

The Grass Menagerie

Renowned wildlife
photographer
Ingo Arndt
journeyed to the
world's greatest
grasslands. He
shares how he's
documented
everything from
bison herds to
tiny flowers.

*Text by
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photos by
Ingo Arndt*

MAASAI MARA, KENYA

Grazing topis
photographed
from a car
window using a
Canon EOS-1Ds
Mark III and
24-70mm f/2.8L
Canon EF lens.
Exposure:
1/125 sec at
f/11, ISO 400.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT, MAASAI MARA, KENYA:

ACACIA TREE, SUNRISE
Tripod-mounted Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III and 24–70mm f/2.8L Canon EF lens with polarizing filter. Exposure: 1/125 sec at f/11, ISO 250.

BURCHELL'S ZEBRA
Photographed from a car with camera resting on a beanbag using a Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III and 24–70mm f/2.8L Canon EF lens with polarizer. Exposure: 1/125 sec at f/11, ISO 400.

OSTRICH CHASE
Taken from a car using a Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III and 500mm f/4L Canon EF lens. Exposure: 1/500 sec at f/4.0, ISO 200.

PRIDE OF LIONS
Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III and 500mm f/4L Canon EF lens. Exposure: 1/350 sec at f/5.6, ISO 400.



Ingo Arndt, a world renowned wildlife photographer, has spent most of his career depicting animals and their homes. In 2014, he decided to focus on something specific that animals need to survive—grass.

“I was always fascinated by grass, especially when you look at grass flowers, because they are so different than what you’d expect,” says Arndt. The image of the topis on the opening spread, taken in the Maasai Mara Nature Reserve in Tanzania, is symbolic of Arndt’s project. “This photograph shows you how natural grasslands should look with herds of animals grazing,” says Arndt.

Another reason for his determination: The world’s grasslands are endangered. “In the U.S., you only have four percent of the wild grasslands of the Great Plains left. The only beautiful and wild grassland areas are private land,” says Arndt.

Arndt researched the exact locales he wanted to explore, and chose seven grasslands to photograph for *GEO Germany* magazine. Those would later become the basis for his art book, *GrasArt* (Knesebeck, 2016). Over the course of two years, Arndt zipped across the globe to examine various types of grasslands such as the Everglades in Florida; the savannahs of Kenya and Tanzania; reed landscapes in Romania’s Danube Delta; and the Shunan bamboo forest, the largest in China.

To ensure that he gets the shots he wants, Arndt goes out with a picture in his head. Then he waits. His steadfast patience and vast experience has earned him timeless images such as a meadow of spider webs in morning dew (page 47) and a rattlesnake hissing along a mountain range (page 48).

His book editor sums up his work best: “He endures for days and weeks outside until he gets the best image he can think of. That makes his imag-

ery and projects special. The result is always fascinating,” says Susanne Caesar, an editor at Knesebeck Publishers in Germany.

Arndt shared with us how he is able to capture wildlife and nature with beauty, grace, and a dash of humor, and gives his best tips for those who want to try it too.

Gaining Access

Covering such expansive landscapes requires more than just fantastic gear; to get the best access to your subjects, begin by getting help from the locals. In Tanzania’s Serengeti, Arndt hired an experienced driver to take him around the land.

“In Serengeti National Park, you have to shoot out of a car because you’re not allowed to step out onto the land. You need a driver who knows what a photographer likes and needs. This is very important because the animals react when you come close to them with a car,” says Arndt.

If you plan to go, he recommends renting a Land Cruiser, especially in the Maasai Mara area in Kenya, because you need four-wheel drive to navigate muddy areas. The Land Cruisers are long, and you can ask if all the seats can be taken out except the last row, so that you have a lot of space inside the car. “You can open the windows, set up your tripod, and shoot in all directions,” says Arndt.

For aerial nature shots, like the one of the Everglades in Florida on page 47, Arndt travels by helicopter; he suggests finding one that allows you to keep the door open at all times. You’ll get the best photographs when your view is unobstructed, but this also means securing your equipment beforehand to make sure nothing falls out.

From all of his travels, Arndt plans ahead based on where he is going. While in the Maasai Mara and Serengeti regions of Africa, he stayed in a lodge for overnights or during slow times when the lions were sleeping.



Grass Roots

A macro look at how Ingo Arndt photographs the tiny blades of grass that make up nature's grasslands.

To document each grass flower and detail, Arndt traveled with a foldable white light box. He bought the pop-up photography tent that's normally used for tabletop studios because it filters outdoor light well. He found that no matter what time of day or how strong the light was outdoors, the light inside the white box was very soft and devoid of shadows. "You can be out on a very bright day and with this setup, you just need a little higher ISO and you can photograph without flash," says Arndt.

But photographing tiny plant life comes with big challenges. First, finding the right blades of grass

that are flowering can take time. "I had days that I only looked for grass species I wanted to photograph," says Arndt.

Next, there's wind to reckon with, an element that is out of a photographer's control. "In open grassland, it's always windy. I had to wait for a quiet day, look for a place without wind, or use my car for wind protection."

Picking the right time to travel to the grasslands was an adventure in itself. "When I traveled to South Dakota in September, normally you should find a good number of flowering grass species, but when I arrived, it was a very dry and hot year. Everything was already dry and yellow. Or in Africa, you never know exactly when it's going to rain and when the grass is in the right stage," says Arndt.

In the Sichuan province in China, a good guide will help you secure permits for access to panda breeding centers, if you choose to photograph them. "You need a permit to go inside this special breeding center that's normally closed to the public." The public breeding centers, Arndt shares, are often clogged with tourists and people gawking at the pandas. "You will never get a good picture there because everyone is panda crazy in China."

Other times, he hits the road with a little camping van, as when he went to Lake Neusiedl in Austria to photograph the great reed-warbler. Setting up a big camping tent in the middle of the Mongolian Dornod Mongol steppe, a temperate grassland region in Mongolia, afforded Arndt access to a completely undisturbed area to shoot an amazing thunderstorm with several bolts of lighting. "The tent was in the middle of nowhere, about three days from the next village. My wife, my guide, and a driver watched as I opened the tent, stood there with my tripod, and took one exposure after the next," says Arndt.

Animal Instincts

Arndt's history of photographing wildlife has taught him a great deal about how to interact with birds and beasts. His best piece of advice is to always focus on the animal's eye. "If the eye is not sharp, then the rest of the animal is not going to look good," recommends Arndt. Another pointer: Be aware of how an animal is displaying its annoyance. For example, when a bison sticks out its tail, it's a sign that it's angry and doesn't want you come any closer.

"Over the years, you get a feeling for the animals," Arndt says. "You can use that knowledge for new animals you encounter because similar species will act in similar manners."

When photographing birds, he sometimes will photograph them roadside from the window of his

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP, EVERGLADES NATIONAL PARK, FLORIDA:

GRASSLAND, WETLAND, MANGROVE, AND CYPRESS

Photographed from a helicopter using a Canon EOS-1DX and 24-70mm f/2.8L Canon EF lens with polarizer. Exposure: 1/500 sec at f/4.5, ISO 800.

GREAT BLUE HERONS

Photographed with tripod-mounted Canon EOS 1DX and 600mm f/4L Canon EF lens and 2X III extender. Exposure: 1/1000 sec at f/16, ISO 1000.

SPIDER WEBS AND DEW

Photographed from a car roof with tripod-mounted Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III and 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6L Canon EF lens. Exposure: 1/250 sec at f/22, ISO 320.

BLUE-WINGED TEAL IN FLIGHT

Photographed from a helicopter using Canon EOS 1DX and 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6L Canon EF lens with polarizing filter. Exposure: 1/750 sec at f/5.6, ISO 800.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

SOUTH DAKOTA PRAIRIE

A prairie rattlesnake shows a threat display. Photographed with tripod-mounted Canon EOS-1DX and 600mm f/4L Canon EF lens and 1.4X III extender. Exposure: 1/1000 sec at f/5.6, ISO 500.

PAMPA, CHILE

A mountain Lion hides in grass. Photographed using tripod-mounted Canon EOS-1DX and 600mm f/4L Canon EF lens and 2x III extender. Exposure: 1/250 sec at f/8, ISO 1600.

EASTERN MONGOLIA

Sawflies on dry grass. Canon EOS-1DX and 100mm f/2.8 Macro Canon EF lens. Exposure: 1/350 sec at f/10, ISO 800.

TORRES DEL PAINE NATIONAL PARK, PATAGONIA, CHILE

Pampa grassland and mountain range at sunrise. Photographed remotely using a tripod-mounted Canon EOS-5DS R and 24-70mm f/2.8L Canon lens with polarizing and neutral-density filters. Exposure: 1/2 sec at f/16, ISO 160.



camper. “You have to be careful, drive very slowly, and open the window very slowly—even if you have a long lens,” says Arndt.

The one thing that Arndt stresses that you must have when aiming to photograph animals in their natural habitats is patience. He’ll wait for the right moment and then fire a bunch of shots. For the pride of lions on page 44, Arndt waited for about two hours until the group was looking in the same direction. “With lions, during the day, they do nothing and the light isn’t good. In the mornings and the evenings are when they’re the most active.”

Before he embarks on any animal adventure, Arndt will do online research and read books, but he emphasizes that the best way to learn about the behaviors of animals is to go out into the wild. “It’s important to know where you can find the animals, how they behave, and to know your equipment, but it’s always better to go out and watch what happens in real life,” says Arndt.

What to Bring

Arndt always packs light, robust, and very strong Gitzo tripods—essential for the kind of work he does. Depending on what he’s shooting, he might bring more than one. During a recent trip to Ecuador where he photographed hummingbirds on assignment, he lugged 10 tripods.

The only time Arndt doesn’t bring a tripod? When he’s in a helicopter. Instead, he packs his Canon EOS-1DX outfitted with a 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6L IS II lens and a 5DS R with a 24-70mm f/2.8L II lens. “That way you have a big variety of things you can photograph. You don’t want to change lenses while in an open-door helicopter. It’s better to bring two cameras and two lenses, and secure them around your neck with neck straps,” says Arndt.

For the flowering grasses (see

sidebar on the previous spread), Arndt got close using a 100mm f/2.8L IS Macro lens and a 65mm f/2.8 MP-E 1-5X Macro lens. He set up his studio-on-the-go with a white light box and a plastic box with sand in it to stick the grass inside and arrange the flowers, as he wanted. He prefers to shoot these macro shots with a tripod-mounted camera, no matter if he’s using a short or long focal length, because “the tripod allows you to work more precisely.”

For animal shots such as the lion pride and the running ostriches (page 44), Arndt shoots with a Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III and 500mm f/4L lens. For more up-close images like the great blue herons in the Everglades (page 47), he used a tripod, a Canon EOS-1DX, a 600mm f/4L lens, and 2X III extender. For wider landscapes such as the mountains in Torres del Paine National Park (bottom left), he used a polarizer, neutral-density filter, remote control, and tripod with a Canon EOS-5DS R and 24-70mm f/2.8L zoom.

Typically, Arndt likes photographing animals with his 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6L IS II lens, a 16-35mm f/4L, and a 600 f/4L IS II with 1.4X and 2X teleconverter.

While you might not set out to document the world’s best grasslands on your next photo expedition, Arndt’s images and dedication to his craft and his subject can serve as the inspiration for an idea that’s waiting to be explored. Do your research, head to where the wild things are, and enjoy each moment among nature’s wonders. 

Ingo Arndt has published more than 15 books on subjects ranging from monkeys and marmots to the architecture built by animals (which we showcased in our April 2014 issue). See more of his work on his website, ingoarndt.com.