

MASTERING PHOTOSHOP'S CURVES

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# Better Photography



**THE MAGAZINE**  
FULL OF IDEAS

Robin Moon's Affair with Nature • Infrared Cameras  
Cole Thompson's Vision • Ian Everett on His Bike





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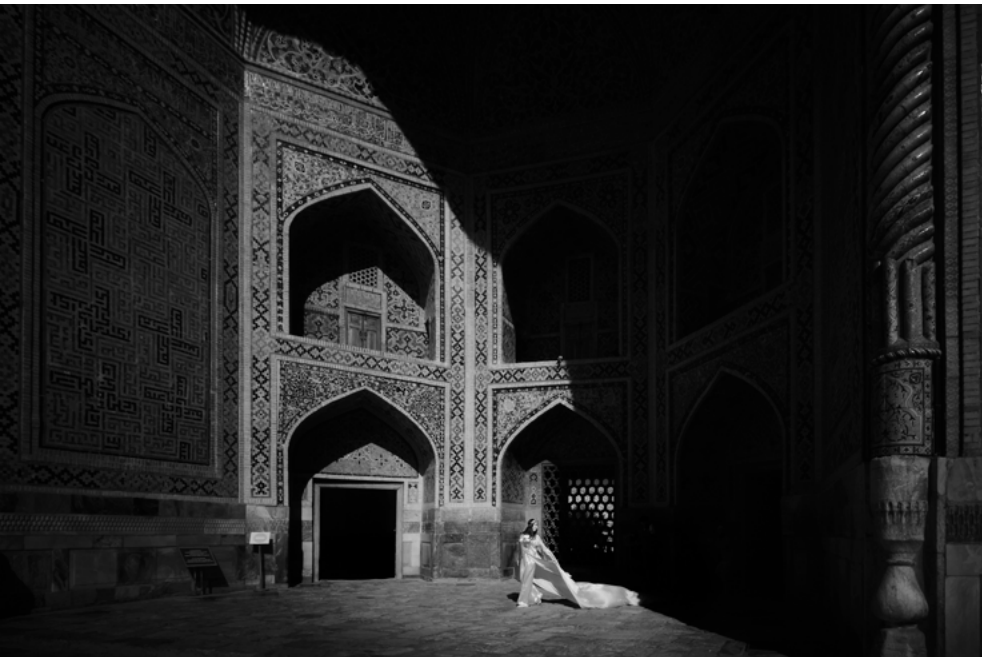


Photo by Peter Eastway



Photo by Cole Thompson

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Sony Ambassador Robin Moon has found herself travelling around the globe in search of her favourite subjects: wildlife.



Photo by Robin Moon

# ROBIN MOON

## *The Nature Lover*

**Sony Ambassador Robin Moon has found herself travelling**

**around the globe in search of her favourite subjects: wildlife.**

**Interview by Peter Eastway**



A relative newcomer to the world of photography (when you compare her to crusty old darkroom workers like the editor), Robin Moon has asserted herself as an accomplished photographer with a series of awards in photography competitions around the world.

Tim Moon, her husband and partner in crime, shares their passion for photography on many levels, from helping to run the Mosman Camera Club to hosting photography tours and workshops. And it would be fair to say they are not only competitive photographers, but competitive with each other!

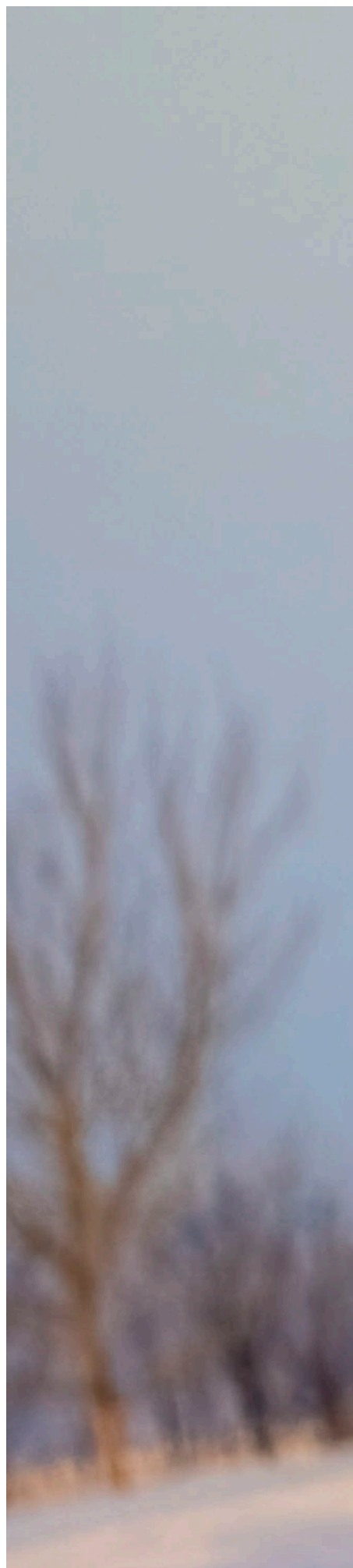
Robin describes her beginnings in photography back in 2014, when she and Tim holidayed in Italy. "I started to get cranky that Tim's lovely Nikon with its beautiful f1.2 lens was taking better photos than my iPhone. I had no idea why!

"Back in Hobart, where I was working at the time, a colleague suggested I buy the Sony a7r with a 16-35mm f4 lens. On the first night I owned it, I shot a simply 'amazing' aurora. I look back at those photos now and realise I had captured Tiger Tails, picket fences and the rare 'Steve' Phenomenon overlaid on the Milky Way. I had no idea what any of those things were at the time. And I had no idea about camera settings – I had literally cut and pasted settings from a social media page. Of course, I was the only person to think my picture was amazing with its out-of-focus stars and wonky horizon, but that was a pivotal moment for me. If I could create those colours and composition, then what other adventures awaited? The die was cast and I was insatiable to learn and experiment.

"During my years as a beginner photographer, I equated hours of editing time with outputting a well-produced image. Funnily enough, it didn't work for me and when I balanced myself against my naturally gifted husband who had always had a camera in his hands from his childhood days and architectural career, I worried that I was never going to be a competent photographer."

### **Right: Snowy Owl**

*In Native American folklore, the Snowy Owl is a symbol of wisdom, guidance and protection. On the wide open prairies of Ontario, Canada, finding them to photograph involves tramping many kilometres in the soft dawn light, a process which at least warmed me up. Sony a1, 200-600mm, 1/2000 second @ f5.6, ISO 400. See text for details.*







“Then in 2017, I came fourth overall in a competition. However, Tim in his first ever major competition, had won overall first place! Comparisons were made about my progress and far from laughing them off, I was actually furious. From that moment, I decided I needed to separate my photographic approach from Tim’s if I were to flourish in the sport.”

Discovering Nature

On a trip to Iceland with Tim several years ago, Robin finally put her foot down when driving to the next waterfall without stopping to photograph the charismatic Icelandic horses by the side of the road! “I flipped my lid, so we stopped with Tim warning me it wasn’t really safe to do so on the small shouldered road, but I was adamant. The horses were bunkered down in a howling gale, but I climbed through the fence anyway and walked up to them. They were desperate for some company and I found them really easy to engage with and thus photograph.

“In fact, it became immediately obvious that this is what I should be photographing. I’d been an animal lover all my life and unlike landscapes which required me to work hard, photographing animals was easy and automatic. It was from this trip that I photographed an Arctic Lynx in snowy Norway and was ecstatically runner-up at the Sony Alpha Awards in 2018. That cemented my confidence in which direction my creative eye should go.”

So what makes a successful nature photographer? Robin suggests you definitely have to be comfortable with your camera so you can concentrate on your subject and not your settings. “I mainly shoot using manual exposure control,



Pony tongue

adjusting the settings without really thinking about it.

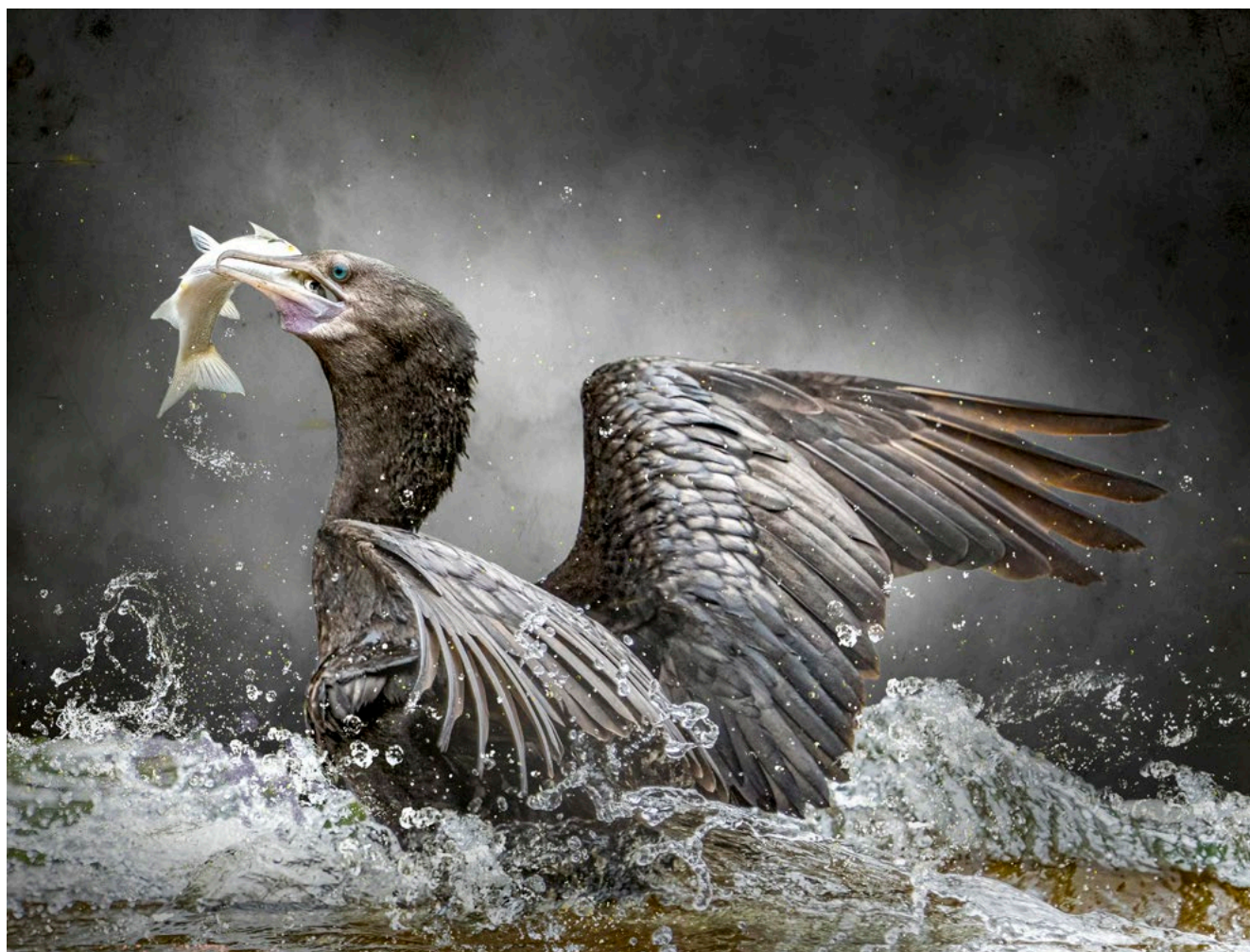
“However, nature and wildlife photography is all about capturing the moment, so being an animal lover and understanding random behaviour, I’m pretty adept at predicting what’s going to happen.

“And understanding animal behaviour allows you to optimise your time in the field. For instance, knowing that crested terns will come into feed and bathe when the tide



Evening flappery





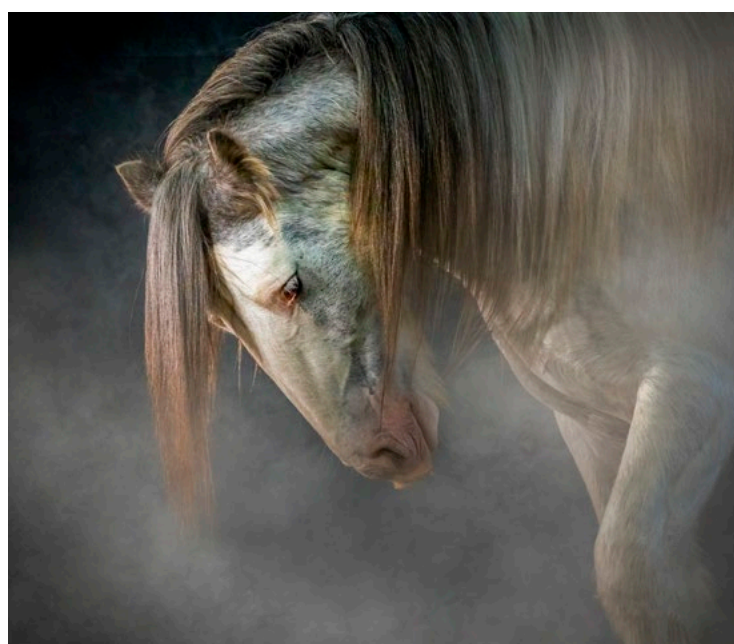
**Mullet's last glance**

turns, means you can use a tide chart to determine the best time to go. Sure, you can just turn up to a location, but there mightn't be much animal action if it's the wrong time.

"Plus you need lots of patience. I'm a bit of an introvert, so I love the idea of sitting quietly and being observant. Half the pleasure of nature photography is simply immersing yourself in the outdoors.

"My favourite subject is animal behaviour. Whales in particular are astounding as we unravel their social capabilities and their desire to interact with us. While swimming with them, in both Tonga and Australia, I have developed some 'crazy-good' snorkel singing abilities – skills I am sure the whales have been suitably impressed with as they lock eye contact with me or roll over to show me their beautiful moves.

"Birds with their unpredictable behaviour are always satisfying. When you capture a shot that has taken you some time to work out how to do it, well, there's a great deal of pleasure there. I'm thinking of the tiny Azure Kingfishers given they are rocket fast, very skittish and always require the full reach of your zoom lens. Being a kinaesthetic learner – where you learn hands-on rather than through verbal instruction – means the process of manipulating the camera in manual exposure control is part of the pleasure while trying to predict and capture bird behaviour."



**Drum Stallion**

*The Drum breed is derived from a mixture of Clydesdales, Shire and the Gypsy Cob. This large fellow had a gentle demeanour that was not fazed by the smoke or lights. He indulged me by searching for delicious snacks at his feet, so I could capture the arch of his neck and his glorious mane. Sony a1, 70-200mm, 1/1600 second @ f2.8, ISO 400.*



Kea Dance

Owl in the Snow

One of Robin's most successful photographs to date is of a Snowy Owl wheeling over a white expanse in the Ontario prairies. Among other awards, it earned her the 2023 Digital Photographer of the Year in the Australian Photographic Prize.

While the winning photograph took just a split second to capture, Robin invested more than 20 hours over a week in seriously sub-zero temperatures to create the opportunity.

"I was all bundled up wearing a heated fisherman's vest with a battery pack over a ski suit. I could last outside for up to four hours, the most important thing being to keep my torso warm. Interestingly, the warm torso translated to reasonably warm fingers, allowing me to remove my gloves occasionally in those sub-zero temps. Gloves, of course, are the bane of every sub-zero wildlife photographer, reducing the ability to efficiently interact with camera controls.

"I was visiting my sister who lives in Pennsylvania and lives near an annual Snow Geese migration refuge area. She



Rainbow lunch

happens to be a professional portrait photographer, so after we had captured the Snow Geese in their southern migration environment for a few days, we decided to travel further north for more adventures.

"While I love photographing all types of birds, after my Antarctica trip it's difficult to go back to seagulls. Given my age and late start in the photography world, I have realised there's no time to lose for seeing how and where I can further stretch my skills and with that aim, I take great pleasure in observing and dissecting the wildlife work of more experienced photographers (such as Marsel van Oosten and Ami Vitale). It doesn't escape me that I connect best with those whose work shows an intimacy in their storytelling. Winning the awards has given me the confidence to push my boundaries a little further. Although prizes are lovely, I find more reward in the realisation that I can put more trust in my instincts and abilities. There's no more time for just beaches, as the snowfields provide me with my current love of crispy clean, high key subjects."



Eight frames from the sequence Robin shot to capture the Snowy Owl – see page 33.





### Snow Geese Migration

*Snow Geese migrate south from their Arctic homes each year in search of unfrozen lakes. In the heart of rural Pennsylvania, USA, up to 200,000 of them return to the same lake to gather and rest overnight. At sunrise, they lift off as one, circle the skies and depart for fields in search of food. The noise is quite otherworldly – a cacophony of honks and calls creating a distinct and deafening natural symphony. Sony a1, 200-600mm, 1/2000 second @ f8, Auto ISO.*

“Local farmers act as tour guides, leading small groups of photographers to nearby haunts for Snowy Owls when they venture south in the middle of winter, looking for mice, voles and lemmings.

“The owl’s eyes are locked onto the camera because of the clicking of the shutter,” Robin explained. She was using a Sony a1 with a 200-600mm f5.6. Her shutter speed was 1/3200 second at f8 with auto ISO.

“An aperture of f8 provides a safe zone because it has a little more depth-of-field. It also helps provide front to back focus on your subject. However, once I have the safety shots, I like to move to f5.6 or f4 because I also love the effects produced by shallower depth-of-field.

“Shutter speeds for birds are usually from 1/2000 to 1/3200 second and I use the a1 to shoot at 30 frames per second. If I have to push the ISO up to get the fast shutter speeds, I can live with the extra noise, but I can’t deal with a blurred subject. And the right frame with perfect wing and body position can make or break a successful nature photograph.”

Robin spent five days ‘hunting’ her subjects, two hours in the morning light and two hours in the late afternoon. “The light on the snow is beautiful and luminous, but of course the main reason for shooting at these times is that the owls are most active.”



**Snowy Owl at dawn**





### Looney Tunes

*Adelie penguins with their googly eyes were my favourites to photograph in Antarctica. This little fellow walked right up to my feet and gave me an earful of feisty attitude before retreating to a beached ice floe to snack on some ice. His stance inspired me to combine a couple of images and present his hilarious behaviour like the old Disney cartoons. Adelie numbers are on the decline, believed to be in part because they are now jostling for space on the retreating ice with their hardier cousins, the Gentoo penguins. Sony a1, 100-400mm, 1/2000 second @ f8, auto ISO.*

Robin, her guide and the other photographers would track the birds across the fields, sometimes walking several kilometres. "You would see a bird sitting in a tree or on a fence post, so we'd walk over towards it. Eventually it would take flight and that would be the moment to shoot. Then we'd follow it once again and repeat the process. In knee-deep snow, it was a tough walk!

"There is no pattern. The owls would go one way and then another, so I spent a total of 20 hours in freezing conditions to get the images. I wanted shots with eye contact. I've seen other beautiful photographs of the owls with their wings across their faces, but I wanted to see the face as well. I knew the angle I wanted."

With no small degree of persistence, Robin finally found herself in position, with a thicket of trees in the background and low, soft morning light. "When I took the photos, I knew I had one of the shots I'd come for."

And at 30 frames per second, she had plenty of frames to choose from. "Sometimes 30 frames per second is overkill, but it all depends on the subject. Laughingly, I realised this one day when I captured 11 almost identical images of a humpback whale breaching at full vertical. So for photos of whales who are actually not that fast as they fling their bulk into the air, 10 frames a second was all I needed, but for kingfishers, 30 fps is important! I'm getting better at choosing the best frame rate but, I always prefer to look at my results on a big monitor before deleting any of them."

In post-production, Robin cropped the image square and rotated it to make the wing level. "While I loved the blurred trees in the foreground, sometimes you have to make some



### Penguin Portal

hard choices and more important for me was to concentrate on the owl looking at me."

Robin uses both Lightroom and Photoshop for post-production, but she finds herself working in Lightroom more often than not, especially given the excellent masking now available and the ability to cull or keep bulk images from the high frame rates she takes. And, she adds, Topaz Lab's DeNoise AI and Sharpen AI provide an excellent way to lift good images into excellent ones.

### A Woman in Photography

Robin explains that initially she was concentrating on technique – both in-camera and post-production – and using competition results as an affirmation of her growth as a photographer. "Along the way, I've learnt that competitions



**Crested Tern bathing**





**Danco Curves – Gentoo penguin at Danco Island, Antarctica**

can be full of variables outside your control and so less weight should be given to poor outcomes. However, competitions have taught me that small details can make large differences and as I'm a big picture person and not into small details, that was quite a learning curve for me.

"I've won two major prizes this year and both were with photos where I was entirely in control of the narrative. For me, it means that my best photography comes from being immersed in a moment and letting the creative, emotive brain take over. Even if I set out with a particular shot in mind and the results turn out quite differently, there's a simple joy in discovering a random moment has been unexpectedly captured. Birds are particularly good for providing this.

"And winning these awards against a pool of Australia's most talented and experienced photographers has been a watershed moment for me. Photography can be a very male orientated domain and my early days were spent standing beside people on a rock shelf early in the morning, receiving unasked for instructions about gear, technique and composition. For many of us, that can be quite intimidating when your journey is just beginning.

"Now I'm more settled and proud that I can represent a genre of Well Ripened Women taking up photography as a way of decompressing from life. I recently ran a women-only workshop which sold out in a flash, so I believe there is a need for the newly retired or time-accessible woman to be allowed to unleash her creative potential at her own speed and with her own (often aged) gear. I really enjoy working with the late-in-life learner because mastering even basic steps gives them much joy. I'm a big advocate for knowing that happiness in your work can be found at whatever level you are. If you

think, as I did, that your wonky horizon with out-of-focus stars is the most wonderful image ever, that belief is essential for providing you with the confidence to keep learning.

"When I'm teaching people through my Sony or Wanderlust Imagery workshops, it matters little what camera a student has if they are happy with its quality. As a Sony Digital Imaging Advocate, if you need help deciding what camera



**Cormorant with Puffer fish**





### Bondi Dance

*A female Humpback whale and her offspring cavort in the swell outside Sydney Harbour's Heads. On their southern migration, these hungry mums may not have fed for over six months and are eager to get home for a krill feast in Antarctica. They stop close to shore to let the babies rest or to teach them breaching and tail slapping skills. These behaviours are tools for removing barnacles or scaring prey, or just for having fun on a windy day.*

will suit you best, that's where I come in, knowing that the most expensive camera is not always the most appropriate. A simpler and more portable tool may provide a less stressful, but just as satisfying experience. It all depends on where your head is at. Sony's decision to add an older woman as an ambassador shows a level of insight and wisdom for reaching a richly rewarding portion of the market and I'm very proud to be associated with them.

"The choice of my original Sony a7r body was purely based on the camera fitting comfortably into my hand, something the bigger DSLRs couldn't provide. I'll never waiver from my current set-up, the Sony a1 with lenses like the 100-400mm GM lens. It provides a super-fast frame rate, super-fast focusing and the results are really sharp. I'm also more than a little bit in love with their prime telephoto lenses, (400mm f2.8 and 600mm f4), but the portability and weight of the 100-400mm for travelling takes precedence in lens choice.

"I can come home from a birding morning with over 1000 raw 50mp files, but there's both tension and pleasure in finding (or worrying about missing) the hero image. Minimal editing (bouncing between LR and PS) means cleaning up distractions

and allowing the subject to stand out. Compositing images is purely used for playtime these days as I move further towards the skill of capturing a 'clean' image in-camera.

"Now that I'm older and wiser, I realise I can save myself much angst by slowing down and considering all aspects of my composition before I press the shutter button. That slow down might only mean a millisecond, but it can make or break the opportunity when producing pictures for a nature competition where little alteration is allowed. If what I have captured is well taken, there is usually minimal work to be done in the editing process. Editing basics include correcting the white balance, defining the highlights and shadows, considering the best crop and applying a little selective de-noise or sharpening. If any of these basics need too much tweaking, I will probably discard the image.

"Getting the capture correct is essential."

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**For more information, see Robin's website here:**  
[www.wanderlust.sydney](http://www.wanderlust.sydney)

**You can also see her on SnapHappy TV.**





### **Barnacle Bill**

*In the warm clear waters off Vava'u in Tonga, an adolescent Humpback whale spun around in front of me to ensure I captured his best side. Curious and charmingly cheeky, these gentle intelligent mammals enjoy engaging with us as much as we do with them. I was in no danger from his close proximity – whilst I flipped around on a restless sea, he had full control of his weight, space and momentum, a skill I was grateful for. Sony a7r4, 12-24mm, 1/4000 second @ f8, auto ISO, Aquatech housing.*



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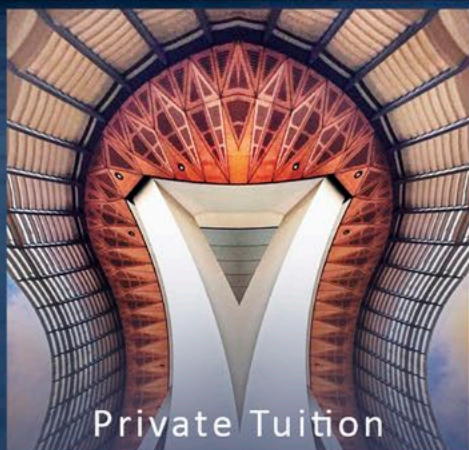
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