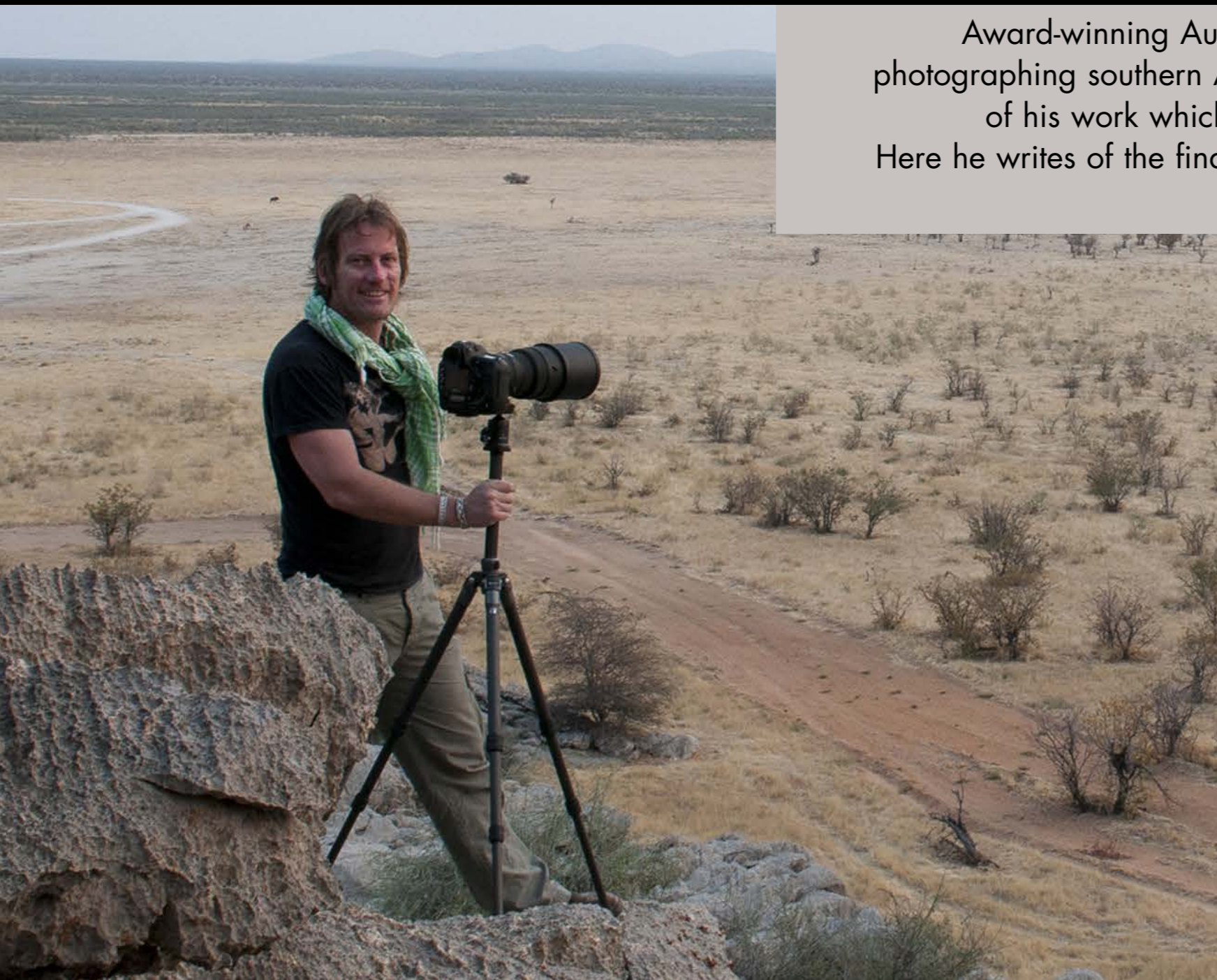


The Ghost Elephants of Etosha Pan

Christopher Rimmer – a Wildlife Photographer in His Own Words

Award-winning Australian photographer Christopher Rimmer has spent four years photographing southern Africa in preparation for a large scale international touring exhibition of his work which opened in his hometown of Melbourne, Australia, in 2011. Here he writes of the final chapter in that journey, the trip to northern Namibia to photograph the famed ghost elephants of Etosha Pan



Okaukuejo is in north central Namibia and is the site of a former German colonial fort established in 1901. Almost 650 kilometers from Namibia's capital, Windhoek, Okaukuejo currently serves as the administrative centre for the world famous Etosha Pan National Park. I had come to Okaukuejo to locate and photograph the park's famed "ghost" elephants. The Etosha elephants' supernatural appearance is due to the white clay found in the area in which they take their afternoon mud baths.

The sun was dipping low on the horizon as I saw the gates of the Park appear at the end of the road. I had no doubt that I had arrived in a photographer's paradise. I spent the remainder of the evening preparing my four cameras for the long, hot days ahead. Early the following morning, I staked out a position at a waterhole just a few kilometers outside the camp's gates where reports had been coming in of sightings of large herds of elephants. However, when I arrived a single jackal skulked nearby and a few springbok stood motionless in the distant heat haze, but the waterhole was devoid of elephants.

As the hours dragged on and the temperature slowly climbed into the high thirties, I cooled myself by saturating a cotton scarf in water and wrapping it

around my head - even the barrel of the lens was almost too hot to touch. After five hours of this torture and just as I was thinking I could take no more, a massive herd of elephants appeared on the horizon, heading directly towards my lens! As they drew nearer, the young elephants ran ahead of the herd towards the waterhole. The combined sound of the elephants all trumpeting at once as they splashed around in the water, had to be heard to be believed. I could almost sense the pleasure and the relief these elephants seemed to be feeling - it was an extraordinary moment. I observed the Etosha elephants for two weeks, during which I came to recognize the complex dynamics that existed within the family groups. They are like humans in many ways; young males have a best older buddy to look out for them whilst the females all contribute to looking after the babies. I began to recognize each elephant individually and note small personality characteristics which made each individual unique. Now, back in a freezing cold Melbourne, as I survey my work hanging on the walls of Galleria Rocco, I am transported back to the hot, arid plains of Etosha Pan and to this remarkable group of elephants which have played such a prominent role in getting me thus far. ●

Young Bulls Greeting Each Other, Namibia

*Nikon D3X with Nikkor, 70 -200mm F2.8, Exposure 1/320 @ f7.1,
Lee Neutral Grad Filter number 3 with Lee Bellows lens hood.
Some of the young bulls seemed to be greeting each other.
They would approach and join heads, often one would place
his trunk in the mouth the the other.*



**Elephant Charging,**

Etosha Pan, Namibia.

Nikon D3X with Nikkor, 70 -200mm

F2.8, Exposure 1/400 @ f6.3

Possibly one of the most dangerous shots of the trip. This large bull suddenly charged my position.

I obtained this single frame before he backed off and walked back into the bush. It was subsequently used on the poster to advertise the "In Africa" exhibition.

Eye Contact, Etosha Pan, Namibia

Nikon D3X with Nikkor, 70 -200mm

F2.8, Exposure 1/100 @ f6.3, Lee

Neutral Grad Filter number 3 with Lee Bellows lens hood.

This female seemed curious about the mirror slap of my camera and stared for some time in the direction from which the sound had come.





Battle at Etosha Pan, Namibia.

Nikon D3X with Nikkor, 70 -200mm F2.8, Exposure 1/400 @ f6.3, Lee Neutral Grad Filter number 3 with Lee Bellows lens hood.

This large female seemed to be the dominant matriarch of the first group. She would regularly attack any young male from the second group who approached the water hole whilst her family were there.



Second Group Dusting, Etosha Pan, Namibia

Nikon D3X with Nikkor, 70 -200mm F2.8, Exposure 1/400 @ f13, Lee Neutral

Grad Filter number 3 with Lee Bellows lens hood.

After the arrival at the waterhole a second group would move off to dust in the distance. (1)

Female group at the Waterhole, Etosha Pan, Namibia

Nikon D3X with Nikkor, 70 -200mm F2.8, Exposure 1/250 @ f13, Lee Neutral

Grad Filter number 3 with Lee Bellows lens hood.

Adult females and young males who comprised the first group drinking at the waterhole. (2)



Elephants at Etosha Pan, Namibia

Nikon D3X with Nikkor, 70 -200mm F2.8, Exposure 1/250 @ f8, Lee Neutral Grad Filter number 3 with Lee Bellows lens hood.

I waited many hours for the elephants to assume a line of symmetry that would result in a pleasing photograph which they kindly obliged in this frame.





Young Bulls Greeting Each Other, Namibia

*Nikon D3X with Nikkor, 70 -200mm F2.8, Exposure 1/250 @ f13,
Lee Neutral Grad Filter number 3 with Lee Bellows lens hood.*

Young bulls coming at the waterhole would first slowly approach and greet each other, gingerly touching with their trunks and often put it in their mate's mouth. (1)

Young Bulls Greeting Each Other, Etosha Pan, Namibia

*Nikon D3X with Nikkor, 70 -200mm F2.8, Exposure 1/320 @ f7.1, Lee Neutral
Grad Filter number 3 with Lee Bellows lens hood.*

Another fitting example of the social interaction going on between young males when they meet and greet each other. (2)



Young Bulls Greeting Each Other, Namibia

Nikon D3X with Nikkor, 70 -200mm F2.8, Exposure 1/320 @ f13, Lee Neutral Grad Filter number 3 with Lee Bellows lens hood.

Young bulls greeting each other at the waterhole, showing distinct sign of social interaction - one could almost say affection in this case.



Elephants at Etosha Pan, Namibia
*Nikon D3X with Nikkor, 70 -200mm F2.8,
Exposure 1/400 @ f6.3, Lee Neutral Grad Filter
number 3 with Lee Bellows lens hood.*
One needs to wait long hours under the scorching
sun of Namibia to be able to get well-composed
images of the Ghost Elephants of Etosha.

Elephants at Etosha Pan, Namibia
*Nikon D3X with Nikkor, 70 -200mm F2.8, Exposure 1/160 @ f9,
Lee Neutral Grad Filter number 3 with Lee Bellows lens hood.*
The elephants' wrinkly skin and muted, chalky appearance
adds texture to the portraits, making them unique.



Elephants at Etosha Pan, Namibia
*Nikon D3X with Nikkor, 70 -200mm F2.8,
Exposure 1/250 @ f8, Lee Neutral Grad
Filter number 3 with Lee Bellows lens hood.*
Image composition and skin textures
gain much if portrayed in black and
white or sepia tones.



Second Group Dusting, Etosha Pan, Namibia
Nikon D3X with Nikkor, 70 -200mm F2.8, Exposure 1/400 @ f13,
Lee Neutral Grad Filter number 3 with Lee Bellows lens hood.
After the arrival at the waterhole a second group
would move off to dust in the distance.

