly see.

At six, I joined the Scout Association, unknowingly setting the course for my future. Every weekend was spent immersed in the outdoors—hiking rugged trails, reading the land, and sleeping beneath the stars. Nature became my classroom, and I, its eager student.

It wasn't until my early teens that photography entered my life. A childhood best friend introduced me to it, and soon, I was creating with an iPod camera, mesmerised by the way early morning light danced on dewdrops and silhouetted dandelions. Her interest faded, but mine only deepened. What began as a playful pastime became a genuine passion.

Everything changed one fateful afternoon when I encountered a Northern Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*), gliding effortlessly along the cliffs just a stone's throw from home. Its stiff wings, oceanic mastery and defiance of gravity captivated me. My very excited research upon returning home revealed its ties to the Albatross, a bird of legend.

I was hooked; and seabirds became my world.

At 18, I scraped together every penny I had saved from my two jobs to buy my first DSLR, a Nikon D3300. Armed with my new gear, I ventured further, seeking out new species and new challenges. Opportunities soon followed. My images, now gaining attention on a social media account opened in February 2015, led to my first industry job with BBC Earth and, later, Channel 4 and a feature on BBC Springwatch, sharing my love for Northern Fulmars.

It was a pivotal moment; for the first time, I began to believe that wildlife photography could be more than just a passion—it could be my purpose, but at such a young age working for minimum wage, I had to think outside the box.

Determined to forge my own path, I turned to volunteering, trading hard labour for proximity to wildlife. I scrubbed compost toilets on remote islands, scythed bracken under the beating summer sun, repaired broken barn doors with tools twice my age and patrolled fragile seabird burrows by day—so that at night, I could have the island and its seabirds to myself.

CHAPTER ONE: MY PATH TO A **WILD** LIFE

At 20, my world shifted again. I met Northern Gannets (*Morus bassanus*) for the first time at RSPB Bempton Cliffs. Great, prehistoric-looking birds with eyes as blue as the sea. Overwhelmed with joy, I stood on the viewing platform and wept, knowing that I had found another muse.

For years, I balanced passion with practicality. I worked three jobs while dedicating tens of unpaid hours a week to my photography, grabbing any opportunity for experience and exposure. The weight of it was suffocating. But I held onto a single truth: this dream was worth fighting for.

Then, everything changed. In 2022, after nearly a decade of relentless effort, Nikon Europe responded to my emails, recognised my work and invited me to become a Nikon Creator. This partnership meant more than a sponsorship, it was my first paid photography job, my first international assignment, and the validation I had fought so hard for. What followed was a whirlwind. I became a wildlife photographer for the National Trust and the RSPB, I worked on Sir David Attenborough's 'Wild Isles' and I photographed for National Geographic.

But the greatest moment came when I captured 'The Art of Courtship', an image of two Gannets, framed against the rugged cliffs of Shetland. That image changed my life.

In October 2023, it won the 'Natural Artistry' category in Wildlife Photographer of the Year, officially launching me into the industry I had long dreamed of.

Just weeks later, I was crowned the Portfolio Winner in Bird Photographer of the Year, taking home one of the industry's most prestigious titles.

Suddenly, the doors that had once been locked swung open. I used my newfound status as leverage. By 2024-2025, my career had taken me from the Arctic to the Antarctic twice, I found myself leading international workshops, I became an ambassador for the RSPB and I was granted access to document seabirds in ways I had once only dreamed of.

I created these opportunities not by waiting, but by forging them myself.



'The Art of Courtship'

Each summer, the sculpted sandstone island of Noss, Shetland, hosts more than 22,000 Northern Gannets which return to breed on the ledges carved by the elements. As I stood in a small boat in turbulent sea swell at the foot of the towering cliffs, I noticed the perfect pair, isolated on a lower ledge, intertwining their necks and framed by streaks of guano. I immediately saw potential, and realising my vision would be tricky, anxiously awaited the few seconds that the boat aligned with the rocks, hoping for a chance. Everything came together - the courting Gannets drew up against a dark hollow on the guano-painted curves of sandstone and I got my shot, enhancing the complementary shapes in black and white.

Northern Gannet (*Morus bassanus*)

Winner of 'Natural Artistry' in Wildlife Photographer of the Year (2023).

CHAPTER TWO: BEYOND THE TRADITIONAL WILDLIFE SHOT

Wildlife photography is often seen as a pursuit of technical perfection—razor-sharp images, textbook compositions, and a clear, unobstructed view of the subject. We are taught to follow the rules: to fill the frame, ensure eye contact and use the rule of thirds. But in doing so, we risk creating images that, while technically sound, lack something more profound.

The first time I captured an image that truly moved me, it wasn't what most would consider a 'perfect' wildlife shot. The focus was soft, my shutter speed far too slow at 1/60, and the background was cluttered. Yet the light was golden, piercing through the delicate wings of an Atlantic Puffin in flight. Its movement became a blur, a fleeting whisper of motion, its form dissolving into the atmosphere like a breath on the wind. And still, that image stayed with me, not for its technical perfection, but for the way it felt.

It was at that moment that I realised wildlife photography wasn't just about documentation. It was about storytelling, emotion, and artistry.

Wildlife is rarely neat or predictable. Birds do not pose against uncluttered backdrops, nor do they always sit obediently within the golden ratio of a frame. The wild is chaotic, fluid, and full of surprises, so why should our images strive for perfection instead of embracing reality?

When I first started photographing seabirds, I found myself waiting for the perfect conditions; a clear view, soft light, still air. I believed that the best wildlife images were taken in golden light, those perfect sunrises and sunsets that bathe everything in warmth and bokeh.

But during one particular week volunteering on an island, I was met with nothing but rain, fog, and mist. The light I longed for never came. I was heartbroken, believing that all was lost. For days I waited, hoping for a break in the weather. It never arrived. I felt defeated, until I realised that this was the reality of the seabirds I had come to photograph. Their world was not always bathed in golden light; it was wild, unpredictable, shaped by storms and shifting skies. And so, instead of resisting the conditions, I began to work with them.

I experimented, using the white-out conditions to my advantage and explored the creative possibilities of my camera. Without realising it, I had stumbled upon high-key photography, a style that would later become one of my defining artistic signatures.

That week changed the way I saw light forever.

CHAPTER TWO: BEYOND THE TRADITIONAL WILDLIFE SHOT

Rethinking wildlife photography requires courage. It means stepping away from conventional wisdom, letting go of expectations and trusting in your own vision.

Not every image needs to be perfect. Not every subject needs to be rare. What matters is how your images make you feel, the connection they create, the stories they tell. So, embrace imperfection, follow your instincts, find what moves you and let it shape the way you see. Because when you break free from the mould, when you stop looking for the perfect shot and start feeling for the right one, that is when your photography becomes something more.

That is when it becomes art.

Finding Your Own Style:

One of the greatest challenges for any wildlife photographer is finding their own visual voice. In an era where thousands of photographers chase the same subjects, in the same locations, using the same techniques and technology, it is easy to feel lost in a sea of similarity.

But the truth is, your best work will come when you stop chasing what is expected and start following what moves you.

I do not choose my subjects based on what is popular. I am drawn to seabirds because they fascinate me. My connection with them informs every frame I take. This is what, I feel, makes my images unique. Not the species, but the way I see them.

To develop your own style:

- Photograph what you love, not what you think will impress others.
- Experiment with creative techniques such as motion blur, backlighting, negative space.
- Find emotional depth. Ask yourself:
What do I feel in this moment? How can I translate that into an image?
- Embrace imperfection. Nature is unpredictable, and sometimes, the most unplanned shots carry the deepest impact.

CHAPTER THREE: THE KEY TO CAPTURING NATURAL ARTISTRY

Over the years, I have taught myself how to use my camera through a process of trial and error. I've followed my heart and pointed my lens in the direction of things that intrigue me, and unintentionally, adopted a way of capturing natural artistry. You may already be familiar with the term 'natural artistry', or, you may be wondering what it actually means.

By definition, 'Natural Artistry' is:

"Reflecting the simple beauty or complex artistry of nature whilst remaining true."

-Wildlife Photographer of the Year

At its core, natural artistry is about seeing beyond the obvious.

It is not just about photographing wildlife, it is about capturing the patterns, textures, forms, and details that make nature a masterpiece.

The artistry of the natural world is everywhere.

It is in the delicate sculpting of stone by wind and waves, it is in the intricate texture of feathers, the perfect symmetry of a butterfly's wings, and in the motion of a seabird in flight. It is in the chaotic elegance of crashing waves, the subtle gradient of colour in the sky and the unexpected geometry of a flock in motion.

These elements have existed for millions of years, long before a camera ever documented them.

Our role as photographers is to recognise, frame, and translate these moments of natural artistry into one still image.

But to do that, we must first learn how to see it.

CHAPTER THREE: THE KEY TO CAPTURING NATURAL ARTISTRY

Finding Natural Artistry:

Natural artistry is not found only in rare species or remote locations. It exists everywhere. Most photographers are drawn to the personality of their subject. But artistry is often found in the details that surround it.

Textures : The rippling surface of the ocean, the rugged cliffs shaped by time, the fine barbs of a feather catching the wind.

Patterns : The swirling formations of kelp in the water, the mosaic of a colony, the precise speckling of a bird's plumage.

Shapes & Forms : The elegant curve of a neck, the sharp geometry of a beak, the fluid arcs of moving water or wing.

Negative Space : A lone subject against a vast sky, an isolated footprint in fresh snow, the emptiness that makes a subject stand out.

The more we train our eyes to see the artistry in nature, the more it will appear to us. When we step back from the idea that every shot must be a clear portrait, we start to see nature as an abstract work of art. We stop looking for an animal and instead, we look for patterns, textures, shapes, and compositions.

The Beauty of Simplicity:

Some of the most artistic wildlife images are not the ones packed with detail, but the ones stripped down to their purest form.

Minimalism in nature can be breathtaking. Removing distractions allows you to focus on the essence of the subject—its form, its movement, its place in the environment.

When you embrace simplicity, you begin to see how powerful negative space can be. A wide, empty sky feels vast and limitless. A tiny subject against an endless expanse of snow feels lonely, fragile and resilient. By letting go of the need to fill the frame, we give nature space to breathe – and in doing so, we create something far more evocative.

CHAPTER THREE: THE KEY TO CAPTURING NATURAL ARTISTRY

Embracing Imperfection:

Through leading my workshops, I've come to realise that one of the biggest misconceptions in wildlife photography is that an image must be perfect to be powerful.

But in nature, imperfection is artistry.

- A seabird battered by wind, its feathers ruffled, tells a deeper story than one in still air.
- A broken eggshell on a ledge is just as powerful as the chick that once hatched from it.
- The blur of movement and the chaos of a storm add energy and life to an image.

When we stop chasing technical perfection and start embracing the raw, unpredictable beauty of nature, our images gain depth. Rather than waiting for a clear, textbook moment, learn to capture the truth of the wild—the struggle, the resilience, the untamed spirit.

The Importance of Creating in Camera:

With the rise of Photoshop and Artificial Intelligence, many photographers have lost the ability to be truly creative in-camera. The ease of manipulating an image in post-production; removing distractions, removing backgrounds, introducing new elements and altering reality has blurred the line between artistic photography and digital construction.

But the essence of natural artistry is that everything is captured in-camera.

No removals.

No introductions.

No artificial reconstructions of reality.

The challenge and the beauty of natural artistry is finding and framing moments as they are, using light, composition and timing to create something extraordinary. It is about working within nature's parameters, not altering them to fit an aesthetic ideal.

The role of a wildlife photographer is not to manufacture beauty, but to recognise and translate it. There is a distinct satisfaction in knowing that your image was created honestly.

CHAPTER FOUR: WHAT MAKES A PHOTOGRAPH UNFORGETTABLE?

What does make a wildlife photograph unforgettable?

Some images linger in the mind long after they have been seen.
They hold something more than just a subject, they hold a feeling.

The most powerful wildlife photographs don't just document an animal; they evoke emotion, stir curiosity, and invite the viewer into the scene.

But how do we create such images?

How do we move beyond capturing what is there and instead, capture what is felt?

The answer lies in understanding four key elements that I believe shape the emotional weight of an image:

Light & Colour : The foundation of mood, drama, and atmosphere.

Shape & Texture : The hidden artistry in patterns and form.

Environment & Story : The setting that adds depth, scale and emotion.