Sunday Times Wildlife Photographer of the Year

WINNER
LEAVING THE COMFORT ZONE
By Michael Viljoen

IN the flooded Okavango in Botswana in April, Knysna-based Michael Viljoen caught this lion — which had just spotted a crocodile lurking beyond the frame.

"Wildlife photography is about brilliant light and excellent opportunity — I was fortunate to get both in this scene," says Viljoen. "Apart from creating decent depth of field, and choosing a shutter speed that would arrest movement without blurring it, I underexposed to not burn the bright highlights in the lion's face.

"For a sense that we were right there in the water, we parked in a low position. The lion's eyes evoke danger. The water's hue adds to this ominous mood."

After some growling, the lion swam across the channel.

Lions aren't known for their love of water, so why did he do it? He had his eye on a lioness, of course ... and she had already crossed to the other side.

FIRST RUNNER-UP
WHERE GIANTS ROAM FREE
By James Kydd

James Kydd's aerial shot of an Okavango elephant herd contains forceful elements that place the subjects in rare perspective. The circular palm bush holds the eye and the elephants convey a real sense of raw Africa.

"This image was taken for the Okavango Wilderness Project during a 2 500km mokoro expedition following the Okavango River from its source in Angola to its end in the Kalahari," says Kydd, of Cape Town.

He adds that showing these giants from the air "portrays them as they are: a delicate part of a much larger system. Africa loses an elephant every 15 minutes. If we cannot protect the water that the continent's elephants depend on for their survival, we may lose them ... and a piece of ourselves." Follow @intotheokavango on Instagram and Twitter.

SECOND RUNNER-UP
SUSPENDED SYMMETRY
By Lizet Grobbelaar

A fleeting frame that allows the viewer to marvel at nature's beauty and design, this shot shows a booted racket-tail hummingbird feeding on fuchsias in the Tandayapa Valley, Ecuador. Photographer Lizet Grobbelaar of Pretoria says, "A hummingbird beats its wings 80 times a second and rotates them in a figure eight to allow backward flight." To get this shot, she "had to use flashes that offered a capability of 1/16 000th of a second".

The Sunday Times Wildlife Photographer of the Year wins photo gear worth R110 000: an EOS 5D Mark III and 24-105mm L lens kit, an EF 85mm f1.2 L USM Mark II lens, and an EF 70-200mm f2.8 L IS US Mark II lens. The first runner-up receives gear worth R70 000: an EOS 6D camera, 24-70mm f4 L lens kit, and an EF 100-400mm f4.5-5.6 L IS USM Mark II lens. The second runner-up wins photographic gear worth R57 000: an EOS 7D Mark II body camera, an 18-135mm IS STM kit, an EF 70-300mm f4-5.6 L IS USM lens. Each winner also bags a Pixma Pro-1 photo printer worth R11 599. Prizes courtesy of Canon: **www.canon.co.za**

The Sunday Times Travel Photographer of the Year and partner will jet off to the Maasai Mara in September 2016 to watch the Great Migration on an all-expenses-paid, seven-day luxury safari worth R120 000. The first runner-up will also experience the Maasai Mara on a seven-day luxury photo safari worth R60 000. The second runner-up wins a four-day wildlife photography workshop at the Bush House, Madikwe Game Reserve, worth R22 950. Prizes courtesy of Wild Eye.

Sunday Times Travel Photographer of the Year

WINNER
LIFE ON THE TRACKS
By Sharon Hoffmann

THE people of Ploenchit district in Bangkok, Thailand, go about their daily life along the city's train tracks.

The juxtaposition of the "Chanel" girl with the surrounding poverty makes this image powerful, the panel noted. It makes the viewer ask questions and gives context. The strong composition and detail combine for a memorable image that talks about people and place.

It also features a side to the city not seen by tourists.

"A friend in Bangkok took us out to the tracks to introduce us to the real city," recalls Sharon Hoffman of Johannesburg. "The hotel warned us and said, 'No, you mustn't go there. It's dangerous.' But we found no aggression or begging — the people were warm and wonderful. It was quite an emotional experience."

FIRST RUNNER-UP
SHHH! DO YOU SEE WHAT I SEE?
By Sarah Isaacs

Sarah Isaacs of Cape Town shot a band of Holi festival spectators on a town square in Udaipur, India, through the creative angle of a camel's legs.

"I was not so much interested in the procession as the people's reaction to it. By seeing the event through the spectators' eyes, the viewer gets the sense of what it's like to be there."

She made several attempts at capturing the crowd and eventually she wedged herself between a truck and the camel, which was "waiting to be part of the procession".

"I was so close I could touch it," she said.

Her quiet presence is hardly felt, rendering a spontaneous scene. But she's "no voyeur".

"I never want to feel like a spy. It's important my subjects acknowledge they're okay with my presence, even non-verbally — and I think this shot demonstrates that ... one or two people are looking at me, but they seem relaxed," she says.

"No matter how good they are, I delete a photo if I sense I've offended someone. It must feel right. I'd make a terrible war photographer," she jokes.

SECOND RUNNER-UP
PRIMEVAL BOUNTY
By Jayson Naidoo

After taking a "normal sunrise shot" of the Eastern Cape's famous Hole in the Wall, Jayson Naidoo of Desainagar, KwaZulu-Natal, looked for "something different".

"I had noticed a few fishermen crossing at certain points, so I waited for one to move past the hole as the water hit its side," he says. The result is a synergy of background action and leading lines that guide the eye to the subject in a fresh, eventful scene.

"The image is about the message. I focused on a local who earns his sustenance from the area, which catches the destination's authenticity."

SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR 2015 JUDGES

Wildlife category
■ Gerry van der Walt: Wildlife photographer, Wild Eye co-founder
■ Greg du Toit: Wildlife photographer, winner of the Natural History Museum Wildlife Photographer of the Year
■ Paul Ash: Editor, Travel Weekly
■ Ruvan Boshoff: Sunday Times photographic editor

Travel category
■ Andrew Unsworth: Sunday Times senior writer
■ James Oatway: Sunday Times chief photographer
■ Neo Ntsoma: Photojournalist and tutor; winner of the CNN African Journalist of the Year Award for photography
■ Obie Oberholzer: Acclaimed travel photographer and author