

# BEST-LAID PLANS



Thomas P. Peschak's current assignment has taken him completely out of range this month. He'll be back in his regular slot in the October issue, as up-and-coming photographer Shem Compion steps into the breach.

One of my favourite sayings harks back to the days of the 1980s' TV show *The A-Team*, when Hannibal would say, lighting a thick cigar: 'I love it when a plan comes together'.

This was how I anticipated ending my July visit to Mashatu Game Reserve in Botswana. My excitement stemmed from an idea I'd had for a very specific shot on my previous visit.

Each time I'd been to Mashatu, I'd seen herds of the reserve's famously relaxed elephants crossing this riverbed and I wanted to place a wide-angle lens low on the ground, right next to their daily route on the 'elephant highway' to get a wide and scenic image of these large animals. Of course, as soon as I came prepared (nature and Murphy being as they are), the elephants changed tack completely. Such is the joy of working with wild subjects!

For four days I studied the habits of the elephants with the rangers. We followed any herd we found, anticipating its movements and placing the camera wherever we could. This worked very well and I managed to get some great shots, but the image of elephants crossing the river still eluded me.

Day eight arrived and, with it, one last opportunity to get my desired image. On leaving the camp in the morning, we found a herd in the mopane trees. As the elephants turned towards the Mojale River, we drove ahead and tried to anticipate how far up the river they'd walk and where they would exit. A nervous and wet minute in the water followed, as I set up the camera in a dead bush right on the river's edge. Then we waited.

Eventually the elephants emerged 100 metres upstream. As the ranger enticed them closer with some soft words, the herd moved slowly towards the camera. For the next agonising 20 minutes, they filed past it, ignoring the frantic clicking completely. After a week of hard work, I was finally getting my shots. 'I love it when a plan comes together!' I thought.

At precisely that moment, a bull elephant emerged from the bush and strode into the river. He was in musth and clearly had one thing on his mind. He walked past my camera and immediately heard the shutter click. Snaking his trunk into the bush, he sniffed. My celebrations ceased abruptly as I watched the bull grab my camera and toss it into the thick, wet mud.

It stopped clicking, obviously, and the elephant left it alone. After he and the herd had moved on, we were able to retrieve the camera, which a quick inspection revealed to be still working. So, I got my shots, but learned a valuable lesson: don't start celebrating until the last elephant is safely out of the way.

## IMAGE DETAILS

**Photographer:** Shem Compion

**Subject:** African elephant *Loxodonta africana*

**Camera:** Nikon D300, 10.5 mm fish-eye lens, f 8, 1/160 second, ISO 400, no flash, remote release