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WILDLIFE FILMMAKING

An interview
with "Monkey Kingdom"
cameraman Gavin Thurston

Reviewed:

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Into the Wild

with Videomaker

We caught up with veteran outdoor cinematographer Gavin Thurston for a glimpse at his wisdom and passion earned through his work on hundreds of documentary films for the likes of BBC and Disney Nature. He gives us tips and insight and shows us that the first step into the wild may be as close as your own backyard.

BY JEFF CHAVES

"There are lions right here. They're hunting us," the South African Ranger told the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) crew in a hushed tone. "There are seven in the group. These lions have hunted me before. They are dangerous."

Gavin Thurston is a veteran cameraman for hundreds of wildlife documentaries. The BBC sent his crew to capture video of Black Rhinos for a new series. On the last evening of the shoot, he had one of his most dangerous encounters, "Literally as he said this, 30 feet away, this lioness came out of the grass and straight towards us — stalking, ears down."

The ranger put a bullet in the barrel of the gun. Gavin continues, "The lion kept coming. He fired a bullet over her head. She kept coming. I thought, 'This is so stupid.' The last thing I want is to have a lion killed. She was

now about 15 feet away. He then fired a bullet in front of her and sand went in her face and she stopped."

It was still a 20 minute walk back to the land rover. The ranger said that there were likely six other lionesses out there. He told the crew to watch out for them because they'll be working as a team. Gavin reflects, "All the way back, my eyesight, my hearing, my sense of smell, everything was heightened. I could see every blade of grass, every grasshopper. I kept glancing back at the female. She was following us"

The crew managed to make it out safely without any more gun shots. Gavin says that encounters like this are actually very rare in the life of a wildlife filmmaker. He says with a chuckle, that more commonly, "the dangerous situations occur because of your own stupidity or the stupidity of

people you're trusting, the so-called experts. Never trust the experts, that would be my advice. Use your own brain and ask questions."

A Passion for the Wild

We caught up with Gavin Thurston from his home in the UK after he returned from the Galapagos Islands on a new project with the BBC. Gavin has more than 200 credits with the BBC alone, but Americans might know his work best from Nature, Nova, Animal Planet or the recent Disney Nature films, "Bears" and "Monkey Kingdom."

He credits his grandmother with instilling him with a love for the outdoors. She would take him out to the woods near her rural home and point out the trees and wild flowers. She would place a few leaves in his hand and point out the differences between the different trees. ▶▶

Into the Wild with Videomaker

It was a fateful trip to the zoo with his class that would put him behind the lens. He took a box brownie film camera with him and fired off some shots. In those days, you would wait a week or so to see the results of a 12 exposure film roll. What he got back amazed him. He kept shooting, and soon classmates would offer him money for pictures.

His passion became a career when, after he left school, he began working with a British company called Oxford Scientific Company. They made short films, mostly for educational purposes. His now growing portfolio got him a job that paid bus fare and lunch. "In America you call it internship; in Europe we call it slavery," Gavin quips.

He assisted a camera operator and, literally, caught the bug for filming wildlife. They were getting footage of a leaf rolling weevil that is common in the UK. The weevil is a small, red bug that separates a piece of a leaf and carefully rolls it into a tube. It then lays eggs into the tube and larvae live off the leaf.

"I looked down that camera lens and got right into that weevil's world," Gavin tells us. "And that was just one creature. I thought, 'There's just such an amazing world of undiscovered things.' My eyes were really opened and I never looked back."

From there, he was hired with the BBC and went from the clockwork film camera to video equipment. He worked with 1-inch Ampex recorders that he calls an "an absolute monster." Later he worked with ¾-inch machines and then Betacams. Today he works with 10-15 different types of cameras, and his shoots are not just around the UK. Gavin has shot footage on every continent.

An Absolute Revolution

Gavin notes that, with all of the new camera and recording technology available, we are in a revolution. When he began in the 1980's, he explains, "It was very elitist. It would be about who you know and how wealthy you are. Now a days, it's a very real possibility to succeed." But

it's going to require certain disciplines that he learned in those early shoots.

"In many ways, the technology has made the job easier, but it's a double edged sword." He points out that with film, you had limited time you could shoot for. "With the old clockwork camera, you could only shoot for 2 1/2 minutes and only 28 sec with each wind of the camera. You really had to choose when you push the button. It really honed my observational skills."

He says that it was like Ansel Adams in the early 1900's, a wildlife photographer who had to wait for the right moment and pick his shots carefully. The discipline is the same, even though with modern technology, a camera can run almost continuously even in an outdoor environment. Gavin really got to the top of his craft by listening and observing, he says, "by really getting into the zone and watching an animal's behavior."

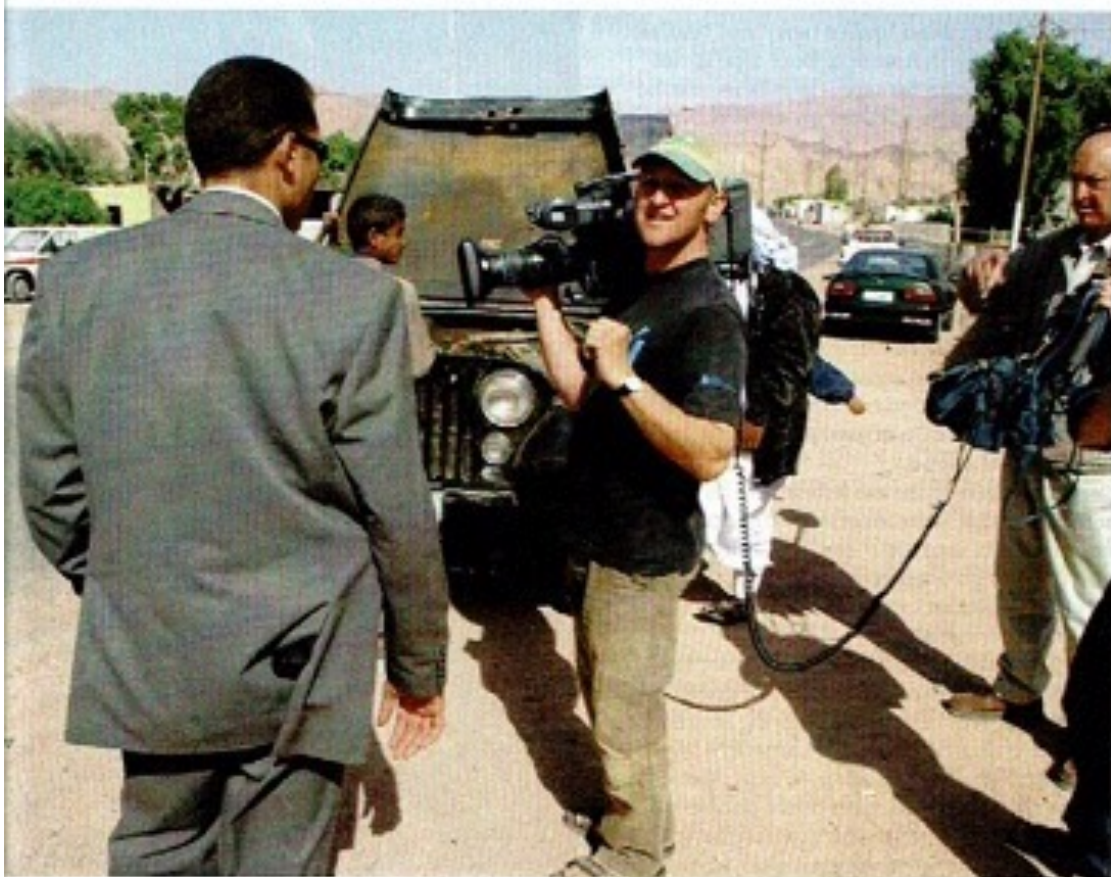
On "Bears" and "Monkey Kingdom," these skills were put to the test. "In both cases, we are shooting as near to wide open as possible on the lenses to protect that shallow depth of field to really draw the viewer's eyes into what you wanted them to see. The tricky part is that you have only

about a half an inch of focus, so literally all of the follow focusing is on the fly. There is no auto focusing."

There are some real challenges with shooting both animals, however. He says, "Bears are less predictable than monkeys. Bears are very difficult to read. Its expression doesn't really change much. Monkeys are much more like us and you can see mischief in its eye. You can see where they're looking and what their intent is the same as you can with a human. I found the monkeys much more predictable." Gavin points out, however, that the smaller size of monkeys mean that they move out of frame and out of focus more easily.

"At the start of 'Monkey Kingdom,' in particular, I'd say 60% of the rushes were soft." For the uninitiated, rushes are the daily viewing of the camera footage by the director. Gavin says that, because of the tight depth of field, the cinematographers had to get better with their observation skills. "Toward the end of the production we all got much better. Maybe only 20% was unusable. We got embarrassed into getting better." He credits the improvement to patience and anticipating the monkey's movements.





It's in the bag.

So, what are some key ingredients that you will always find in this seasoned veteran's bag? What are the essentials for any shoot, no matter if it's in the Mojave Desert, Madagascar Jungle or Arctic Tundra?

"One of the things that I've learned that is very important is the glass you put on your camera. Pretty much any camera you pick up, you can get a decent image with it, but one thing that can let you down is the glass you stick on the front." Gavin points out that lens cleaning equipment is always important.

He always packs lens tissues from a UK company called Whatman. He doesn't rely on cloths. "A lot of people swear by the micro fiber cloths. It's fine the first time you use it. The dirt you wipe off is now on the microfiber. If you use that microfiber a second time, you now wipe that dirt around on the lens."

"Don't skimp on lens cleaner. Buy the best quality lens cleaner you can buy," Gavin advises. He always packs a spray bottle of Pancro.

Also in his kit is a device called an arctic butterfly. It's a small vibrating brush for getting rid of visible dust, but he points out, "You can use it

for lens cleaning but you can also use it for sensor cleaning, particularly for DSLR cameras."

Gavin always packs his Ronford tripod. He says that it's been with him for 13 years and has been in salt water, mangroves marshes, deserts, the highest mountains — you name it. He points out that they aren't a cheap set of sticks but, "If you buy something of quality, it will last." He notes that this is only the second tripod he's owned in his 25 years as a freelancer.

Another must is a good hood or matte box. Keeping light off the glass is critical to a clean shot. But Gavin points out that you don't necessarily need to put out a lot of money: "On 'Monkey Kingdom,' one of the kits they sent out from the UK failed to include a matte box with the lens. The second assistant actually made a matte box out of cardboard and gaffer tape. They used that successfully for about 10 days until we got the proper matte box flown out. But the cardboard one would have gone on for another 6 weeks easily." He adds that he's a big fan of low tech solutions.

With that, Gavin shares, "One thing I will never leave home without is good gaffer tape."

Into the Wild with Videomaker

In the UK, it's called "gaffer tape," not "gaffer's tape" as we say in America. Duct tape is not a substitute for gaffer tape. He tells us that he once ripped a pair of pants on some thorns in Panama and was able to patch the tear with gaffer tape. The patch lasted for two years and through multiple washings.

Be prepared.

"There's nowhere on this planet which is so difficult to film, if you go prepared." Gavin reflects that today he has a great advantage. "I'm quite fortunate that most of the shoots I go on are very well planned by companies like BBC, Animal Planet or Disney Nature. So we have the advantage of support."

He has been to the extremes, and he says to remember that your most important piece of equipment is yourself. "The first thing is that you need to go prepared so that you are comfortable." You can't expect to shoot well if you are cold or overheated.

The second step of preparation is for the equipment. For example, if you are going to be in sandy or wet environment, bring some plastic trash bags to secure your camera.

But the greatest resource is experience. Gavin often consults with other people online who may have shot in the environment he's going to. Like many professionals, he has



TOUGH GEAR

We are all aware that there are a dozen or more action cameras out there that are waterproof, shockproof and fairly indestructible, but what if you are looking for more control in an outdoor environment? What if you want to get out in the wild with more than just a fixed focus, wide lens view? Here are some choices that won't break the bank but will give you a great image and more control.

JVC GZ-R450B Everlio Quad Proof Full HD Camcorder

JVC introduced their rugged line of Quad Proof Cameras a few years ago. Quad Proof means water, shock, dust and freeze proof. Their latest edition, the GZ-R450B, is water proof to 16.4 Feet, freeze proof to 14°F and shock proof for drops up to 4.9 feet. It features 32GB of built in memory, Konica Minolta HD Lens and a 5-hour internal battery. It records AVCHD Progressive 1920 x 1080/60P recording at up to 28Mbps or 1920 x 1080/60i recording at up to 24Mbps. It has some great features like a 40x optical zoom that will get you right in the action or a time-lapse mode for those great effects.

Fujifilm FinePix S1

Fujifilm calls this "the world's first weather resistant structure in its class," although exact specification were

not available on their web site. This camera comes with a fixed 50x zoom lens (24mm - 1200mm) and boasts 70 different body seals to be superior in practically any type of condition. It records Full HD at 1920 x 1080/60p with stereo sound and built-in wind filter. They have also included a High Speed mode that will capture at up to 480 fps at 240 x 180 pixels.

Nikon 1 AW1 Mirrorless Digital Camera

If you're looking for a camera with interchangeable lenses, then check out the Nikon 1 AW1. It's water proof to 49 feet, freeze proof to 14°F and shockproof to 6.6 feet. This mirrorless DSP also shoots Full HD at 1920 x 1080/60i and features a slow motion mode at a whopping 1200 fps at 320 x 120 pixels.

learned from mistakes and most are very eager to share. He notes, "You've got a global audience that you can ask."

For example, Gavin points out, "When we were working on 'Frozen Planer' in Antarctica and near the North Pole, we found certain video cameras, when they go below a certain temperature, lose the blue channel. It was a Panasonic VariCam and when it got below -20 degrees Celsius, the blue channel would drop out. Back in those days, you were filming with a black and white viewfinder so you didn't notice it." These are well-known issues today. You just need to ask around for good advice.

To keep your equipment up and running, Gavin says that common sense is the key. He points out that your camera is an investment and to treat it with care. Keep it on a tripod instead of putting it on the ground. Don't put it down in snow without wrapping it up. Remember that the camera heats up even when it's slightly used. That snow will melt and get the camera will get wet.

Let's get going.

So how do you get started in recording the natural world? The answer may be right in your pocket.

"If you have a passion for photography or filming, and you have a passion for the natural world, you can now do it with the phone that you carry in your pocket every day," Gavin says that the camera built in has a pretty good quality. If you just start small, like he did, you can develop your skills.

He says that it's all a matter of learning by observing.

You can shoot with the tools you have available or borrow a friend's camera. Go to the local park or nature preserve. Get used to the behaviors of animals. Bring your footage home and learn from your mistakes. Learn to edit video using some of the free programs that are available for your computer or phone. Gavin says, "iMovie is a very powerful tool. You can cut your teeth and hone your skills for very little money."

"Everyone has the ability to be a broadcaster today," Thurston contin-

ues. "If you cut together an amazing video, it might be as simple as a cat falling off a television or it might be something more intricate that you've crafted. You can now stick it on YouTube or Vimeo or Facebook. You now have a global market. You now have a global audience."

You can then build on that experience and learn from others in the business. You can become an intern like Gavin did. He is a big advocate of learning by doing: "It's a trade that you'll learn much better if you're doing the job. You're much better off getting out there and shooting the camera." And once you start — never stop learning.

Primary Motivation

Gavin shares that what keeps him going is not the thrill of bringing others into the outside world and its fascinations. He says that his motivation is not seeing his name on the credits or getting that paycheck. So what is it that keeps him coming back to that same monkey tree day after day for weeks at a time?

"I do it because I love it!" He shares, "When my eye is pressed to the viewfinder and I am suddenly in this other animal's world or this insect's world, I get totally soaked into it. Quite often, the director will say 'have you got the wide shot or the close up?' and literally I will not hear him speak. If I'm so into the animal or behavior, I can go totally deaf to what's around me. I become totally taken by that scene."

Gavin would encourage us all to get out there and observe the world around us. Start recording and bring us all into your wild world.

You can follow Gavin Thurston on his website at gavinthurston.com, on Twitter @GavinThurston, or Instagram @shavingtrout

Jeff Chaves was trained in video production in the Army and has been involved in the industry for more than 27 years. He and his wife run Grace Pictures Inc.

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