



Flamingo flamenco

For wildlife photographer Shem Compion, a visit to Lake Nakuru in Kenya was a total assault on the senses. "It's one of the most amazing birding spectacles in the world," he says. "The noise and the smell and the constant movement of the flamingos... It was something else."

Nakuru, one of the many alkaline lakes in Kenya's Great Rift Valley, is surprisingly easy to access – it's a roughly two-hour drive north of Nairobi by tar road. Because of the abundant algae that thrives in the warm water, it's one of the few places where you can see flamingos in great numbers at any time of the year.

In the 1960s the lake was home to over a million birds, but numbers have decreased since then due to pollution and climate change. Still, seeing upwards of 60 000 flamingos was something Shem will never forget. They proved tricky to photograph, however.

"They're very wary birds and tend to huddle together when they spot

something approaching," he says. "To observe them behaving normally you have to be very patient. In the baking heat on an open mud flat, it's easier said than done."

But it's not just the flamingos that make Nakuru special. The lake also harbours large populations of pelicans, cormorants and other waterfowl, and Lake Nakuru National Park is home to black and white rhino, hippo, lion and leopard.

It's the interaction between animal species that fascinated Shem: "If you're taking pictures at a place like Nakuru, try not to zoom in on one animal; rather look at the overall scene and work on your composition to tell the story of the whole environment."



SHEM COMPION
On my bedside table: Eric Hosking's *Classic Birds: Sixty Years of Bird Photography*
In my CD player: The National, with Johnny Clegg close at hand

◀ FLIGHT OF FANCY

"My intention was to get an 'up close and personal' shot of the birds, so I positioned my camera next to the water and connected it to a remote shutter release. Then I retreated and waited patiently for the flamingos to come closer.

"Luckily a hyena disturbed the birds and they flew right over my camera. I hit the release button like crazy, thinking that I was capturing lots of frames, but when I went to retrieve my camera there was only a single image captured – this one."

HOW? Nikon D200, 12 – 24 mm lens, shutter speed 1/750 second, aperture f9, ISO 250, GorillaPod, remote shutter release.



◀ SHADES OF NAKURU

“There is a lookout point high on a hill overlooking the lake and the surrounding fever tree forests. Each time I went up there I spent over an hour just watching the life down below.

“The colours and the movement of the animals against the contours of the lakeshore make for some interesting patterns and shapes. I composed this image to include the buffalo and Thomson’s gazelle grazing on the shore and the swathe of pink flamingos in the blue water.”

HOW? Nikon D300, 200 – 400 mm lens, shutter speed 1/750 second, aperture f9, ISO 400.



▶ TICKLED PINK

“Forget about Swan Lake; the flamingo ballet at Lake Nakuru is one of the most beautiful dance scenes you’ll ever see.

“I spent a long time watching these males squabble over a smaller female. Soon it turned into a synchronised dance as the birds twirled and swayed in the shallow water – a dance no choreographer would be able to replicate.”

HOW? Nikon D300, 200 – 400 mm lens, 1.4 x converter, shutter speed 1/1 000 second, aperture f8, ISO 400.



◀ INTRUDER ALERT

“A lot of hyenas hang about on the lake shore, scavenging for dead flamingos. Many people consider them to be dirty animals, but they actually perform a necessary clean-up job.

“Late one afternoon I watched this individual run into the shallows and scatter birds in every direction. It was a striking scene, full of tension. Instead of zooming in on the hyena I framed the scene quite wide to emphasise the scale of the lake and the pandemonium that the single hyena was creating.”

HOW? Nikon D300, 200 – 400 mm lens, shutter speed 1/400 second, aperture f4, ISO 100, with a beanbag.

▶ FLAMINGO TAKEAWAY

“This was a once-in-a-lifetime sighting. I watched a hyena run straight into the flamingos, flushing a flock of about 4 000 birds into the sky. It found a dead flamingo and walked back to shore with its prize.

“Another hyena tried to steal the bird from this one and it turned and ran – straight towards me. I stayed very still and framed the hyena vertically to get its reflection in the shallow water. It eventually passed by within a few metres – so close that I could smell its wet fur! Not very pleasant.”

HOW? Nikon D300, 200 – 400 mm lens, 1.4x converter, shutter speed 1/640 second, aperture f8, ISO 250, with a beanbag.





◀ PELICANS IN THE MIST

"Each morning at the lake I was greeted by a stunning scene of mist rising off the water as thousands of birds began their morning bathing ritual. The flamingos and pelicans tend to congregate in different areas of the lake. To get this shot, I headed over to 'pelican corner', where these great white pelicans gather on a sandbar.

"I stalked up to them and captured this beautifully lit scene of the birds preparing for the day's fishing expedition."

HOW? Nikon D300, 200 – 400 mm lens, shutter speed 1/320 second, aperture f7.1, ISO 500, with a tripod.