



set up FOR success

BENCE MÁTÉ



AS THE SUN began to make an appearance at the Bhejane birdbath hide at Zimanga Private Game Reserve in KwaZulu-Natal, a male Spectacled Weaver arrived for an early-morning dip. As it did so, award-winning photographer and master hide-builder Bence Máté 'composed with light' while trying to capture a backlit image of the bird. After scrutinising how Bence paid attention to the smallest details, Nicky Classen chatted to him about the unusual sideline to his career as a photographer.

When did you become interested in photography? 'I was lucky enough to grow up in a small village in Hungary, close to nature. I started photography at the age of 13, which is when I built my first hide. I had a basic film camera with a short lens and the hide allowed me to get a lot closer to the birds. At that time, after shooting I had to wait two weeks for the film to be developed, so I had to know exactly what to do with camera settings.'



When did you become a professional photographer? 'At 19 I finished school and, as my parents and nearly everyone in my family are teachers, I was expected to go to university. I told them I liked photography so much that I wanted to spend most of my time doing it, and it wasn't an easy decision. I didn't know how I could make a career from photography, but in fact I've made all my friends and business contacts through nature photography. I started a business making photographic hides, then I began to write articles, give presentations and hold exhibitions to make a living. However, I had to be very careful not to kill my hobby in the process – it's very risky when your hobby becomes your business because you can lose what you initially loved about it.'

What inspires you about wildlife photography? 'To keep creating something new and unique. Something that has never been seen before, which is taken with a new technique, from a new angle, under exceptional lighting conditions – I always try to shoot in a way that hasn't been done before. Something else that inspires me is working together with other, like-minded people: I have built up a group of five employees, two of whom are currently with me here in South Africa. We collaborate

above Capturing action shots is easier under the controlled conditions possible in a photographic hide.

left Bence's award-winning time-lapse image of Grey Herons.

very effectively together in photography, filming, construction, computer jobs or any other creative activity.'

By building these hides, you have made it easier for us but more difficult for yourself. How does that drive you to be innovative in your photography? 'I have spent thousands of hours in uncomfortable hides in tough conditions. In order to take a good image you need perfect conditions, which occur less than one per cent of the time while you are out in the wild or going on a game drive. If you create some kind of an 'outdoor studio' in nature it allows you to be comfortable even if you spend more than 10 hours a day in the hide. At the same time you do not disturb the environment, you see more natural behaviour, and all the variables (such as the background, lighting, horizon and distance) are perfect most of the time. This way you stand a far better chance of getting those so-called once-in-a-lifetime action images. >



The one-way glass used in Bence's hides allows photographers to capture more natural behaviour from animals unaware of a human presence.

Do you often visualise shots before you take them? 'Not so much. I create conditions, and then let nature create compositions. As soon as all the circumstances are perfect, I do not control too much and just let Mother Nature do the rest.'

Where else have you built hides? 'In Hungary, close to my home; Transylvania, Romania; Costa Rica; the Pantanal, Brazil; and here in Zimanga, South Africa.'

Do you have a favourite hide at Zimanga? 'I will have! I have the plans, but it has not yet been built.'

Why is working from hides responsible wildlife photography at its best? 'Where our hides are concerned, we observe subjects' natural behaviour without disturbing them, and the hides are available for other photographers who may

not have the opportunity to build their own.'

What's currently in your camera bag? 'I am testing new Panasonic cameras – we are in a long-term partnership. Half of my equipment is home-made, and I carry tape, rope, a knife, gloves, rubbish bags, a Canon 1DX camera, various lenses and, of course, flashes.'

Any tips or advice for beginners? 'First of all, observe the environment around you. You can take prize-winning shots in your immediate surroundings, a couple of kilometres from your home. Don't travel too far before you have explored what you have around your home – the opportunities are limitless, even if you live in a city. There is a lot more nature around you than you imagine.' ♦

Read more about Bence Máté's hides at Zimanga Private Game Reserve in the September/October 2014 issue of *African Birdlife*.

Bence Máté's successes in the Wildlife Photographer of the Year competitions:

- 2014 Birds (Finalist)
- 2013 Underwater Worlds (Highly commended)
- 2011 Eric Hosking Award; Behaviour: All other animals (Highly commended); Animal Portraits (Highly commended)
- 2010 Veolia Environnement Wildlife Photographer of the Year; Eric Hosking Award
- 2008 Animal Behaviour: Birds (Highly commended)
- 2007 Eric Hosking Award
- 2006 Animal Behaviour: Birds (Specially commended)
- 2005 Eric Hosking Award; Animal Portraits (Runner-up); Animal Behaviour: Birds (Highly commended)
- 2004 Animal Behaviour: Birds (Highly commended)
- 2003 Animal Portraits (Highly commended)
- 2002 Young Wildlife Photographer of the Year (Overall winner); 15–17 years old (Winner)
- 2001 15–17 years old (Highly commended)