



# Up close personal

By Lou Coetzer

## THE STORY

When a project I was working on required good images of Burchell zebra and elephant as a matter of urgency, I knew that I had to head to Etosha National Park; the park's waterholes are great to capture tuskers and the Andoni Flats has always been my favourite place on earth to photograph zebra.

Knowing that vast numbers of zebra make their way across the flats on early winter mornings to reach the only waterhole in the large area, I typically wait for their arrival there. At this time of year the grass of the Andoni Flats is normally a few centimetres high, and with the sun rising behind me and the vast numbers of biting, fighting and niggling zebra approaching, it is always a photographic Nirvana. This time around, as it turned out, the grasses were metres high in some places due to the exceptional rains.

As I was working from a small 4WD vehicle with a window bracket and Wimberley Head tripod, switching lenses was rather difficult. I therefore decided to keep my 600mm F4.0 lens in place and simply experiment with extreme close-ups when the herds moved past. While photographing zebra approaching from the horizon I suddenly noticed with my left eye that a zebra stallion was very close to me. It was nibbling on very dry winter grass and the softness of its mouth contrasted strongly with the harshness of the grass. I was so impressed by the delicate way in which this powerful mammal nibbled on the grass that I quickly filled the frame of the Nikon D3 with the stallion's mouth and managed to fire a few shots before it disappeared.

## THE IMAGE

Most of the photographers who join me on photographic safaris do so with zoom lenses in the 80-400/100-400/50-500 lens categories. What always amazes me is how the optical power of these lenses is under-utilised by their owners. When we analyse images after a game drive I constantly enquire why the subject is so small in the frame. And when we check their images' metadata file, we find most are taken with the lens in the 50-200mm range. Why does this happen?

## THE LESSON

When you are using a zoom lens for wildlife photography, always leave it at the maximum zoom range. Allow the subject to fill the viewfinder first, spending a moment looking for detailed images, before you zoom out. On many occasions, such as my shot of the Burchell zebra's mouth, might be the shot of the session. In the process you will start to see interesting photographs that will normally pass you by. □



**Beginner's tip**  
Keep both eyes open while shooting – use your right eye to look through the optical viewfinder of your camera and your left to scan for peripheral potential for your next shot. Doing this allowed me to see the zebra stallion in time to get the shot.

### SEE A PHOTO TAKEN BY YOU!

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\* See more of Lou's photography at [www.coetzermaturephotography.com](http://www.coetzermaturephotography.com)