

A natural affinity: the art of shooting wildlife



BEC SIMON BLAKENEY

Ever since taking the decision not to go to art school and instead heading off to Tanzania at the age of 19, BAFTA and GTC Award winning IAWF member **Sophie Darlington** has been honing her skills as one of the UK's most experienced wildlife camera DoPs. Her extraordinary eye, fantastic empathy for the creatures she films, and ability to capture an unscripted story as it unfolds, can all be witnessed in the 'Lion' episode of the recent BBC series *Dynasties* (nominated for a 2019 GTC Award for Excellence with fellow cameraman John Aitchison). Sophie chatted to Zerb Managing Editor, Alison Chapman, about what it takes to consistently achieve such beautiful and intimate footage of these majestic creatures.

In search of a remarkable tree

Sophie's involvement with natural history film-making started as a result of 'rebellious' against going to art school and instead heading off to Tanzania in search of a remarkable fig tree she'd heard about. "I went to Tanzania because I had seen a picture of a fig tree in the Ngorongoro Conservation Area. There's a valley in these beautiful, flat, flat plains with the amazing Gol mountains and a volcano called Ol Doinyo Lengai in the background. This tree is so big you can park a Land Rover behind it and the tree completely obscures it. My friends had been there on safari with Peter Matthiessen, who wrote a book called 'The Tree Where Man Was Born' (this is one of the trees where the Maasai believe man was born). It has owls and bees and figs, and there's a well – and it's sacred. There was something in me that said: 'I want to see

“ If you look at the most impactful wildlife shots, they are often from almost ground level.

that tree'. I was incredibly lucky as my stepfather was a pilot, so I got a very cheap flight, and my mum knew someone who knew someone who had a hotel there and said I could go for three weeks if I helped out. So, I went for three weeks and stayed for two years! I just fell in love with the place. I didn't

“ Long-lens work is all about keeping it steady. It's almost a kind of meditation to avoid transmitting your body movement to the camera.

get paid but I stayed for free and helped at the lodge. I felt very, very lucky.”

While she was there on this extended 'gap year', Sophie met a wildlife film crew. The company she was helping had outfitted a BBC shoot involving Keith Scholey (now head of Silverback Films with Alastair Fothergill), Hugh Miles, Adrian Warren and Richard Matthews. After observing the crew, Sophie knew this was what she wanted to do for her career. "I went back to Ireland for a couple of years and got a job working on Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles [as Head of Ink and Paint], which ironically was the only job I could find. All the while I was trying to work out how I could get back to Tanzania. Eventually, I found out that the Dutch wildlife film-maker Baron Hugo van Lawick needed a camp manager and applied for the role. People ask 'How do you get started?' You'll find a way!"

Apprentice to Baron Hugo van Lawick

The 'apprenticeship' to Hugo van Lawick involved everything from making coffee to putting up tents, ordering vegetables, helping locate animals, occasionally doing sound, and plenty of opportunities to watch how the camerawork was done. "After about a year, Hugo finally let me do some camerawork and concluded, 'OK, yes, I think you have what it takes, but before you touch any more film, it's the edit room for six months. As a cameraperson you've got to understand what the editor needs.' I have been so grateful for that. People don't get the chance now – although, I suppose they learn in different ways. Kit is so much cheaper and you can practise cutting your own material and put it out on Vimeo. I was very grateful for the chance though, especially as we were working with film. You had to make every shot count. How on earth did we survive without pre-roll?"

Since most wildlife sequences are shot without a director, editing knowledge is invaluable. Sophie describes the particular kind of 'chess' involved in capturing a sequence that will tell the story. "You have always to be thinking about which shot you're going to get first: the wide, the closeup? You need to anticipate the behaviour and cover all the bases, also considering where the light is and the lie of the land. It's a very quick and exciting process. It's where the editing learning comes in. Back when I started, it used to be that the rushes went home and it was months before we could see anything. By then the grass was a different colour, the animals had long since disappeared and you couldn't get the cutaways. Now, we watch rushes every evening – it makes for a long day (you're up before dawn and out until after sunset, then there's rushes, kit to look after and batteries to charge) – but at least you absolutely know what footage you have. It's fair to say you don't get a huge amount of sleep on shoots!"

While Sophie has become something of a specialist in

filming lions and other big cats, she has worked in every kind of environment from the Equator to Antarctica and the Arctic, filming all manner of creatures. For the multi-award winning series *The Hunt*, she was part of the core camera crew of five, working on such varied sequences as the opening shot of the series (high speed of a leaping Thomsons gazelle being pursued by a cheetah), crab-eating macaques in Thailand, tarsiers in Sulawesi, orca in Patagonia, Ethiopian wolves, lions in Namibia and bears in Alaska.

Long-lens specialist

While she can turn her hand to most kinds of filming (timelapse, infrared, thermal, drone) if needs be, Sophie admits she prefers to leave these shots to a specialist if the budget permits. "I'm not into the latest gizmo. I have an Osmo and I've done a little bit of drone work alongside a pro operator, but there are people who are brilliant at these techniques. I'd rather be good at one thing as opposed to OK at a load of things. If you put me out in the field and say 'Do



Filming crab-eating macaque in Thailand for *The Hunt*



Although known for her work with big cats in hot climates, Sophie can also often be found filming in much colder regions such as the Antarctic and Alaska



Sammy Munene, specialist filming driver, *Dynasties*, Lion

some timelapse', I can – but let's give credit to those people who do it beautifully and leave it to them. I would rather be really competent at one thing than a jack of all trades."

And that 'one thing' is capturing the beautiful long-lens intimate imagery of animal behaviour she excels at. Sophie's ideal setup (which she doesn't always get of course) is an ARRI Amira, her "absolute favourite camera in the world", with a Canon CN20 lens 50–1000mm (75–1500mm with extender), mounted on a Ronford Baker Atlas 40 head, plus a pair of low legs, because she loves to film at or below eye level to the animals.

On lens choice, she says: "I like to stay 20 to 30m minimum distance. Of course, there are times when animals come straight towards you and there's not a lot you can do about that. Since the CN20 came out, I've used it almost exclusively. It's not madly fast but it's a lot faster than what we had before and a zoom is imperative for capturing animal behaviour. You can't get them to do it again! If you're on primes you're stuck. In your head, it's a real dance. I work with a brilliant Kenyan naturalist, Sammy Munene, who's a driver, guide and now dear friend. He has an incredible understanding of what you need. He worked on Big Cat Diaries and has filmed with everyone from Attenborough to Michael Moore. He has an amazing sense of where you want to be; you don't have to tell him. When you want a two-shot, he knows exactly where to put you to get that shot. In *Dynasties*, there's a beautiful shot of the lioness, Charm, with a male lion behind her. Sammy knew instinctively this was what I would want and where to put the camera car to get it. He not only understands the behaviour of the creatures but also camera angles and lenses."

Working with such long lenses, stabilisation is a big issue. Sophie can see the value of MōVI and Ronin rigs for some circumstances and recognises that great sequences have been achieved with them: "In the 'Chimpanzee' episode of *Dynasties*, the fact that the camera is able to travel with the chimps through the forest on a MōVI is amazing. It's the

perfect subject for that setup. The chimps are obviously so unconcerned, it really, really works." However, in her own work, Sophie loves the respectful distance and low profile a long lens allows, giving the best chance the animals won't be disturbed from their normal behaviour. This is her real specialism and she has developed techniques and a mindset to cope with its specific challenges. "If you're in a Land Rover, the slightest bit of wind will rock it, or even if your legs are on slightly uneven ground – long-lens work is all about keeping it steady. It's almost a kind of meditation to avoid transmitting your body movement to the camera. At times it can be madly exciting when you're waiting for something to happen and there's that buzz of adrenaline when it finally does – but it's really important this doesn't show down the lens. Over the years you develop techniques – and you can't have too much coffee!"

The perfect camera car

Sophie's vast experience of filming big cats means she knows exactly what her ideal camera car looks like. "It's taken years of getting the right setup. I have my perfect car but unfortunately it only exists in one place. Not every shoot can afford it. I got the vehicle for one shoot – I helped design it, but then had to leave it and now another cameraman is using it. I put on a Euro mount adapter and a swing-out head and it had an outside platform so I could film from about 6" off the ground – which is a beautiful thing. If you look at the most impactful wildlife shots, they are often from almost ground level. It depends on the vegetation, of course. So, it had a very low mount, a slightly higher mount (maybe a foot higher) and a U-bend bench at the back so I could sit. I felt a bit like a gunner on a military vehicle! I could pan maybe 260° and could shoot over the driver's head, so not as high as shooting out of the top of the vehicle, which gives that awkward angle looking down on behaviour, which is not for me. It's about being able to vary your height. In a vehicle you can sometimes change your orientation by going up a hill, but if you're on flat terrain, you need to be able to change your height without moving the vehicle. You also need to consider the behaviour you are observing. If you're filming animals running, then you need a massive panning arc, but if you want amazing intimacy, you might want to be as low as you can – and, of course, the animal has to be comfortable with you hanging out of the vehicle."

Is it ever dangerous?

Given that Sophie has just mentioned she is frequently hanging outside the vehicle, I ask if she ever feels in danger. "I think I would be rubbish at my job if that were the case! If you ever make an animal feel they have to charge you, then you're not doing your job properly. I have been nearly killed by a buffalo – but that was a long time ago and it was in very thick bush. The buffalo was being hounded by some lions and it couldn't go anywhere. We were having to buzz around a bit to get a view and I think the poor buffalo in its absolute anguish and pain as the lions were literally nipping at its heels looked up and saw us. We were brown-coloured and it thought: 'I've had enough of you as well. He came straight at me and I swung my camera in and he made a huge bang in the side of the car and missed me by a fraction, which was sobering. I genuinely don't think it was because of my behaviour though. We are called **natural** history film-makers for a reason. Everyone wants to hear bravado tales – but really, if there are any, that's because we're doing a crap job."

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Using the Amira there was a sense of relief that this is a camera that just allows me to be creative again, rather than having to navigate a complicated menu system to do everything. It's artistic and intuitive to use.



Filming with favourite Amira-CN20 combination on *Dynasties*, Lion

In Sophie's view, people are much more dangerous than animals. "I would take a pride of lions over something unpredictable that could happen in a city, any city in the world, any day. With animals you can understand their behaviour and there is less unpredictability. We've filmed in areas where there were poachers and people with poisoned arrows, so we've had to work with local anti-poaching authorities, but I've never had any actual run-ins with them. I've also had incidents with drunken border guards but nothing that seriously frightened me."

In fact, probably more dangerous than either people or animals is weather. "I think the nearest many of us get to

being in real trouble is down to weather. Being 30m up a tree in the Amazon and seeing a storm advancing and the trees literally bending and falling towards you is properly scary. This happened to me at night and I had to get down that tree very quickly – and I'm not the best climber! I have friends who've been up towers when lightning has struck and that is truly terrifying too. I've also been in a storm in Antarctica when the wind was blowing at 102mph; that was pretty full-on."

"The companies we work for are incredibly careful to make sure we aren't in any danger. The Health and Safety on these productions is immense; they do a huge amount of work before we step in and take all the credit. To film brown bears in Alaska, for instance, we had to fly across a stretch of water that if you had an engine failure with a single engine you would be in serious trouble. There were all sorts of safety procedures in place to ensure we had the correct H&S – fair enough too when you're going to be landing on a beach that's only accessible at low tide, then going out on foot to film bears and wolves, with no guns and no bear spray because the people we work with choose not to use it and I respect their decision. They have 25 years' experience of guiding and they know how to deal with it – you make sure you're with people with the right knowledge."

"After a while, you get to understand the bears' behaviour but the guides are there to watch your back. There are all these safety elements in place but, still, the first time I went to film bears I was absolutely terrified! How can you not be? Some of them are 10-feet tall and you've seen Grizzly Man, right? But actually I ended up going three summers in a row, twice for a Disney film and once for *The Hunt*, and you begin to really love reading their behaviour. A wild wolf once approached us to within a metre – he just came straight up to us and looked at us with the most amazing yellow eyes I've ever seen. And it wasn't fear I felt, it was sheer privilege – not many people will ever have that experience. Then he tried to come a bit closer and the guide had to flap a raincoat; a bit basic but it worked! There was no malevolence in that animal, just curiosity. When you're starting out on a shoot with an animal that might be seen as very dangerous, there's the first encounter when you're cautious, then you get over that and become a bit more relaxed – and then there's usually a moment when you get grounded. So you achieve a balance, an equilibrium. It's all about understanding the behaviour; I love learning to understand it."

The animal behaviour displayed in some sequences can be pretty violent too, especially when filming for a series like *The Hunt*. Asked if this is ever distressing to witness or whether she is so busy and focused on the process of capturing the sequence she remains removed from it, Sophie replies: "Bang on! I think that when you are down the lens, I imagine it's the same as with war photographers. It allows you to disengage and just concentrate. There is so much to think about – you've got to keep it in focus, follow the action, anticipate what's happening. Often it's only afterwards you reflect and think 'Blimey!'".

Dynasties

This winter's blockbuster BBC natural history series (produced by BBC Studios Natural History Unit) was the extraordinary *Dynasties*, six episodes each charting a year in the life of a family group of a different species. Sophie was Director of Photography on the 'Lion' episode, part of a camera team with John Aitchison and specialists Mark McEwen, Luke Barnett and David McKay. Unlike many wildlife series, which



Charm carrying her cub to the pride for the first time – Sophie knows she's there, despite how it looks in this image!

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If you ever make an animal feel they have to charge you, then you're not doing your job properly.

are predominantly sequence-based, the premise of this series gave the chance to really get to know a family of animals – in this episode, a pride of lions led by a remarkable lioness called Charm.

Filming the episode involved 11 shoots in the Maasai Mara over the course of two years. The first and crucial stage was to choose a pride that would accept the presence of cameras and seemed likely to have an interesting story to observe. As it was, the choice of Charm's pride made for a very strong story indeed as no one could have predicted the harsh and eventful year the pride was to undergo. Sophie explains: "There's a huge amount of trust involved in choosing the lion. I helped to choose her, working with the incredibly talented producer Simon Blakeney. You don't have a script and you have to rely on really good research and prior knowledge. As it's the BBC, we scrupulously tell the story as it is – you start off at the beginning of the two years and really don't know what will happen. It's a cliché but 'nature writes the script'. This story didn't go at all as we expected, it really didn't. We chose a pride with which the BBC had a huge amount of history from Big Cat Diaries – I didn't work on that but the audience may remember the pride. You have to consider access and go with animals who are unconcerned by the vehicles, which is fantastic as a film-maker, because then they just ignore you and get on with their lives. In this case, we already knew all their relationships, which put us ahead. If you're going with a shy pride, you have to spend time getting to know them but with this pride we could drive straight in and they literally

weren't bothered; they would completely ignore us. The lead lioness Charm just didn't blink an eyelid."

The *Dynasties* shoot had the unusual luxury of being a two-person long-lens camera team, at times cross-shooting. Another bonus was that it was on Sophie's favourite camera, the Amira: "John Aitchison and I shot together on *Dynasties* with two beautiful, brand-new Amiras with Canon CN20s. Cross-shooting is quite unusual and it was really lovely to work this way. It makes for incredible sequences because you've got the cuts; one of you can pick up details you wouldn't normally be able to with just one camera covering all the action. Using the Amira there was a sense of relief that this is a camera that just allows me to be creative again, rather than having to navigate a complicated menu system to do everything. It's artistic and intuitive to use. It makes perfect sense to me that almost every Oscar-winning film is shot on ARRI!"

An artistic eye

As mentioned earlier, Sophie came into film-making neither through a zoological nor a technical route, and approaches shooting very much from an artistic point of view. "I didn't go to film school and I'm not a 'number junkie'. I come at it from a visual perspective. I have a very dominant left eye – if I try to film with my right eye, I can't! I seem to have a strong visual acuity with my left eye and framing comes very naturally to me. It leans heavily towards beauty and composition and light. I love the challenge of balancing that with the animals' behaviour."

Sophie's appreciation for light and the way it plays on the landscape is immediately obvious from watching her work on programmes such as *Dynasties*. "If I hadn't been a wildlife camerawoman, I think I would have liked to be a lighting designer. I love light, natural light. I love light coming through rain – my favourite shot in *Dynasties*, without doubt, is one of Charm walking towards us through the rain. Again, in *African Cats*, there's a shot of a cheetah mum and her cubs in the rain and that's the shot that did it for me. Filming weather is great. People always ask what my favourite animal is and of course there are loads – I love lions, elephants, giraffes, wolves... there are so many, but if you were to ask what my favourite light condition is, it's much easier – it would be a massive dark cloud over the Serengeti: a dark, dark sky with maybe some golden light or grass in the foreground. I just love that."

Work-life balance

Wildlife film-making puts enormous pressures on the family life of all involved. Sophie has managed to make it work since taking an eight-year break when her son was very young. It's not easy though: "Every cameraperson I know really suffers when they are away. If we are lucky enough to be away with other people, we talk about this a lot. It's really difficult because you never quite know when you're going to be away and then, when you are away, it can be for ages. When you come back, it can be tricky settling back into the family because you might have been away in, say, Antarctica and it's been an extraordinary experience. But you get back and life has just been going on quite happily, and you realise no one is particularly interested in what you've just been through because they've been getting on with their own lives. When you're working away, it's almost always a very small team, maybe two or four at most, and you form an amazing bond. There are very few horrible people in the wildlife industry; they are mostly just brilliant people to work

with. They're a pretty extraordinary bunch and I think that's because you need a certain temperament to do these shoots and be isolated with one another in that way."

The environmental message

Increasingly, big wildlife series, notably *Blue Planet* and *Dynasties*, are playing a crucial role in educating the audience about the many devastating effects the behaviour of humans is having on the plight of wildlife and, of course, climate change. The nature of their work means that wildlife film-makers are constantly witnessing, first-hand, examples of the worst excesses. Not surprisingly, this is a major concern to Sophie: "We have to step up to the challenge to help people understand the rate at which this is going. It's terrifying, absolutely terrifying. Since I started, 30 years ago, the change is terrible – everywhere you go people say: 'It never used to be this way; this used to happen every year but it's stopped in the last few years.' And you can no longer predict the weather – it's all about climate change. I think we could be doing more. I would like to see much harder messages going out but it doesn't always have to be negative. Somebody once said to me 'Beauty is the sharpest tool in the box' – and people are often reached by beauty. Sometimes a beautiful image may be more powerful than a negative one."

Advice for those starting out

To finish up, I ask Sophie if she has any advice for young people starting out? "Make your own films, edit your own films – and try to be true to yourself. Don't emulate what

other people have done; do your own thing. This industry, like all industries, needs amazing fresh creative vision – and there's plenty of room for it. Tell a story. Get out there and shoot. It doesn't have to be on expensive kit (I know that helps – it makes us look good!) but the important thing is to be out there shooting. These days there's Vimeo and YouTube, and loads of competitions – there are so many ways to get your footage out there now. Make a really short showreel (just 2 or 3 minutes as no one has time to watch longer) – of your absolute best work telling a story. Send a link on Vimeo and people will watch it; production companies and producers are always looking for new creative ways to tell stories."

Fact File

Since 1991, Sophie has worked happily as a film-maker and cinematographer specialising in natural history in remote locations throughout the world, from 78 degrees South to 78 degrees North with a lot of Africa in between. Sophie won a GTC Award for Excellence and a BAFTA in 2016 as part of the camera team on *The Hunt* and was accepted as a BAFTA member in 2018.

See more about Sophie's work: <http://sophiedarlington.com>

Dynasties was produced by BBC Studios Natural History Unit – see more about the series: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p06mvmmr>



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