

# New horizons



**Frans Lanting** is established as one of the world's great wildlife photographers, but in recent years he has shot both wildlife and landscapes. He talks to **David Clark** about his work



**PREVIOUS PAGE** A thunderstorm over the karoo landscape, Nieuwoudtville, South Africa

**ABOVE** Quiver trees at dusk, shot by Frans in Nieuwoudtville, South Africa

**RIGHT** An aerial shot of a flock of greater flamingos, taken in the Manambolo Delta, western Madagascar

**A**SK Frans Lanting what makes a good wildlife photograph and he gives a typical carefully considered response. 'That's a hard question to answer', he says. 'You could equally ask, what makes a good photograph? A good image needs to engage people; it needs to transport them somewhere else. It can simply be something that engages viewers just because of its pure beauty. It can show people something they've not seen or heard about before. There are many different ways of making a good photograph.'

'In the case of wildlife photography, a good photograph is one that connects the viewer with the life of an animal that they don't ordinarily see. I also aim to really try to get inside the lives of these animals and that takes time.'

Frans, 53, has been getting inside the lives of animals since taking up photography full-time at the relatively late age of 28. Before that, he says, he was 'messing around with photography, but not doing it seriously.' He reached the top of his profession within ten years and has remained one of the world's great natural history photographers, displaying a superb use of colour and movement as well as a highly developed eye for animal behaviour.

His list of major assignments during his career includes spending months with seabirds on Pacific islands, camping among giant tortoises inside a volcano crater in the Galapagos islands and searching for the last white



**TOP** Red-eyed tree frog, Barro Colorado Island, Panama

**ABOVE** Coastline with morning clouds, Big Sur, California, USA

rhinoceros in central Africa. He has also lived among elephant seals on California's west coast in the US, followed a pride of lions for a month in Africa, and photographed penguins in South Georgia and Antarctica. Each new collection of images he produces reveals another series of excellent pictures. However, in the past few years he has shot more landscapes, and they are similarly stunning.

Frans was born in Rotterdam in the Netherlands, but has lived in Santa Cruz, California, for more than 20 years. He had originally intended to have a career in economics, but abandoned his master's degree in environmental planning to take up photography. He later said that he felt 'a bad day in the field is better than a good day in the office.' Since then he has won major competitions, such as World Press Photo and the BBC Wildlife Photographer of the Year awards. He has produced a number of acclaimed books, including *Eye to Eye* (2003), *Jungles* (2000) and *Penguin* (1999).

He has also contributed to *National Geographic* magazine since 1985. His relationship with the organisation is a good one and it has been beneficial to both parties. Assignments come about either because he has suggested them, or because the magazine has a need for coverage of a particular place or subject.

Since 2001, Frans has been a Photographer In Residence for the National Geographic Society. 'This



is a small group of six senior photographers who are relied upon for their experience and insight into how the society can utilise us to keep abreast of things,' he explains. 'My specialism is natural history, and wildlife and conservation. It's a great organisation and a great platform in which to publish. The society gives me the opportunity to do things that would otherwise be hard to do. I can push the boundaries of what is possible by working with them.'

In recent years Frans has continued his extensive travels, shooting in Alaska, Madagascar, Botswana, New Zealand, India and South Africa. 'What I do is search for a place with opportunities and things happening that can be reported on – places where science and conservation efforts are occurring,' he says.

His work has diversified from the wildlife photography with which he became globally famous, and on recent assignments he has shot many landscapes and floral close-ups. He singles out his work in Madagascar and Botswana as being the most important in terms of helping shape people's perceptions of a place.

Frans is known for taking meticulous care of his equipment, and his kit varies greatly depending on the project. 'It's very different when you go to a tropical forest in India and when you go to windswept islands off New Zealand,' he says. 'I use mainly Nikon 35mm equipment with a great variety of lenses from a 14mm to an 800mm. I also use lots of strobes, including the Nikon Speedlite. I use medium format as well, especially for aerial photography or for landscapes.'

However, the majority of equipment for Frans's wildlife work is 35mm. 'It's fast and immediate, and there's a lot of good accessories,' he says. 'And when you go to remote locations it's important that the equipment is portable.' He also uses complicated remote camera installations and 'all kinds of other specialised contraptions.'

Whatever the assignment, his thorough approach requires a considerable amount of equipment to be taken. On one trip to Borneo many years ago, he took a staggering 23 suitcases of luggage, but says he has now got it down to 'a starting point' of around 200kg of gear. The equipment can be highly specialised for photographing certain animals. 'For example, in New Zealand I set up an infrared video camera at the site of a rare bird where I couldn't get very close,' he says.

'This bird, the kakapo, is very rare. It only comes out at night and I was photographing behaviour never captured on film before. The infrared video camera was cabled to a tent about 100m away and from there I was able to see what the bird was doing. Then, at selected intervals, I'd trigger my own camera through another radio slave, which was concealed nearby at the same vantage point as my video camera. Among other things, that shoot

**ABOVE** Frans photographed the rare Kakapo using a complicated technical set-up on Codfish Island, New Zealand

**RIGHT** An aerial shot of a bush plane flying over the University Range, Wrangell St Elias National Park, Alaska

**'When you go to remote locations it's important that the equipment is portable'**



**LEFT** Sacred ibis landing in a field of daisies, Namaqualand, South Africa

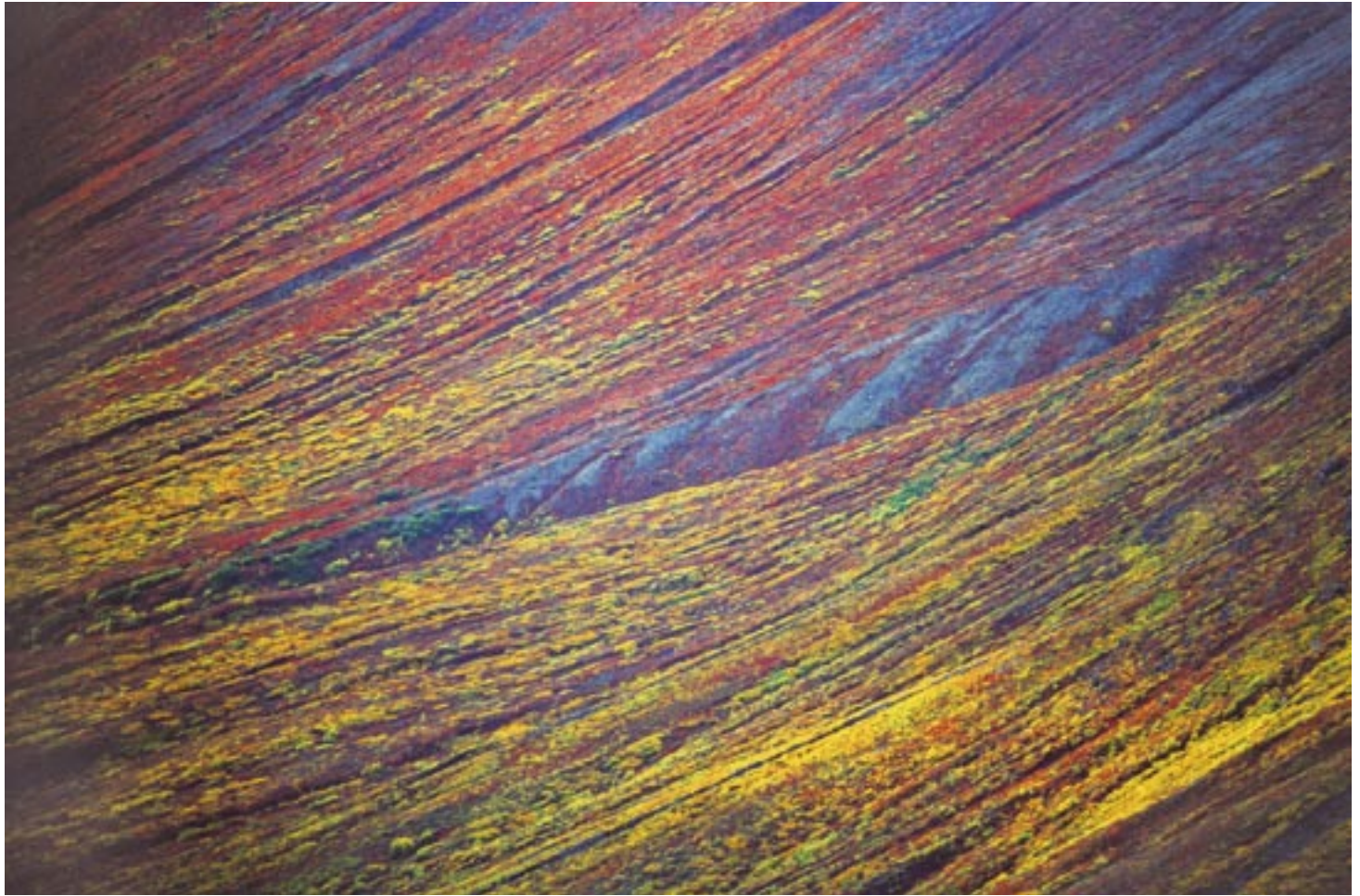
**FAR LEFT** Geyser erupting at night, Rotorua, New Zealand

involved trekking through the forest with car batteries to power the whole system.'

Frans has incorporated digital equipment into his armoury, though not always to shoot his final pictures. 'On location I use digital cameras to verify exposures in complicated lighting situations,' he says. 'I also use them to capture original images, but I still mainly use a lot of film cameras as they're much simpler and more reliable in extreme environments.' Digital equipment, he continues, brings the advantage of immediate results. 'The disadvantage is that you take yourself out of the situation and you end up fiddling with arcane digital details instead of engaging yourself with the subject,' he adds.

The one thing Frans couldn't do without, though, is the help of his assistants, particularly local people recruited to do everything from interpreting the local language to lugging heavy gear up steep mountains. He also employs locals who know the wildlife very well. 'If projects are complicated or exotic, I can be much more effective if I work with local people,' he says. 'Teamwork is vital, and local expertise is an essential ingredient in what I need to be successful.'

Once set up, Frans blends into the background as much as possible and his experience in observing animal behaviour becomes vital in getting the shots he wants.



Although patience is an important quality, it's only one of the attributes needed for successful wildlife photography. 'Patience is important, but it's not absolutely vital because some people are less patient than others yet still produce memorable photographs,' he says.

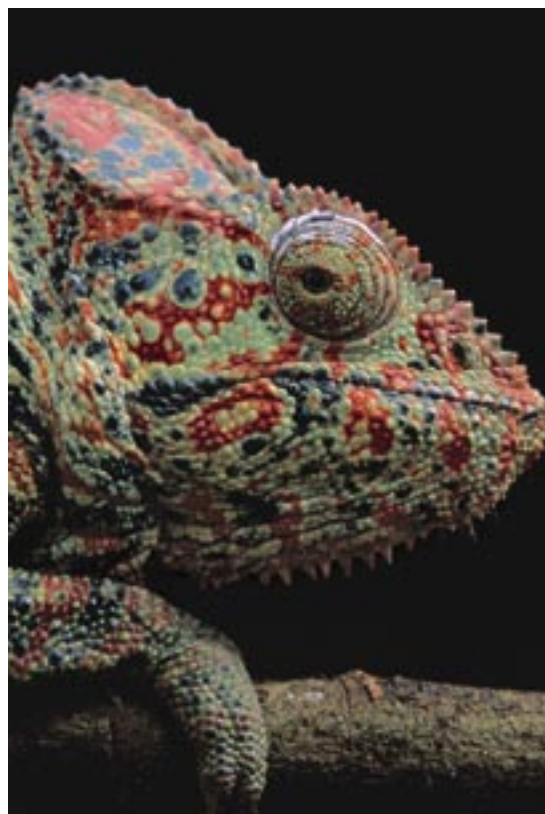
'In my opinion, natural history and wildlife photography require you to be active: you need to figure out where to go, when to be there and what to do. You have to deal with photographic equipment, and the logistics of finding a place to stay at night and surviving. There really are a whole lot of skills and attributes involved.'

Despite his numerous photographic expeditions in different parts of the world, Frans has never been injured by any of the animals he has photographed. 'Big animals are fairly predictable in how they behave and if they have any aggressive tendencies you're going to be forewarned,' he says. 'At that point it's best to back out and avoid the situation.' Small animals – insects and microbes – are the ones that have caused the problems. On one occasion, while photographing in the Congo, Frans contracted cerebral malaria, which nearly proved fatal. He was transported to a hospital in Rotterdam just in time. Despite such dangers, he is about to go on a three-month assignment to southern Africa, though he's reluctant to say exactly where he's going or what he's going to photograph.

As a final word, I ask him what advice would he give to photographers who want to follow in his footsteps and concentrate on wildlife. 'Pick a project and stick with it,' says Frans. 'Whether it's something living in your local neighbourhood or something exotic, you've just got to have your own point of view about it, and that comes from engaging yourself in the subject. The most important thing is to find something you feel passionate about, because that is what you will need to carry it through.' **AP**

● For further information on Frans Lanting and to see more of his work, visit his website [www.franslanting.com](http://www.franslanting.com).

***'The most important thing is to find something you feel passionate about'***



**ABOVE** An aerial shot of Bremer Valley in Wrangell St Elias National Park, Alaska

**LEFT** An Oustalet's chameleon, photographed in Madagascar