



Battle of the black-winged stilts

By Lou Coetzer

THE STORY

It was late April in northern Botswana and the water level of the Chobe River was starting to drop after two months of being in flood. The newly forming islands and water pools meant only one thing to the birds of the Chobe – it was time to re-establish territories. So, with our minds on the potential unfolding drama we turned away from the more traditional safari subjects on the banks – hippos, elephants and buffalo – and looked to focus our cameras on the feathered flocks.

The waiting game then started. After an hour or so a pair of black-winged stilts landed in some shallow water and their body language was clear – this patch of water was theirs. But then out of the blue came a second pair of very aggressive black-winged stilts, who landed virtually on top of the first pair and they immediately started attacking one another. With camera ready, I snapped this shot.

THE IMAGE

As it was already late in the morning with harsh sunlight, my first concern was not to blow out the white highlights in the birds. For that I underexposed the image with a -1.3 EV setting. This can lead a complete lack of detail in the blacks (known as 'crushed blacks'), but digital capture tends to be more tolerant of underexposure than film of the same ISO, allowing you to retrieve these details in post-processing.

In the good old film days we always tried to shoot at the lowest possible ISO. That has changed dramatically with the advent of cameras like the D3s that can produce a quality image at high ISOs. My approach now is to rather use the highest possible ISO that can still produce a quality file. I rarely go lower than ISO 800. The spin-off is fabulously high shutter speeds that allow more depth of field control and the ability to freeze the action.

THE LESSON

Just because something is bigger doesn't make it a better subject, so don't be fixated on 'large game' – you may well miss some captivating stories happening right in front of you. And by discussing the various relationships between animals and their environment with your guide, you can find out where the opportunities lie for unique images. If you then maintain your focus and have a little patience, it will pay off. □

* See more of Lou's photography at www.coetzernaturephotography.com



Shot with a Nikon D3s with a 500mm VR F4.0 lens (+ 1.7 Converter); 850mm at f8; 1/5000 sec; ISO 1000; EV -1.3

