

# Queen

of the Light

**Piper Mackay** has spent the last 12 years photographing the wilds of Africa, having swapped a career in fashion for a life behind the lens. She explains her journey into photography, how Africa captured her soul and her new infrared work with WPM

Interview by Lorna Dockerill

### How did you first get into photography Piper?

I was actually in the fashion industry for about 25 years. For more than a decade I designed garments and then went into textile design. I was in junior sports wear, so really young and funky stuff. I had a big change in life and a friend of mine said you need to go and do something you've always wanted to do and I'd always wanted to go to Africa. I'd dreamed of going on safari since I was a little girl. I had every DVD on wildlife and stories in Africa that one could possibly own.

So I signed up on a trip which was safari, culture, tribes – the whole mix. It was an incredible safari and on the list recommended a 300mm lens. I said "I'm going to want to take great photographs of lions." So I went down to my local camera store and said, "I need a 300mm and a camera. Help me, what do I need?" That's really how that all started. I'd never held a professional camera and had no idea how to use one. I did not know what aperture meant. I knew nothing. It was right when digital came in. "What cameras are you familiar with?" the guy at the camera store asked me. "Well," I said, "what kind do you have?"

It really came down to brand recognition, as when he said Canon the name was familiar already because we had Canon copiers in our office. So I bought my first digital camera, the 10D, a CD burner and a 75-300mm image stabilised lens. "Can I hire you to teach me how to use it?" I asked the guy. He came over for a couple of lessons and off to Africa I went.

### What happened when you got to Africa for the first time?

The first place I went to was Tanzania in



the Serengeti during the migration. The minute my feet hit that rich, red African soil it was magic. The sights, the sounds, the safari engine. I fell in love with Africa. A lot of people do, but it got into my soul so deep that I sat on the Serengeti and said 'OK, I'm going to be a wildlife photographer.' Like, I can do that in a couple of months! I went back three times in five months and have continued to go

to Africa for the last 12 years. It was on that first trip that I sat there and really felt deep in my soul that I needed to live one year of my life in Africa. That's really been part of my journey and there were several failures along the way. There were several times I packed up my stuff and went and had to come back. It took me ten years to make that dream happen. If you never give up, just keep going, get through all your

obstacles, I really believe everyone has the power to obtain their goals. My passion for Africa has never let me down when things get really tough.

### How has your fashion background helped to shape you as a wildlife photographer?

It's interesting, even more so now, because I worked with texture and colour and have >





> recently started shooting with infrared. I got to a place in my photography where I was feeling stagnant. I was still extraordinarily passionate about my subjects, so my desire wasn't to go out and seek other places that made me passionate. I was still very passionate about Africa but after shooting it for 12 years I was struggling with finding newness and passion through my lens. So

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I decided to convert one of my cameras and go infrared. It's been amazing and has become all about the subtleties of colour and texture.

**That brings me onto my next question. There are so many African wildlife pictures these days and you have been covering Africa for a while. What are you trying to portray in your pictures**

**and how do you go about making them different?**

Sadly we're losing wildlife at an alarming rate. It has stabilised in parts of Kenya - they really work hard on conservation and Namibia and Botswana follow closely behind that. I'm trying to capture them in their environments in a kind of timeless grandeur. I want people to look at these animals and feel extremely

connected to them in a very emotional way. I think so many times we're too quick to pick up a camera. I have a lot of experienced travellers and photographers travelling with me. They get into a new environment, get excited, put up the camera and forget about everything that's important about photography. It's about your passion and connection to your subjects. They just start snapping away, taking a rather ordinary shot of an extraordinary subject.

**How do you find working with infrared? Have you had to adopt a different approach while shooting with it?**

Yes, very much. Infrared is tricky. It sees just beyond the red spectrum of what we can see, what we call invisible light. You never know what you're going to get. You need to set a custom white balance every time you're shooting a new environment. One positive thing is that you need to have bright light. I'm on the equator a lot of the time and we have around 15 minutes of good light when that sun shoots up, so the next two or three hours is magical for infrared. It reads off what's living, so even if it's cloudy and you have warmth it's going to read off grass, skin, trees, foliage and clouds. It produces this mystical timelessness that I'm trying to implement now into my photography. I've recently wanted to go back into more of a fine art style and infrared is allowing me to do that. I'm seeing a familiar world in a completely unfamiliar way.

**What are the challenges of infrared?**

One of the problems with infrared is focusing, because it focuses on a shift so it doesn't necessarily focus on what you see through the lens. I converted an old >

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> 5D Mk II, but it works best when it reads directly off the sensor, which works best with live view technology. Yes, I can use live view but it's very hard to see off the back of the camera when working with a DSLR. It's difficult to get sharp images of moving subjects. What I love about it is that it brings out tones and subtle colours that cannot be mimicked in Photoshop. I don't care how good you are.

Infrared is making me see light in a whole different way. A lot of times, as most people do, we reach too quickly for our 500mms and shoot too tight, especially when starting out with shooting wildlife. With infrared, all it makes me want to do is pull back because you're working off what I call the living light. You want all the environmental shots.

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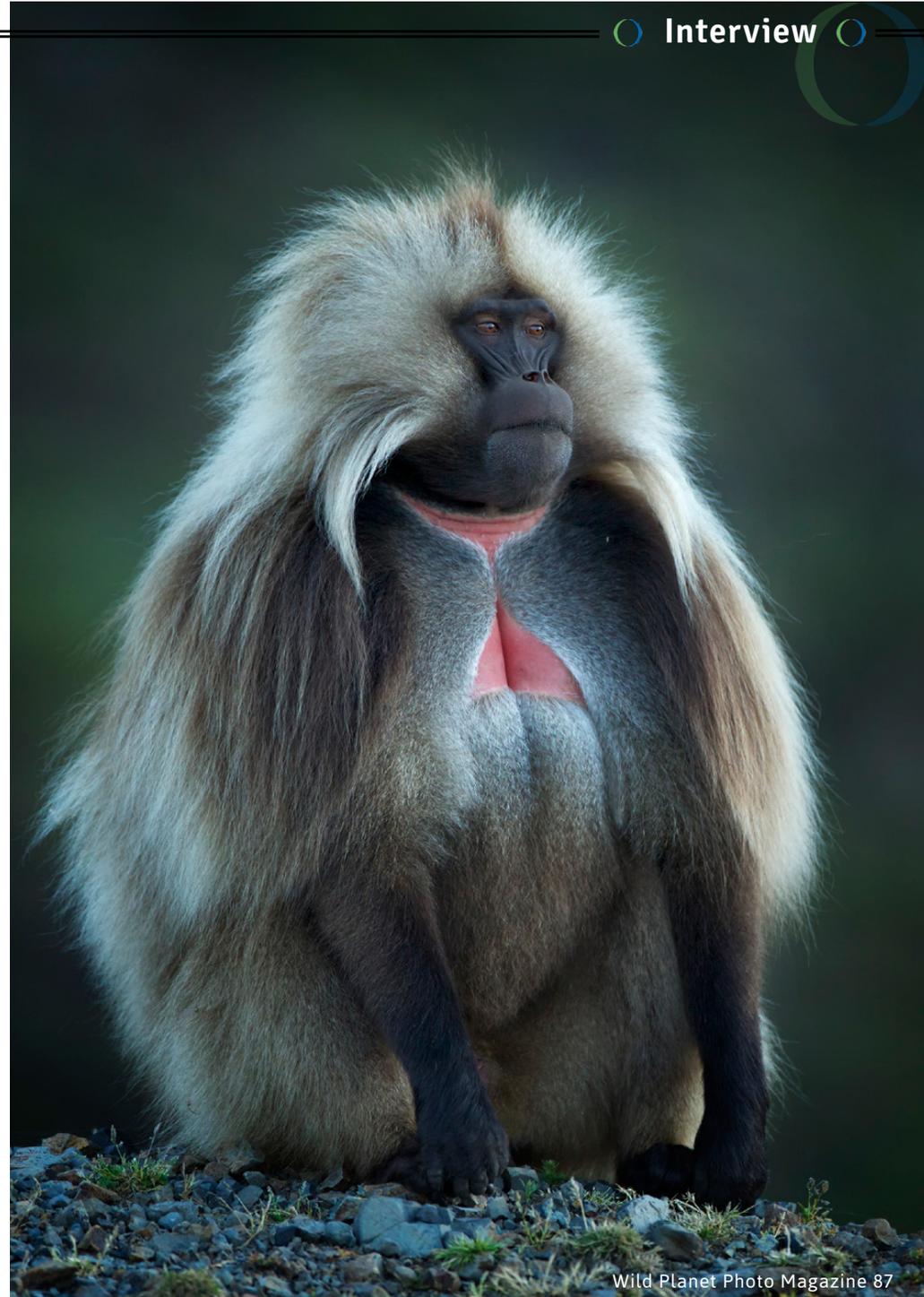
**You drive your own vehicle while photographing in the Maasai Mara. That sounds pretty dangerous and difficult with a camera in tow. How do you manage that?**

I'm stuck a lot. You know you're going to break down. When I'm there during the off season, we have radio, we have phone and I have people I can call to rescue me. We all work together, stop and pull each other out. Last year I spent three months in the Maasai Mara and the first part of the season I drove myself. I really liked it because I could position myself much more quickly. I'm always thinking 'what's my light, what's my background?' To me, those are the two most important questions I always ask myself. A lot of

times even with an experienced guide, they are not seeing your vision the same way you are. I want to be two inches here, or four inches there and it makes a big difference. Once in a while I become geographically disappointed, so not exactly where I thought I was going, but once you know your landmarks you're OK. It's relatively safe, you know you're going to get stuck and have a puncture. It's just part of the adventure.

**Let's talk about your primate pictures. They are very different from your Africa photographs. What species are they?**

Mountain Gorillas and Gelada Baboons which are found up in Ethiopia. I could just sit there and watch them for hours. Their family behaviour, the hierarchy, the fighting, training of the young ones. I love primates and I'm drawn to the subjects that have unique family behaviour. When you first come to Africa it's, 'the big cats!' but they sleep 22 hours a day. If you want to photograph lions, the best time to do it is in the morning. They're much more active then and usually hunt pre-dawn. When with a group of elephants that family behaviour is consistent. Grazing, going to the swamps, they're very active all day. The same with primates, they are very active within their families all day. The best way to photograph a lot of primates is in diffused light. You want the clouds. It's good to try and go during the rainy season which can be very messy but very productive photographically. >





> **People choose the migration season for their photography safaris. What do you love about photographing wildlife there during that time?**

The action is absolutely non-stop. It is the most adrenaline rushing, exciting wildlife experience any where in the world. You can feel the tension, you know the predators are on the grasses waiting. Just to see that is so mind blowing. It's really like you're sitting in a wildlife documentary. This will be my 13th season in the Mara - it never gets old!

**What's the best piece of advice someone ever gave you when it comes to photography?**

That's a tough question. Passion, patience and persistence.

**And the biggest lesson you've learnt?**

I believe deeply that you need to photograph what you're most passionate about. Don't chase an image. I find too much that people are chasing their images instead of shooting their passion. I spend so much time in Africa because I'm so passionate about it. This is such a difficult career, but if you're so passionate about it you'll keep moving through any obstacle that's thrown in front of you.

**Which cameras and lenses do you use for your wildlife work?**

I use the Canon 1DX and the 7D. I use the 7D basically for the crop factor, it helps cover a range of my lenses. I mostly shoot with a 500mm, a 70-200mm and a wide-angle, the 16-35mm. I would say that 90 per cent of my work over 12 years has been shot with those three lenses. I use a 24-70mm for infrared. Canon came out with a 200-400mm and I'd love to

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have that lens but I also wanted my Land Rover. As a single working photographer, I have to make compromises. So if Canon wanted to give me the 200-400mm that would be a workhorse lens for me.

**Any advice for fellow wildlife photographers?**

The number one mistake that I see people make is the shutter speed. Generally, in wildlife photography having the eye sharp is very important, keeping your shutter speed up. These days, you want to have

the shutter speed triple the length of your lens. It used to be double, but if you're in the middle of a migration with all that action happening and really want to capture a sharp image, it should be triple the size of your lens. That's the technical side, but you do really need to take time to get to know a subject. Learn how the animals are going to greet each other so you're ready, in the light. You'll know where the action is going to happen and the angle you want it coming into your lens.



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**PIPER MACKAY**

Piper Mackay is a cultural documentary and African wildlife photographer. Her images have graced the pages of Nature's Best, National Geographic, National Geographic Explorer, WWF calendars, birders and numerous travel publications. Her passion for the natural world has grown into a lifelong commitment to inspire others to explore, respect and preserve the beauty of our fragile planet.  
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