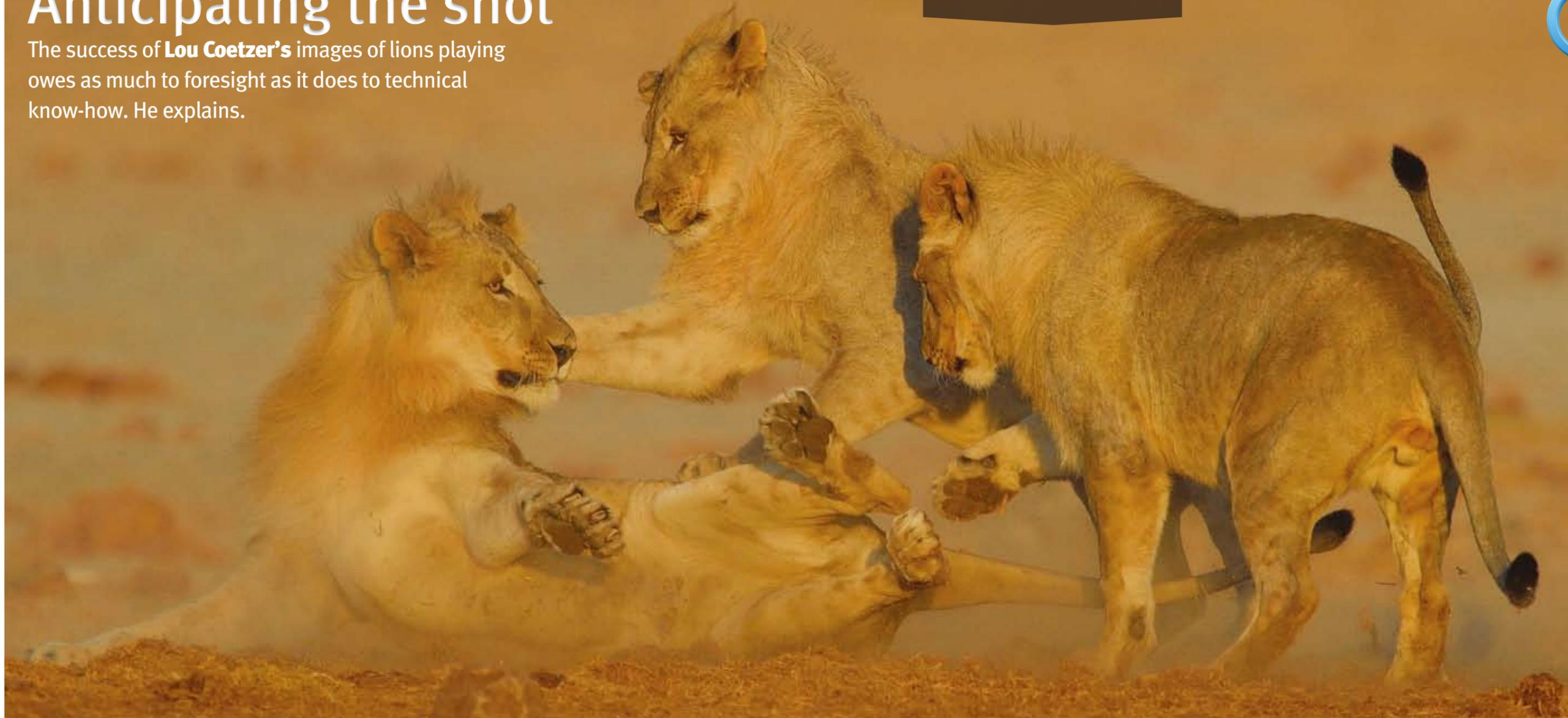




Anticipating the shot

The success of **Lou Coetzer's** images of lions playing owes as much to foresight as it does to technical know-how. He explains.

Nikon D4, 600mm f/4 VR plus 1.4 Converter
ISO 800, f8 @ 1/4000sec EV -1.7



Telephoto tricks

When working with long lenses (400mm plus), ensure you are shooting in the mid-to-high thousandths of a second.

To do this, choose the highest ISO setting on your camera that still renders a great digital file. This should allow for fast enough shutter speeds. Your choice of ISO will depend on the camera model. Make sure you set it in advance: there is never time to rectify your settings during the action.

Keep it clean The background and foreground of a wildlife photograph are just as important as the subject. The difference between this becoming a world-class image or being binned is the fact I repositioned myself to get a better background.

Up your game When you arrive at a scene with lots of drama, take a few quick shots so that you can record it. Then relax and consider repositioning yourself to get a better background, and to make better use of the angle of ambient light. A simple decision like that just might bag you a wonderful photograph.

THE STORY

For a period of six weeks I photographed at two secluded waterholes in northern Etosha, Namibia. The resident lions were drinking much earlier and then moving out to the thickets to get away from the rising sun, and we usually only saw a few members of the pride. However, one morning all 14 of them were present, scattered in smaller groups over a hundred metres or so.

THE CHALLENGE

Deciding which group to focus on required consideration. The pride male and a female were lying to our left with two adult females further behind to the right. The sub-adults were spread out, investigating, playing and drinking. This all looked like photographic nirvana but I knew the scene

could change very quickly; if either the pride male or a senior female got up and walked away, the pride would follow.

From a technical point of view the scene was very challenging. Working with a 600mm f/4 lens and a 1.4x teleconverter (840mm), depth of field was going to be a major problem with the lions close to me. It was just after sunrise so, although the golden light was great, shooting at a high enough shutter speed was going to be difficult.

I decided to focus on a group of subadult males and females stalking each other in play fighting. However there were two, very big, problems in choosing this group: there was a manmade water supply structure in the foreground, and white rocks, protecting the water pump from elephant damage, in the background.

In conjunction with *Travel Africa*, **Lou Coetzer** is running photography workshops in Oxford on March 8 and 9, 2014. For details, visit www.coetzernaturephotography.com

THE SOLUTION

I took a few shots as the action began and then made the decision to start my vehicle, and move to the right of the subadults and closer to them, risking them abandoning their play and moving off. Luckily, all the lions were very relaxed and enjoying the early morning sun and the play fighting continued.

My Nikon D4's base ISO is always set to ISO 800. Together with shooting at EV -1.7, that gives me high enough shutter speeds to deal with any action that may happen.

My general rule of thumb for the minimum shutter speed required for action, is to take the focal length of the lens I am using (in this case 840mm) and multiply it by three (1/2500). I opted for f/8 as a middle-of-the-road f-stop.

The three lions were brilliant. With light in

their eyes, a good fore-and background, and the early golden light, it was now up to me to nail the shot.

Because the action was now filling my frame on the horizontal axis, the only aspects that required management were not cutting the tails to the right, and making sure that the leg of the lion on the left was in the frame. When it dropped its tail, it was out of frame and I immediately stopped taking photographs. When he curled it up again, I was back in business and fired away. 🐾

This shot was an award-winning entry in the Mammal Behaviour category at Veolia Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2013