



Thursday, May 27, 2010

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Welcome to the 1st day of the Out of Africa BLOGcast and what a great day it has been. Travelling of course is always the downside, but the excitement of being on safari is one that is hard to beat and overcomes even the grumpiest traveler (Tracey – that is Andy by the way!!!) Hey, whose writing this! Anyway we are finally here and what a place here is. I am sitting on a wooden veranda overlooking the sweeping bend of a river sipping a cold beer - it is a tough life being a wildlife photographer! We are based at Kaingo Camp, home of Derek and Jules Shenton of Shenton Safaris, deep in the South Luangwa valley in Zambia. It is a really beautiful spot as the hot dry season is reaching its peak and all the wildlife is congregating around the Luangwa River and the lifeblood that it gives.

It always takes us a few days to get into the feeling of a place but this afternoon we really hit the jackpot big style. Unlike a lot of other places in Africa the vehicles are open here, which means great all round visibility and therefore better opportunities for observing wildlife. It also means that you have to watch your movement carefully in the vehicle and always wear dark clothes; it really feels like how safaris used to be and for us is how safaris should always be.

Our first encounter happened within a few minutes of leaving camp as we slowly edged up to a female Thornicroft Giraffe (a subspecies of the Southern Giraffe) and her young calf. It was a really beautiful few minutes as the young chap nudged closer to the safety of the female whilst taking in every opportunity to give us the once over. A lovely encounter to start our safari with, too many people just ignore giraffes on safari which is a shame as they are really beautiful and special animals.

Always keen to checkout the local lions we moved to the area of the Mwamba pride, who are over 20 in number and have a tree climbing habit that I wanted to capture. Alerted by some circling vultures Derek edged the vehicle slowly around some bushes and there in front were 10 sets of eyes fixed firmly on us! Lions are awesome big cats to spend time with and this pride was no exception with an abundance of small teenage thugs who were desperate to romp around and cause havoc. Since the sun was getting lower in the sky and the day was cooling off (thank god for that), the lions were becoming more active and it was not a surprise when two of the females got up and walked off up the road. Seeing the opportunity for the late light I asked Derek to spin around and to get ahead to them, which he did by cutting a wide circle on an adjacent road; it is the number one rule of all safari photography that you never cut an animal off from its path and great guides like Derek do this instinctively. We were now slightly off to one side of the lions track but they were coming right towards us, eyes fixed directly on our every move. Slowly I leant down over the side, using my eye-level finder to give me a lower angle than usual, and fixed my autofocus right between the eyes of the leading lion; the light was breathtaking, really atmospheric and incredibly orange. She obliged by staring right back into the lens, just for a moment but enough to send me a message which I received loud and clear. I carefully took the shots I needed then slowly drew back into the vehicle and watched her walk slowly by. They disappeared one by one into the bushes as this was now their time for hunting, and a time when we wanted to leave them alone. Heading back we found a nice spot in the plains, cracked out the cold beers and waited for the full moon rise which promised to be spectacular. It was, simply awesome, and a perfect round off to our first day and one helluva nice lion picture. See you tomorrow!!!

3. Hippos and Lions



Welcome to day 2 of the **Out of Africa BLOGcast**. This BLOGcast is really testing our skill as photographers as the images that you see here are virtually straight from the camera, with little colour correction possible other than some small tweaks in our raw software. These are usually done by candle light, under the stars whilst elephants wander through the camp, which teaches you to get everything done very quickly indeed! Since I have no idea how the images will look when uploaded to the website (which we are doing by satellite phone every lunchtime), please forgive any slight colour in-balances. At the end of the day all of these images are straight, without any manipulation, which is how wildlife photography should be. Now down to the action! Day 2 of our *Zambian* adventure started with an amazing sunrise, the red orb of the sun rose slowly out of the horizon pushing its gentle light across the plains. It was one of the finest sunrises that we have seen in all our travels in Africa

and a great start to what was to become an amazing first full day in South Luangwa. To make the most of the stunning sunrise we travelled all of 1 minute from camp and parked the vehicle on a bend in the river overlooking hundreds of hippos. They had been walking around the camp all night long, hardly making a sound as they are surprisingly light footed for something so bulky; hippos are only dangerous if you surprise them and get in the way of their safe path to water, something which unfortunately you might only learn once! Now, about 15 minutes after dawn, they had all gathered back in the water apart from a few stragglers who were lumbering around on the flats. Hippos are brilliant fun and the air was filled with their wheeze-honks (the official name for their general method of chatter) and every few minutes scuffles would break out which usually resulted in large sets of teeth being shown.



As the sun rose higher we decided to move a little further along the river and sit in Shenton Safaris' purpose built hide, right in front of a large group of hippos. The mother of all fights broke out about a minute after we got into the hide, with two hippos erupting continuously out of the water in front of us; in between the fights they dung fanned at each other, a practise best left undescribed but you should get the general idea. In all we stayed over an hour in the hide and the fight was almost continuous throughout, a brilliant punch-up to start to the day!

As the heat started to ramp up we decided to sit in another Derek's hides overlooking a waterhole that we knew the Mwamba lion pride loved to frequent. Slowly, led by Derek and Jules as always, we crept into the hide and immediately saw the pride sleeping under a tree well above the waterhole; sleeping is perhaps an understatement, lions do not sleep they totally zonk out with legs sticking out in all directions. We sat and waited and waited and waited until finally the lions suddenly became alert. One moved off behind into the bush and another took up position down the bank, just out of site of the waterhole. All was quiet and we waited, until finally three warthogs appeared and headed towards the water, completely oblivious to the waiting danger. As soon as they reached the water two of the lions ran from behind them and trapped one against a steep bank, the others setting a new record for the vertical hill climb in the warthog Olympics.



The lioness wrestled the warthog to the floor and was busily strangling it when the rest of the pride arrived at speed and started a tug of war over the unfortunate warthog, which was now screaming a sickening cry..



Eventually the warthog disappeared in a mass of lion bodies, but then suddenly re-emerged and for a few seconds we saw the terror in its dying eyes; a female lion finally ended its struggle for life.



Africa is a tough place and one where life and death are a constant cycle. Now that is what I call an eventful morning! The afternoon, well that may be for tomorrow, let me say that we managed to get the tree climbing lions that we wanted. But this is Africa and you never know what might come along tomorrow, see you all for now and hope that you like the pictures!

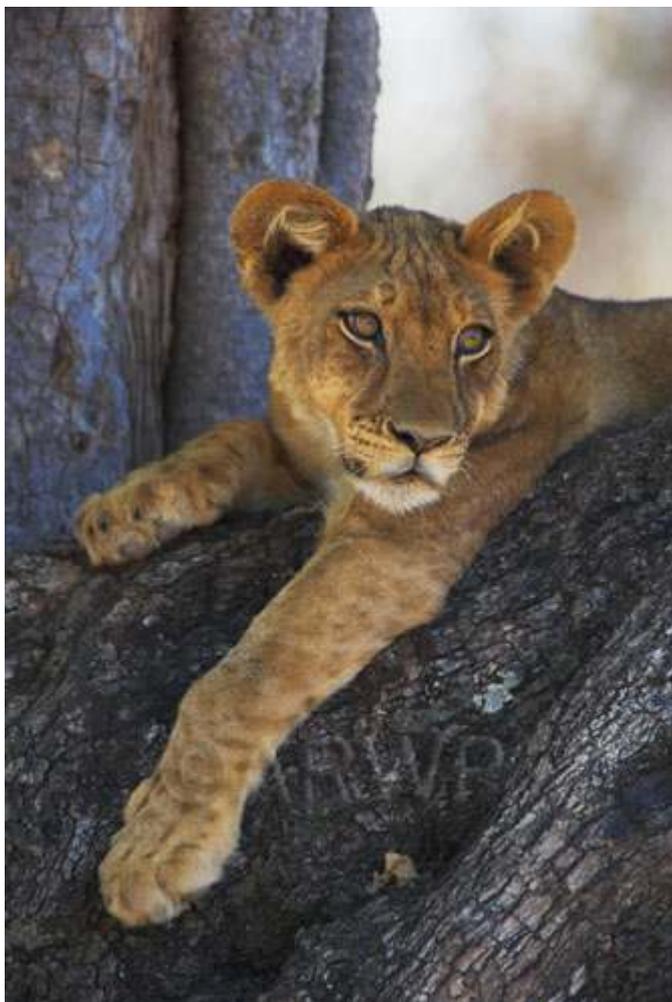
4. The Mwamba pride



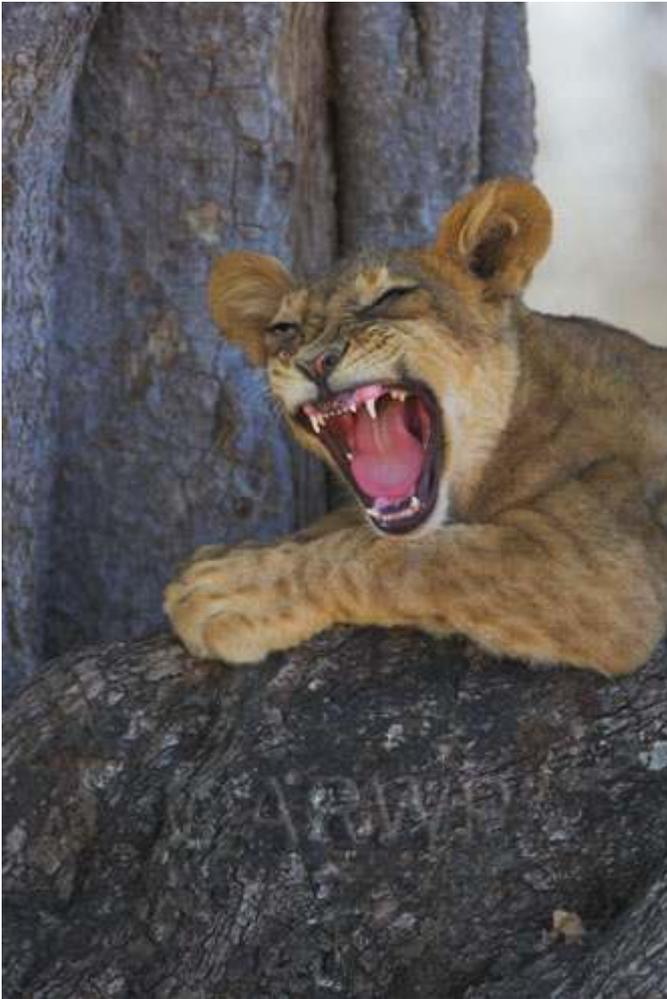
Day three and things are really beginning to hot up here. Not only is the daytime temperature building (and unfortunately the night-time as well) but the lions are starting to really giving us a show. For the past two days we have stuck with the Mwamba pride and concentrated on little else as this is the only way to get those unforgettable moments. Yesterday you will hopefully have seen the kill pictures, nothing award winning but still some nice images. Today I have put up a nice collection of lion images and tomorrow hopefully I will have something different; that is the thrill of Africa you never know what you are going to get, especially when we have menacing rain clouds that have been building up here all day.



The Mwamba pride consists of 32 individuals but the group we are focussing on consists of 5 females (one very preggers), two teenage thugs and three adorable 3 month old thugs-in-waiting. They are occupying an area right next to our bush camp so it is pretty easy to follow their antics on a daily basis. Luckily they are not coming into the camp at night, that honour is given to two elephants who are happily helping themselves to the figs above our bedroom each night! It is wonderful to watch them in the moonlight but not exactly something that you can sleep through.



Late last night we came across the Mwamba pride lounging around the base of a small tree with a cub about 6 ft off the ground. She was happily sleeping in the crook of a tree and our quiet and respectful approach meant that she stayed there and was cool about our presence.



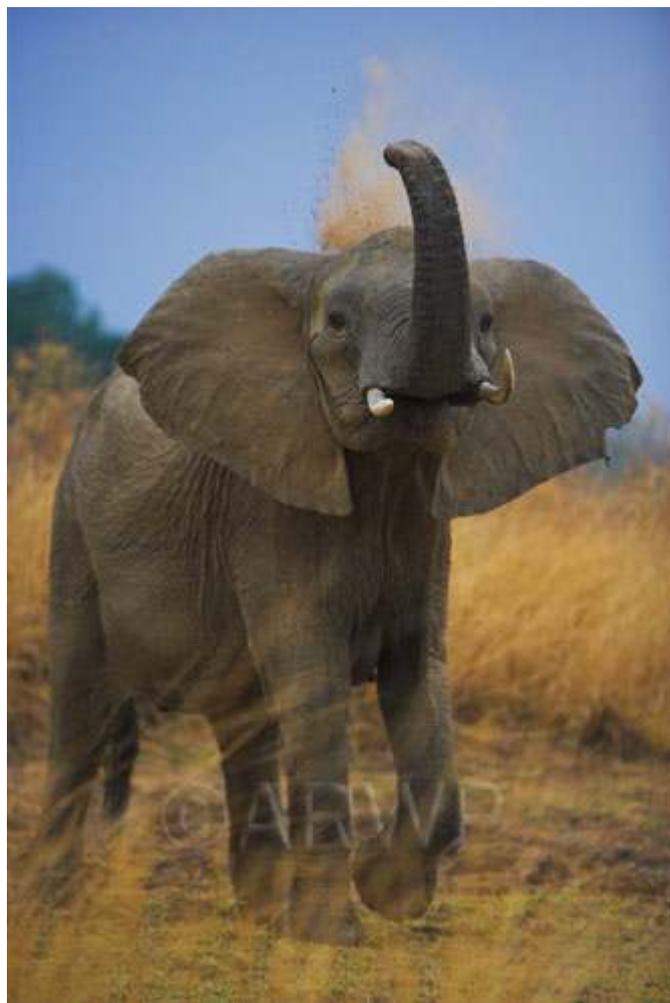
She actually looked totally at home in the tree, something which cannot usually be said about lions, and was still there when we left.



The evening was spent with one of the females and her cubs who gave us a real special treat with some lovely interaction. It is always so special to see the interaction between a mother and her young and the bond between lions is something really

wonderful to see. It is made even more special as we are in an open sided vehicle and there is nothing between us and the lions except trust. Anyway that is all for now as time is short; it is getting near game drive time and I have a new hide for lovebirds that I want to sit in for an hour or two. Hopefully if we do not get any rain I will be in touch again tomorrow, if not then check the blog again the day after! C u later.

5. Elephant encounters



6.

Despite the fact that we have been shooting under cloudy skies we have still managed to get some nice images to put on the blog. I always say to fair weather photographers that any muppet can take a good picture in sunlight but it takes a creative muppet to get something decent when the light is not so perfect. In these conditions we generally concentrate on elephants since we can avoid using the sky excessively as they are in forest environments. The elephants here have suffered a fair amount of poaching and thankfully people like Derek Shenton and his colleagues in the South Luangwa Conservation Society have really started to make an inroad into this. This means that the elephant population in South Luangwa is healthy again and we are constantly finding small family groups of 5-6 animals which shows that the population is healthy. We came across one such group yesterday morning who were busily feeding on ground plants in a dry river valley. They have a unique technique for doing this, shared by elephants all over Africa, and combine a tight grip with the trunk and a deft kick with the foot to uproot a tasty plant from the ground. Two of the herds females were happily doing this, whilst the herds two youngsters had other things in mind. After spending several minutes wrapping their trunks together they started a game of push and shove, with one giving ground to let the other push, then swapping round. It started to get a bit serious and competitive and was abruptly ended by a scolding grunt from one of the females.



The youngsters, like two naughty schoolboys, fell into line with the herd again and we could see how their mothers were showing them which plants were best to eat. Elephants are wonderful animals to spend time with and are very spiritual in their bond between each other and in their relationships with us. They are a real talisman for African conservation and wildlife management and long may that continue as they are the symbol of Africa.



Stop Press!!! Bambi found alive and kicking in South Luangwa!



Well not quite but this very young Puku is certainly cute and this is the first time that we have managed to get any shots of him after several days of effort. His mother and attendant males keep him at a distance from us so it takes a lot of skill from Ian Salisbury (our great new driver as Derek is needed back at main camp) to get close without spooking them. Still what a cute little chap he is! This morning we saw a newborn Puku which could hardly stand and had very wobbly legs so hopefully we will get some images of him for the BLOG before we leave.



At the end of the day the sun gave us a beautiful red sunset which we watched sipping a champagne to celebrate our last night at Mwamba camp. Tomorrow we move to Kaingo camp (local dialect for leopard) which is situated on the river and should allow us to concentrate on leopards for a few days which will be exciting. With these thoughts in mind I was about to pack my camera away when a hippo decided to emerge from the water and cross the flats in front of us, it was a beautiful and evocative moment that I hope this final image captures for you all. See you tomorrow!!!

Techo Bits and Pieces – you may have noticed that I have deliberately kept this blog jargon free as many of the readers are non photographers. To be fair to the photographers however here are a few photographic bits and pieces that you might find interesting. For all of my photography I am using only three lenses (all Canon), a 500mm IS F4L, a 70-200mm f2.8L IS with a 1.4x teleconverter and a 20mm lens; all are mounted on an EOS 1Ds MK2 body. Everything is stored on the brilliant new Jobo GigaVu Evolution downloaders, they have done a remarkable job in the heat and dust. Not only are these units several times faster than any other downloader but they have an on-the-go backup function to an external hard drive; this means that we can quickly, simply and reliably create a backup of our images.



You can see the downloaders here connected to a backup drive (a Jobo GigaOne) all being charged from a solar panel at the camp. A brilliant device and I will be doing a full review later on for Warehouse Express. Another brilliant device is the Visible Dust Arctic Butterfly, which is keeping our DSLR sensors clean in this incredibly dusty environment; without them we would be forced to spend hours cleaning up the dust on photoshop. Our images for the blog are processed using a combination of RawShooter premium and Adobe LightRoom with BreezeBrowser used for file management. So there you go, enough for now as I need to go and fight with the satellite to upload all this stuff!

7. Safari Days



8.

OK back online again, sorry about yesterday but the thunderstorm took out the satellite connection and we could not upload any images. The rainy season is not due to start here in South Luangwa for another 3 weeks so these past couple of days have just been a passing front that took its time to push through. Now though the clouds have gone, the heat has returned and the light is sharp and clear as all the atmospheric dust has been washed away. This is a shame as the amazing sunsets / sunrises have disappeared for the time being, although they should return in a day or so when the dust starts to build up again. I know that a lot of photographers like the clearer light of early season Luangwa, I much prefer this time of the year as the dust adds something to all the pictures.



The stormy skies have allowed us to start taking some landscapes of the area; these are challenging as they have to be done from the vehicle (for safety reasons) and so are all hand-held. For this reason we always use Canon image stabiliser lenses as they give us the edge we need to get the shots that help keep us in business. I know that I am not the greatest landscape photographer in the world, but I do not want to be, all I want to show you is the wonderful habitat that is South Luangwa.



Over the past few days you have seen some of our wildlife shots and so I thought it would be fun to show you behind the scenes a little at our camp – Mwamba. It is a very remote bush camp, set next to a dry river valley and right in the heart of lion and elephant country. Dining is completely alfresco and the food is great – we had lamb curry two nights ago and it was superb.



Our rooms are really great, with an outside bathroom and a brilliant throne under the stars! Quite the best view that I have ever had whilst being on the job although the other morning it was very disconcerting to have an elephant feeding on figs 3 feet away on the other side of a small wicker fence. A brilliant experience though and one that teaches you to be quick and not to linger!



Our morning starts at 4:45am with drums waking us up and we generally leave by 5:10 am, with me usually the worse for wear after a hot nights sleep. Generally we try to have a plan for the morning game drive and this usually involves a visit to the Hippo hide, checking out the lion hide and then taking advantage of any other opportunities that present themselves.



So far we have been damn lucky with lions, elephants, buffalo and hippos, with the leopards being elusive so far which is par for the course for us (although we have seen 2 so far we have struck out photographically). Our morning ends at about 11 am, with stops for coffee along the way, and then it is back to camp for some brekkie and coffee. I then usually head off to main

camp to upload the blog whilst Tracey ensures that all of our gear is scrubbed clean from the dust (more on this later). We usually start in the afternoons about 4pm, with no plan whatsoever and with the attitude of “lets see what is out there” which is refreshing change from the hustle and bustle of our other African work. The pace here is very relaxed and it is a wonderful place to be on safari for anyone who can see beyond the mad rush to get pictures. The day ends at around 6:30pm, at the moment we are not night driving (this will change soon), so we head back to camp for a cold beer (the coldest in the Luangwa valley I am told), good food and a shower before bed. Usually the camp is shutdown by 8:30pm which is great as I need a lot of sleep to get my creative juices flowing!!!

(NOTE FROM JULES: Andy and Tracey had booked the entire camp and so we were working to their timetable. Normally Mwamba runs night drives (just like Kaingo) which finish around 8pm, with dinner starting at approximately 08.30)

9. Leopards and Vultures



10.

Being on safari is not always a relaxing past time and too often in the past I have been too stressed about getting pictures to really enjoy it. I am sure that a few of my guides would agree with this too! But here things are a different pace, and I feel much more relaxed for it. I cannot really put my finger on it but think that it is a combination of the Derek & Jules Shenton safari experience, our guides Ian and Derek and the unpredictability of the wildlife. Unpredictability, what am I on about? Simply that a lot of places that I go, like the Mara, are very predictable and it is easy to find all the wildlife that you want without looking too hard. You might think that as a photographer this is a good thing, well sometimes it is, but as a WILDLIFE photographer I also like the challenge of getting close and watching wildlife too. That is what South Luangwa has given to both Tracey and myself, the expectation of going out in the morning without a major plan or a clue what we are going to see or where to find it. It is simply brilliant and something which we are going to do much more of in the future.



The rains have now disappeared and we are back to a cycle of red sunrises / sunsets with baking hot sun in between. Yesterday was a phenomenal day for game viewing and along the way we got some good pictures too. It started off early with our usual visit to the one of the Hippo overlooks at sunrise, which is a nice time to sit, relax, drink coffee and be creative. Then we moved out into some forested areas, listening intently for any squirrel / puku / impala alarm calls which would indicate the presence of one of our spotted friends. We saw baboons feeding in the early morning light, a family group of giraffe with the cutest youngster ever and the usual collection of plains game but no leopards. Then, just as we were about to move to another area, a leopard appeared from nowhere in front of us and started walking across the plain.



Leopards are really the ghosts of the forest, they can just appear and disappear at will, which makes encounters with them so special. Ian and I worked well as a team, moving the vehicle ahead of the leopard's path so that we could get a decent shot without obstructing it in anyway. She walked from a bush right in front of us, stunning, absolutely stunning, then climbed a very dense ebony tree. Leopards frequently do this in the heat of the day to take advantage of the cooling wind and sure enough she took up residence right at the top. We waited for 2 hours but she did not move a muscle, apart from raising the occasional eyelid or flicking her tail at the annoying flies, so we left and went back to camp to recharge our batteries and my belly! Not the greatest leopard image I know but a good start considering we are looking for other stuff at their peak time.



Our first port of call in the afternoon was the leopard, she was still fast asleep and after two hours wait we decided to try elsewhere. Almost immediately Tracey spotted a white-fronted bee-eater swinging merrily from a branch next to the road. Ian edged the vehicle up, I focussed and shot, a real team effort and not too shoddy a shot of a magically coloured bird.



Off to the swamp next and we came across a group of vultures squabbling over a few small remnants of a Puku which the lions had killed the night before. They were flying in in some numbers so I picked out a whiteheaded vulture and tracked it in, only taking this image just before it landed. Vultures are misunderstood, just like hyenas, and both are species that Tracey and I love photographing as they never disappoint. Finally we arrived at the swamp, the light was low and we quickly found the Hollywood pride of lions (so named because they are real film stars). They were doing what most lions like doing best, sleeping! In fact they were so asleep that they were unaware of an approaching family group of elephants; they had a small baby with them which would mean trouble for the lions. As if on cue the lions woke up just as the matriarch of the elephants saw them and launched a full on charge straight at them. Ian had positioned us perfectly, so instead of getting fleeing lions (they were hidden by the grass anyway) I managed to get this very aggressive elephant.



Once the lions had disappeared she calmed down and brought her baby out to within 5 feet of the vehicle, moments like this are too special to photograph so we watched with smiles on our faces. There is a time for photography and a time to realise why we do this wonderful obsession (it is not a job!).

That evening, under the cover of darkness, we had an awesome game drive without a single photo being taken. We saw lions hunting puku, a leopard climbing a tall tree and jumping at roosting guinea fowl, a honey badger confronting a lion and winning with honour, two porcupines and an amazing white-tailed mongoose. I was so glad that we had packed the cameras away and were just enjoying being out and watching through red spot lights. Like I said at the start being here has been an amazing and relaxing experience and next year I will be bringing a few people put here with me to get the same total safari experience. Watch this space for more details. C u tomorrow, who knows what I will be showing you by then!!

Techo Bits & Pieces - probably the most challenging image of the day was the vulture coming in to land. Hand-holding my 500mm lens requires a good body technique (not a good body I hasten to add!) and an IS system that I trust. I set the DSLR to ISO 100, set the autofocus to AI Servo with all points lit up and followed the vulture in until I wanted to take the shot. It is essential to give the predictive autofocus system a few seconds to lock on for great results.

11. A lovely Leopard

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