

Bird's-eye View

Meet Peter Chadwick, committed conservationist,
renowned photographer and passionate birder

WORDS DALE MORRIS PICTURES DALE MORRIS AND PETER CHADWICK





MAIN: Although Chadwick's work takes him across the world, he is often found along South Africa's coastline taking pictures of sea birds. ABOVE: A trio of gulls watches as Peter photographs their colony.



I am standing next to a 2 000-year-old shell midden in De Hoop Nature Reserve in the Western Cape, admiring the azure ocean, when an assailant drops from the sky and gives me a jolly good trouncing. I am pecked and slapped about the head with pretty strong wings before being pooped on.

"Oh good shot," says Peter Chadwick (46), award-winning conservation photographer and long-time birding contributor to COUNTRY LIFE magazine. "I think you've strayed a little too close to their nesting colony. You're making them nervous."

I'm on Peter's old stomping ground (he was once the manager of De Hoop Nature Reserve) among the beautiful rolling dune fields of De Hoop's coastal region, one of Peter's haunts for photographing his favourite subjects – seabirds. Click, click, click... and half an hour later he walks away from the ridge overlooking the noisy seagull colony with memory cards stuffed with lekker images of the parents feeding their scraggly (but ever so cute) offspring.

The scene down there on the coast next to De Hoop's beaches reminds me of my childhood holidays. The sound of cawing gulls. The gentle lap of waves. The smell of salty air and sunblock. What a place it is to visit, Peter's 'office'. This, and places like it, are where he spends his days at work. Lucky sod.

But Chadwick takes his job very seriously, and you won't find him lounging in a deckchair when he's at the beach. Rather, he spends his time crawling around in bird droppings, or up to his elbows in sand or water or mud, but it's all for a good cause. And fighting a good cause with his camera as primary weapon is what Peter Chadwick does best.

"The difference between conservation photography and straight wildlife photography, is that conservation photographers use their images to bring about change for the benefit of the planet," Peter tells me, as we make our way along a crumbling coastal cliff path. "A wildlife image should tell a story on behalf of the animal, don't you think?"

For 30 years Peter worked in formal conservation, before moving to Bredasdorp five years ago on the southern Cape coast with his wife Sonja and daughters Suné (12) and Xanté (10), when the girls needed to attend school. At that stage, he had been

the general manager at De Hoop for five years. With his move to Bredasdorp, he joined WWF-South Africa as manager of the Integrated Ocean Use Programme. "I had to coordinate the improved management and possible expansion of Marine Protected Areas in South Africa, and provide support to other African Marine Protected Areas.

Peter's time in conservation has taken him from the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, where he worked for the Mammal Research Unit and Cambridge University on the social dynamics of the suricate, across to the Drakensberg mountains where he managed a number of the conservation areas.

"I also spent time in Kruger National Park, monitoring rare breeding birds in the northern sector for the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology. I needed to determine populations of selected rare and endangered species that included larger eagles and vultures, and many of the iconic smaller species."

Peter's work in park management has also seen him travel the globe, providing strategic operational advice on protected area management, and he has also been a key speaker at many events aimed at bringing environmental awareness to the public.

But it doesn't end there. As a staunch soldier in the battle against illegal wildlife trade, he has, in various locations over the years, set up and trained anti-poaching units and rapid-response teams that react directly to wildlife and conservation crime-related issues. "I then deployed with these teams – on land and sea – and the numerous arrests resulted in many hours in court pursuing convictions of suspected poachers."

But it was only after 2011, when his image of African Black Oystercatchers, taken on Malgas Island in the West Coast National Park, won the prestigious Gerald Durrell Award for Endangered Wildlife Photography, that Peter decided to make his camera the primary component of, as he describes it, his conservation toolbox.

"And it was these little guys who sort of started it all," he says. We pause at a cluster of rocks on which sits a pair of jet-black, red-billed oystercatchers. One of Peter's all-time favourite species. "I've always been a keen photographer," says Peter "But winning that award opened my eyes to the possibilities of combining photography and



A selection of Peter Chadwick's photographs. ABOVE: Shadows of Kelp Gulls on the beach as the birds hover over a net haul of mullet on Strandfontein Beach, Cape Town. RIGHT: A subsistence fisherman holds up his catch of red stumpnose. Over-fishing has seen a sharp decline in many line fish. BELOW RIGHT: Peter's award-winning photograph on Malgas Island, West Coast National Park, of a small flock of African Black Oystercatchers taking to flight as a wave pounds the boulder they are congregating on. At one point there were 4 500 oystercatchers but the population has risen to 6 000.



ABOVE: Getting his feet wet. Peter photographs the freshwater birds on a lake in De Hoop. (Photo Dale Morris) BELOW LEFT: Each evening in the Arabian Gulf thousands of sharks are hauled ashore. Here four shark species lie on the blocks for auction. Large-scale shark slaughter for fins is having a hugely detrimental effect on the healthy functioning of the oceans. BELOW RIGHT: For the elephants and many more species, Peter believes humans have a moral obligation to ensure that the rampant poaching pandemic is stopped.





LEFT: A Cape Gannet pauses from preening to stare down Chadwick. The global population of Cape Gannets has decreased by more than 20 per cent in just three generations.

conservation as a full-time vocation.”

A few years back, Peter and conservation photographer Thomas Peschak sat down and formulated a plan on how they could raise awareness of the perilous state of the South African marine environment. “Our marine ecosystems are in dire straits because of misuse and overfishing, but everyone likes marine birds,” he says. “We thought we might be able to use these charismatic species – the oystercatchers, gannets, penguins and the like – as poster boys for the bigger story.

We discussed the power that good photos can have on social conscience and we talked about matching these images with written media.”

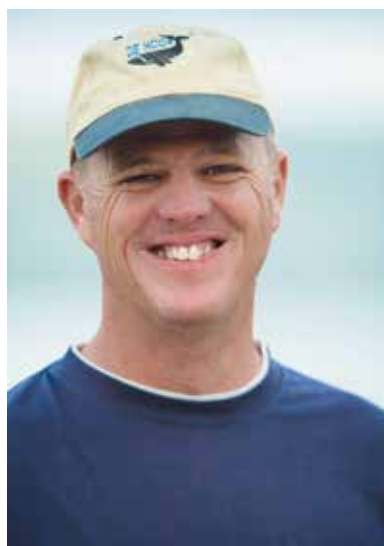
And so, armed with big lenses and big ideas, Tom and Peter headed off to Malgas Island for a week of pre-planned shooting. What they came back with was Peter’s award-winning image of oystercatchers, and a photo of gannets by Tom that bagged him one of the ultra-prominent World Press Photographer of the Year prizes.

“Our objective was not to win these competitions for

our own aggrandisement, but to get the story out there on how and why our marine species are being killed off by man’s mistreatment of the oceans.” Those two images, along with the story of how the birds are facing extinction, reached, in Peter’s estimate, more than 50 million people.

We spend the next few hours seeking out dainty little fynbos flowers, an indigenous adder snake (that eludes us) and yet more ostentatious seabirds, before sunset lowers our shutter speeds to the point where we are no longer able to shoot. It’s then back to De Hoop’s Cape Dutch-style, self-catering cottages for a cup of coffee, a chat and an early night.

“The problem with most modern-day wildlife photographers,” says Peter, as we sit on a sofa and flick through a pile of local and international magazines in which his stories have been published, “is that they don’t really care about the plight of their subjects. We professional wildlife image makers have



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ABOVE: Pristine coastal fynbos meets the sea at De Hoop Nature Reserve. TOP RIGHT: Peter Chadwick – committed family man, conservationist, writer, birder and wildlife photographer. (Photos Dale Morris)



ABOVE: The power of the Chadwick lens.



More of Peter Chadwick's superb images. TOP RIGHT: At Lake Nakuru National Park, Kenya, two Cape buffalo bulls nuzzle in friendship. ABOVE LEFT: Many marine species, especially abalone, are part of an illicit trade and end up as the 'cash crop' for buying drugs and supporting gangs in highly organised crime. ABOVE RIGHT: Fynbos vegetation needs regular controlled burning for its persistence. Smoke from the fires is particularly important as a stimulus that gets dormant seeds to germinate.

a moral obligation to use our art to do something positive in the world.

"There are many pros out there, in the bush, on the oceans, taking amazing photographs, but they seem far more interested in using their images to boost their own fame and egos rather than actually doing any good with them. I detect very little sincerity among the current flock of well-known wildlife photographers, and that's something that frustrates me very, very much. Each of us has the ability to make a positive change and, if we harness the power of the individual, we will end up with a powerful wave of people calling for change, and that cannot be ignored."

The next few years will see Peter visiting many countries throughout Africa, training his lens on sea birds and mammals and landscapes and plants. He will be working with conservation organisations, giving lectures on wildlife and photography, and using his skills as an artist, a writer and a conservationist to help bring about

positive change before, as he says, "it's too late and we end up destroying the very environment we ourselves depend on."

For now, he is busy with a number of marine projects that will take him to the Caribbean, the Seychelles and East Africa. Two of these projects will focus on the proclamation of new Marine Protected Areas. "In the third project I'll be part of a team from the Western Indian Ocean Marine Science Association, helping to improve the management capacity of Marine Protected Area personnel in the Western Indian Ocean sub-region."

Peter is also part of a team from the Game Rangers Association of Africa that is currently assessing the management effectiveness of South Africa's protected areas, where guidelines to improve such management will be developed. "And soon I'll be providing training and mentoring support again for anti-poaching teams in the fight against rhino and elephant poaching. On the conservation photography front, I continue to support BirdLife South Africa

by promoting the need for better seabird and ocean protection. I am also helping to promote the need for support and awareness around birding in Mozambique." And then there's his ongoing work with the Table Mountain Fund to raise awareness of the conservation of the Cape Floristic Kingdom.

Despite, by his own reckoning, that we still have many battles in the conservation war, despite the escalating numbers of dead rhinos and elephants, and despite the undeniable fact that the seas are being emptied of life, Peter remains an optimist. "I will always do what I can, wherever and however I can, for conservation. Even if it's just to take a photo that tells a story. It might be a small seed, but if you don't plant seeds, you can't grow a forest." ■

Map reference G3 see inside back cover

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