

A close-up photograph of a water buffalo standing in shallow water. The buffalo's head is the central focus, with its large, curved horns and dark, textured skin clearly visible. Its eyes are looking down towards the water's surface. The water is calm, creating a clear reflection of the buffalo's head and horns. The background is dark and out of focus, emphasizing the buffalo.

Jim Zuckerman's

PHOTO INSIGHTS

January 2026

Photoshop fixes problems
Photoshop challenge
Fogged lenses
Photography Quiz
Photo Tours
Ask Jim
Student Showcase
The story behind the picture
Back issues

Happy New Year!

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On the cover: A cape buffalo photographed from a night blind, Africa. *On this page:* A wild jaguar climbing down a tree, the Pantanal, Brazil.



Back in the 90's I attended a lecture by a nature photographer who claimed, with much pride, that all of his images were completely unmanipulated. He said he wouldn't even move a blade of grass even if it would improve a composition.

I've never understood this kind of thinking. If photography is an art form, and everyone seems to agree that it is, don't artists have every right to use any technique and style, to experiment with any material, and to creatively manipulate, alter, tweak, and explore any avenue that allows us to express our artistic vision? Isn't that the whole point of art?

If a photographer wants to move a piece of grass, or turn the sky green in post-processing, or transform a model into a one-eyed cyborg, so what? That's his or her art. The photographer whose lecture I attended implied that unmanipulated images -- pictures that capture exactly what we see, particularly of nature -- are superior, and have more intrinsic value, than photographs which have been altered.

If that's the criteria for ideal photos, what about shallow depth of field? We never see out of focus backgrounds. We also don't see with our eyes the compression of elements in a scene from telephoto lenses, or the exaggeration of perspective from wide angle lenses. We certainly never see water blurred into an abstraction due to a long exposure, or streaks of traffic lights at night. We also don't see a hummingbird's wings sharply defined when it's in flight. That happens only when a super fast shutter speed is used.

Photography is not about capturing what you see. It's about interpreting what you see in any way you want.

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PHOTOSHOP FIXES *PROBLEMS*

So often among photographers and non-photographers alike, the word 'Photoshop' is used as a pejorative. "Oh, he Photoshopped it", is a common epithet suggesting the picture isn't real, and the only reason it looks good is because of a mindless software program. Nothing to do with the skill and artistry of the photographer.

Photoshop can be used for many purposes. You can take years off a person's face; photos can be turned into what looks like traditional paintings; image composites create new realities. And it's easy to crop photos to improve the composition.

More than anything else, though, Photoshop solves problems. Photography inherently has challenges that we have to deal with all the time: Backgrounds are messy, depth of field isn't sufficient, the color gamut is off, images aren't sharp enough, distracting elements are in the frame, the exposure isn't spot on . . . and so on.

Photography is about capturing a brief moment in time, and if things don't fall nicely into place during the brief shutter speed, we have two choices. 1) We can acknowledge the picture is not ideal and trash it, or 2) we



can use Photoshop to fix the problem.

There are 5 major problems Photoshop addresses. Sometimes working in Photoshop makes a good picture better, and sometimes the change can be so dramatic that you transform an image that otherwise would be trashed into a stunning and very successful picture.

Problem 1: Depth of field

Depth of field is a manmade construct. Notwithstanding blurred vision due to poor eyesight, we never see out of focus foregrounds or backgrounds. For artistic purposes, though, sometimes we want elements in an image blurred, such as to focus attention on the subject. An example of that is shown at the upper right. The soft background helps to direct our



attention to the glossy starling in Kenya.

Especially with wildlife and nature, but also with people photography, cityscapes, architecture, macro work and more, we don't have total control over depth of field. Depending on the amount of available light, the lens we're using, the distance from the subject to the background,



and the distance from our shooting position to the subject, we may want more depth of field than we're getting, or even less. This is where Photoshop can help.

The two images of the wolf on pages 4 and 5 exemplify my point. Look carefully at the shot on page 4 and you can see that the tree trunk isn't sharp. I was shooting fast and didn't have time to notice my camera was set to a large lens aperture -- f/4.5. Even if I knew the depth of field was going to be shallow, I didn't have time to change settings or I risked losing the shot. Using a 300mm telephoto along with the large aperture, there was no way the tree would be sharp. Soft foreground elements are distracting and visually annoying.

After the wolf was gone, I realized the tree trunk wasn't sharp. Therefore, I took a sec-

ond picture, this time focusing on the bark. In Photoshop, I composited the sharp version of the tree trunk with the wolf image to gain complete depth of field in the foreground.

Another DOF challenge is shown below. This is a great black hawk from the Pantanal in Brazil. I took the picture just as the raptor took flight; the messy background is very distracting and offers little contrast with the bird. So, I selected the bird carefully and then used **Select > inverse**. This action selected everything *except* the bird, which was the background.

I then applied **Filter > Blur Gallery > Field Blur**. The background became completely blurred which, in essence, meant I decreased depth of field. Now the hawk stands out a lot more without anything distracting our attention from the subject. It's true the dark back-



ground against the black bird doesn't provide the kind of contrast that's necessary to make the hawk boldly stand out. To address that issue, on the next page, I replaced the background entirely and again blurred the landscape to suggest shallow depth of field.

Problem 2: Bad backgrounds

One of the biggest challenges in photography is distracting backgrounds. What's behind a subject is just as important as the subject itself. Less-than-ideal backgrounds easily ruin an otherwise good photo. Sometimes you can control or at least improve a background by changing the shooting angle, asking a person to move to a different location, changing focal length and lens aperture, and avoiding harsh light and unattractive shadows. In so many instances, though, when focus-

ing intently on the subject, you forget about the background. Or, you're shooting fast changing situations like a festival, a sporting event, wildlife, birds, and children playing, and it's difficult enough just to capture a great subject and keep it in focus. It may be impossible to consider the background at the same time. That's where Photoshop comes in.

In order to replace a background, you need to first select the subject. Sometimes, the **Select > subject** command in Photoshop works well if there is enough contrast between the subject and the background. Most of the time, though, it's not going to be accurate. The heron on page 9, for example, is impossible to select with a simple command because the heron's feet are the same color and contrast as the twigs. The image of the great black hawk, below, looks like it would be impossible for Photoshop to select it accu-





rately, but much to my surprise the **Select > subject** command worked brilliantly and gave me a perfect selection. In the version above, as I mentioned previously, I added a new background and made it out of focus using the pull-down menu command **Filter > Blur Gallery > Field Blur**. This implied shallow depth of field from a long lens and large aperture.

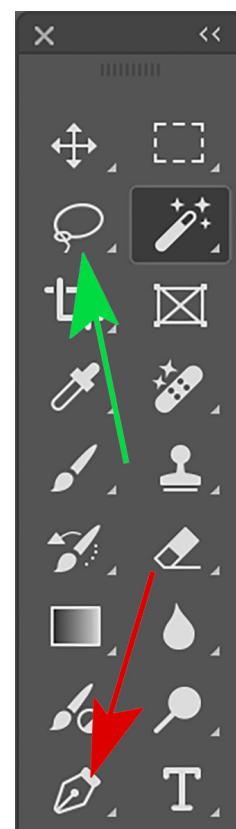
It's definitely worth a try to see if **Select > subject** works. If it doesn't, then you have to use a more time consuming method.

For maximum precision with challenging subjects that don't offer enough contrast with the background for an easy selection, there are two ways to select the subject. First is the pen tool. Its icon in the tools palette looks like an old fashioned ink pen nib (red arrow, right). It lays down dots, or 'anchor points', to define the en-

tire periphery of the subject. This is the most time consuming method, but it's also the most accurate.

Second is the lasso tool. When you enlarge the image to 400% or more, this tool is extremely accurate but it is time consuming as well. I've prepared a YouTube video that shows how to make precise selections; it's easier to understand these techniques when you see them being used in a video demonstration. Click [HERE](#) to see it.

Problem 3: An unappealing or distracting sky



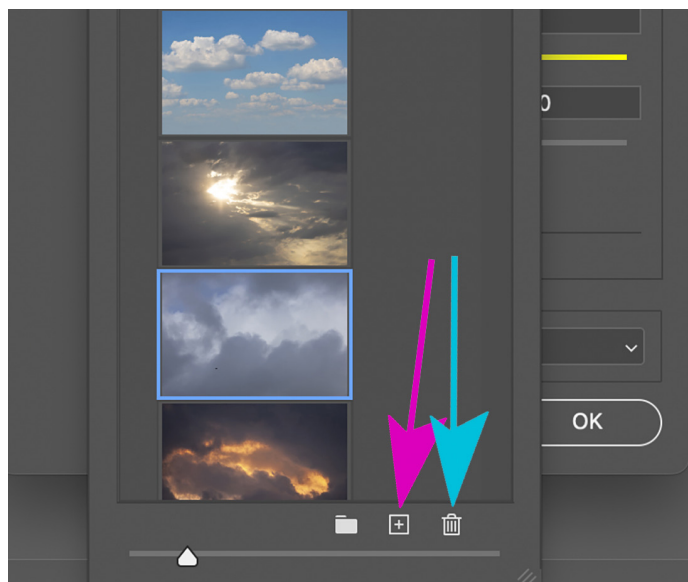


The top of page 10 shows the ruined 14th century Ogródzieniec Castle in Poland. I like photographing castles, but in this case the white sky ruined the picture. Even had I used HDR, the original sky was nondescript without any form or interest in the low clouds. The only way to salvage this image was to replace the sky in Photoshop using the command, **Edit > Sky Replacement**.

What kind of sky is appropriate? The light on the castle is soft and diffused from a low cloud cover. Therefore, the new sky has to have fairly dense clouds that would provide the same kind of soft, shadowless light. By simply replacing the sky, I transformed an image from boring and mundane to dramatic.

The sky images that Adobe makes available in the 'Sky Replacement' dialog box are stock im-

ages taken by other photographers. If you want to replace them with your own skies, first open the dialog box, then highlight a sky image. At the bottom of the box you'll see a small trash can (cyan arrow, below). Drag each sky image to the small trash can to delete it. To add your own sky images, click the + icon immediately





to the left of the trash can (magenta arrow, previous page) and then navigate to where your skies reside on your computer. You can upload as many as you want in full resolution, either horizontal or vertical frames in tif, jpg and, on a Mac, psd files.

The shot I took, below left, in a Masai village in Kenya was at sunset. The sky was golden,

but like the white sky above the castle, it was quite boring. I replaced it with a dramatic sunset, and the result is striking compared to the original.

I have several hundred pictures of skies in my 'sky folder', and I'm always shooting more because you never know how they might be used in the future. Simply replacing the sky makes



a world of difference. Just remember two important aspects: 1) You have to match the type of light that comes from the new sky with the lighting in the rest of the image, and 2) if you are including out of focus elements behind the subject, the new sky has to be out of focus, too. For example, in the shot of cheetahs in Kenya, below, the focus fall-off shows the most distant leaves to be soft. The clouds I chose had to appear blurred, too, for optical accuracy.

Problem 4: Contrast and saturation

The pictures that come out of our digital and mirrorless cameras are not finished products. They are the first step. Digital captures are meant to be processed, i.e., tweaked until they are pleasing to our eyes. This virtually always entails adding contrast and color saturation. We may also add sharpness, highlight and

shadow adjustment, noise reduction, and more. The comparison shots of the two dune photos illustrates how PhotoShop can tweak RAW files. In Adobe Camera RAW, the sliders used were: *Contrast*, *clarity*, *vibrance*, and *dehaze*.

Almost every picture I process is vastly improved using these simple and fundamental tools. §



Iceland Drone Tour

August 24 - September 2, 2026



A PHOTOSHOP CHALLENGE

The image below shows two black-colored hawk taking flight simultaneously in the Pantanal region of Brazil. I like the shot a lot except the white sky hurts the artistry of the image. It's distracting because our eyes are attracted to the lightest part of a picture first, and our gaze returns again and again to the bright highlights. Instead, our attention should focus on the subject.

A white sky is easy to replace when it's behind a mountain, a city skyline, a building and most birds; in other words, when the subject has clean lines with hard edges. But when the sky is seen through a maze of branches, especially when depth of field is shallow and the leaves

and branches are out of focus, it's much more challenging.

One of the considerations to keep in mind is that in a picture like the one below, the new replacement sky can't be sharp. It's not possible to have a picture in which the subject is sharp, elements in the midrange are out of focus, and then more distant elements (like clouds) are sharp. Lenses don't work that way.

In addressing this problem, the first thing I did was to choose a cloud picture that consisted of light gray clouds. I then used **Filter > Blur Gallery > Field Blur** to significantly blur the image. I then uploaded it to the list of cloud



Bentonite Hills, Utah

Photo Tour

April 17 - 22, 2026



shots within the Sky Replacement dialog box as described on pages 9 & 10.

Next, I selected **Edit > Sky Replacement** and in the list of cloud pictures chose the out of focus shot that was just uploaded. The result is shown below.

If you look at the out of focus leaves against the sky to the right of center, you can see there are bits of vegetation that apparently aren't connected to any part of the tree. This happened because the twigs and stems connecting these leaves were so light and so faint in the original photograph that Photoshop couldn't distinguish between the sky and those almost ethereal parts of the tree. The new sky, in essence, covered them up. The bits of leaves seem to be floating, and this is the only part of the photo that doesn't work.

The solution was to use the clone tool to remove these 'unattached' bits of vegetation. You could also use **Edit > Generative Fill**.

When adding a sky using the Sky Replacement feature, sometimes other areas of the image are affected by the colors and tones of the new sky. That happened with the picture of the hawks. Their faces and wings were darkened a little by the gray sky.

Sometimes you can correct this within the Sky Replacement dialog box using the 'Shift Edge' and 'Fade Edge' sliders. With the picture of the hawks, I used the dodge tool instead located in the tools palette within Photoshop to lighten the birds. By doing so, I also made the hawks stand out against the background just enough to focus our attention on them in spite of the busy background. \$



Fogged Lenses

High humidity is a problem for photographers, especially when coming from a cold, air-conditioned room. It's not just the front lens element that gets fogged, though. It's also the viewfinder, the rear lens element inside the camera body, the LCD screen, and if you don't have a mirrorless camera, the mirror and the ground glass above it become fogged as well. You often have to wait 20 or 30 minutes for the temperature of the camera to equalize with the air temperature so the fog dissipates. When the camera is much cooler than the humid outdoors, it doesn't matter how many times you wipe the surfaces. Watervapor will instantly turn into fog, making photography impossible.

To prevent this from happening, there are several things you can do. If possible, leave your camera backpack in a garage or a parked car outside. If you are staying in a hotel, turn down the AC so the discrepancy between the interior temperature and the outside is more equal. Many hotel bathrooms don't have an AC duct in them, so you can place your camera gear inside the bathroom overnight and close the door. This way, you can sleep comfortably in the room while the equipment stays relatively warm.

If the bathroom does have an AC duct, see if you can close it or block its airflow. Anything you can do to raise the temperature helps when you leave the room to shoot the next day. \$



Exotic Birds of Colombia

Sept. 23 to Oct. 3, 2026



The Pantanal, Brazil

Nov. 23 - Dec. 2, 2026



Photography Quiz

1. Which type of camera uses a ground glass screen for composing and focusing, requiring the photographer to look down into the camera from above?
 - a. Range finder
 - b. Twin-lens reflex
 - c. View camera
 - d. SLR camera
2. In long exposure photography, what type of filter is used to achieve a smooth, misty effect of moving water?
 - a. Circular polarizer
 - b. Neutral density (ND) filter
 - c. UV filter
 - d. Diffusing filter
3. A lens hood is useful in the follow situations EXCEPT:
 - a. When it's snowing
 - b. When it's raining
 - c. When sunlight is striking the lens at an oblique angle
 - d. When including the sun in the frame
4. In photography, when an image goes from positive to negative, the lights and darks are reversed. In addition, the colors become their complements.
 - a. True
 - b. False
5. From f/6.3 to f/9 is how many f/stops
 - a. One
 - b. Two
 - c. Three
 - d. Four
6. MEGAbytes means one million; GIGAbytes means one billion; TERAbytes means one trillion; what is the next prefix that means 1000 terabytes?
 - a. EXAbytes
 - b. FEMTObytes
 - c. PICObytes
 - d. PETAbytes
7. If you don't have a cable release, the self-timer is just as effective in triggering a long shutter speed and maintaining a sharp picture.
 - a. True
 - b. False
8. What is the color temperature of daylight at noon on a clear day and the common color of a flash?
 - a. 3200K
 - b. 4000K
 - c. 5500K
 - d. 6500K
9. Lens flare can be reduced by using a neutral density filter.
 - a. True
 - b. False
10. Raising the center column of your tripod increases its stability.
 - a. True
 - b. False

Answers on page 51

UPCOMING PHOTO WORKSHOPS



FROG & REPTILE WORKSHOP in Kansas City

This is an exciting macro workshop in which you will be able to photograph about 40 species of colorful dart frogs and exotic reptiles. Held in a hotel conference room, Jim sets up natural backgrounds for outstanding photos. The photo at left shows a Jackson chameleon with the background replaced in Photoshop.

June 13 - 14, 2026



GREAT GRAY OWLS, CANADA

Get up close and personal with these spectacular birds flying with their magnificent wing spans. The slow flying owls are easy to photograph, even for beginners, and you will absolutely love your pictures!

February 13 - 18, 2027



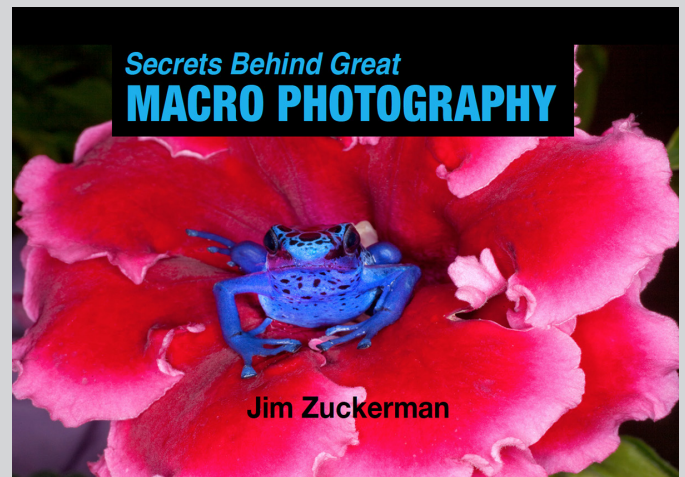
TEXAS BIRDS

Get up close and personal to many species of exotic and colorful birds. We shoot from a blind and get frame-filling shots of cardinals, green jays, crested caracaras, painted buntings, and more. Based in McAllen, Texas.

May 12 -15, 2027

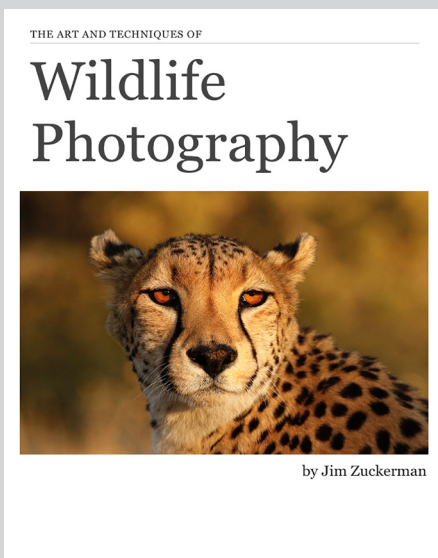
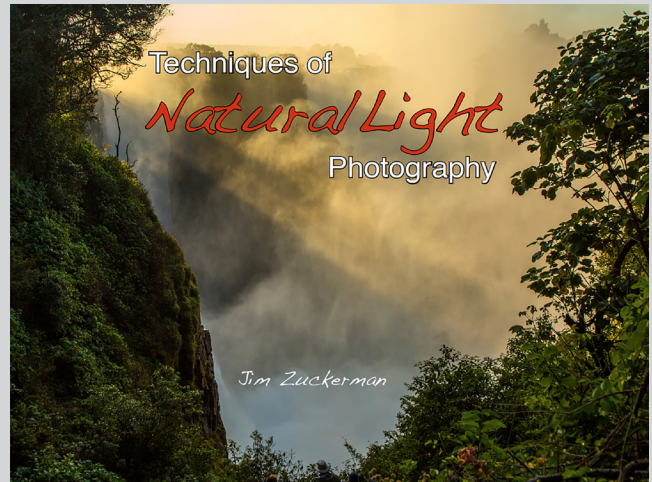
Expand your photographic artistry with *eBooks*

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eBooks continued

Click on any ebook to see inside



India Tiger Safari

May 20 - 30, 2026



What's Wrong with this Picture?



First, let me say what I like about this image. The depth of field is enough so the entire cheetah is sharp. That was important. I definitely would not be happy if the cat's face and head were sharp but the shoulder and the back of the animal was soft. I also like the low angled lighting. I took this late in the day and the sunlight illuminated the eyes beautifully. The turn of the head is also good, revealing both eyes.

The problem with this picture is the horizon line. It cuts through the center of the frame and, in essence, bifurcates the cheetah's face. Bold graphic lines that are not part of a subject almost always are distracting. In this case, the horizon line draws our attention away from the subject. If it were possible to fix this in Photoshop, I would have done it. But working around the whiskers as well as the fine, subtle hair on the underside of the neck makes this pretty much impossible to make the corrections flawlessly.



In this shot, the horizon line is gone because I was able to shoot from a low perspective. In fact, the cheetah was standing on the top of a termite mound, and that's why I was able to fill the entire background with just the sky. That made all the difference.

I still prefer seeing both eyes as in the picture on the previous page. In the portrait above, the profile looks good but, in my opinion, it's not as compelling as being able to see the eyes and the expression of the cat. However, the background is non-distracting and complementary. In addition, low angled perspective adds to the stature of the cat. It makes it seem more impressive. §

On Safari: Kenya

March 22 - 31, 2026



Lions drinking, photographed from a night blind.



White rhinos grazing

SHORT AND SWEET

1. Many times when photographing wildlife, their eyes turn out to be a little too dark. With a subtle application of the dodge tool in Photoshop, you can lighten the eyes just enough so they have more impact compared to the original capture. Be careful not to overdo it, though.



2. Some photographers say they like to use a relatively slow shutter when photographing birds in flight because a certain amount of blur implies motion. It seems to me that when a bird is mid-flight, that unmistakably says 'motion'. For me, birds in flight need to be sharp. Blur is an unnatural manmade construct.



3. When photographing elements that are essentially on the same plane, like these paper flowers in Vietnam, make sure to make the back of the camera, i.e., the plane of the digital sensor, as parallel as possible with the subjects. This insures everything will be sharp at any lens aperture.



4. The last thing you want to do when photographing snow is overexpose the images, i.e., blow the highlights so they are devoid of texture and detail. To prevent that, check your histogram to make sure you're not spiking on the right. Or, underexpose your shots by 2/3 f/stop to protect the highlights. That's what I do. §



Ethiopia Photo Tour

Primitive tribes Active volcano Rock-hewn churches Bizarre landscapes

January 5 - 18, 2027



ASK JIM

Every month, Jim answers a question from his online students, from people who participate in his tours and workshops, or from subscribers to this magazine. If you have a question you'd like Jim to answer, please drop him a note at photos@jimzuckerman.com.

Q: Jim . . . I leave the image stabilization feature on all the time when I'm using my long lens. Is this Ok or is it a mistake?

Bob Evans, Grapevine, Texas

A: I think it's a mistake. When using a fast shutter speed, the IS (or VR) feature should be turned off. It depletes the battery faster and it also causes a slight delay after pushing the shutter and before the picture is taken. Image stabilization is designed to be used with shutter speeds that are fairly slow, such as 1/30 or 1/60 when shooting with a telephoto. If I'm photographing a dark interior with a wide angle lens, like a large cathedral, and no tripods are allowed, I'll also use the IS feature with slow shutter speeds. But when shooting birds, for example, and your shutter is fast, definitely turn off the IS.



Partial List of Photography Tours 2025 - 2027

INDIA TIGER SAFARI
May 2026



ICELAND DRONE TOUR
Aug/Sept 2026



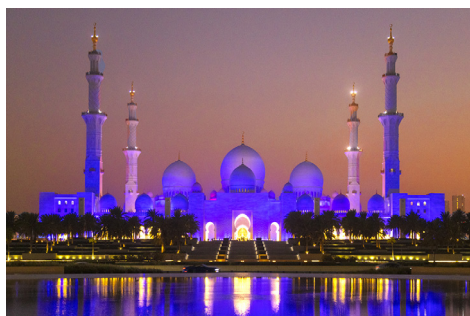
EXOTIC COLOMBIA BIRDS
Sept/Oct 2026



INDONESIA WILDLIFE
Oct. 2027



DUBAI & ABU DHABI
Nov. 2026



THE PANTANAL, BRAZIL
Nov. 2026



WINTER WILDLIFE WORKSHOP
Dec. 2026



ETHIOPIA
Jan. 2027



GREAT GRAY OWLS
Feb. 2027



CHILE: ATACAMA DESERT & THE
FAR SOUTH, Mar. 2027



TEXAS BIRDS WORKSHOP
May 2027



VIETNAM
Oct. 2027



WINTER WILDLIFE WORKSHOP

December 16 - 20, 2026



Eurasian lynx



Arctic foxes

STUDENT SHOWCASE

Each month, Jim features one student who took beautiful and inspiring images on one or more of his photography tours or workshops. It's really fascinating how photographers see and compose such different images even though we may go to the same places. Everyone takes great photographs on Jim's trips.

Barb Earles, Ubandale, Iowa. [Holland/Belgium photo tour](#), [Vermont photo tour](#), [Austria photo tour](#), [Switzerland photo tour](#), [Abandoned in Georgia photo tour](#).



© Barb Earles

Student Showcase, continued



Student Showcase, continued



© Barb Earles



© Barb Earles

DUBAI & ABU DHABI TOUR

November 14 - 22, 2026



Great Gray Owls workshop

February 13 - 18, 2027

spectacular action shots



The Story Behi



nd the Picture



This is the remarkable Museum of the Future in Dubai. The design is absolutely brilliant. Bold graphic concepts in architecture are often best photographed with extreme wide angle lenses, exemplified here.

Even though I've lightened my camera backpack in the past few years in an effort to put less pressure on my lower back, I was very glad I brought my Sigma f/1.8 14mm lens to Dubai. I used it all the time, including here. The lens is 2 1/2 pounds, and to be honest it feels heavier than that when I'm carrying it. However, it produces very sharp and very dramatic interpretations of great architecture. In addition, the remarkably large maximum aperture allows me to shoot in low light -- like dusk and twilight -- without the necessity of using a tripod. I took this picture from the sidewalk, so using a tripod wouldn't have been a problem. So often, though, there are prohibitions against using one. With the f/1.8 aperture, I rarely worry about the tripod issue.

I was in Dubai and Abu Dhabi researching a photography tour which is now planned for November 2026. §

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PHOTO INSIGHTS
 you would like to read.

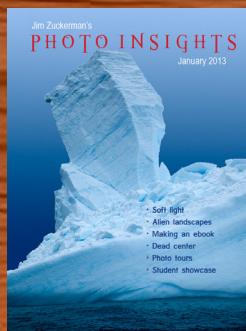
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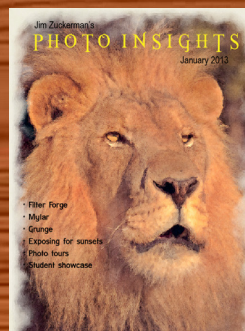
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Feb. '13



Mar. '13



Apr. '13



May '13



Jun. '13



Jul. 13



Aug. '13



Sept. '13



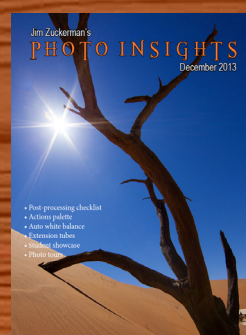
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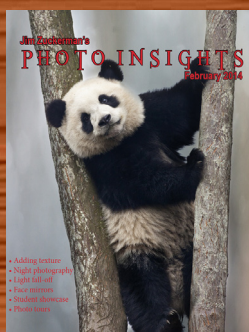
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Feb. '14



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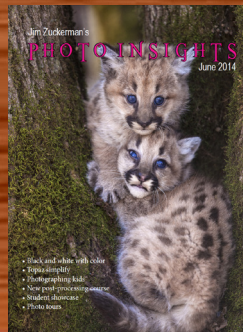
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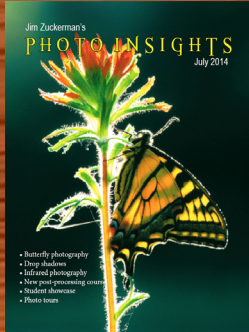


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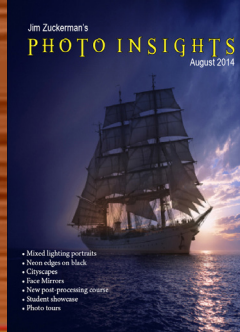


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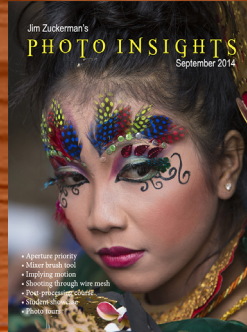
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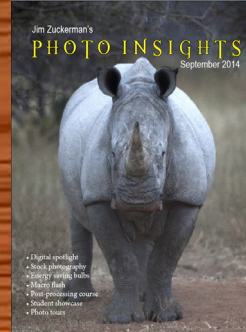
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Sept. '14



Oct. '14



Nov. '14



Dec. '14



Jan. '15



Feb. '15



Mar. '15



Apr. '15



May '15



Jun '15



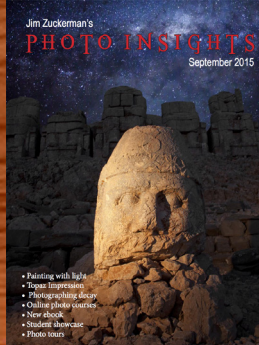
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Nov. '15



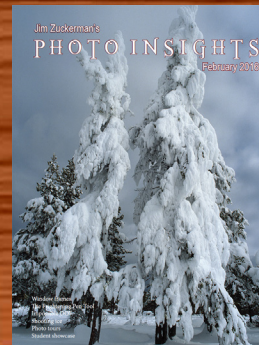
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Jan. '16



Feb. '16



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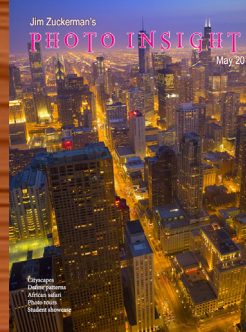
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Apr. '16



May '16



Jun '16



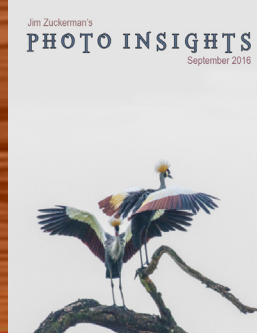
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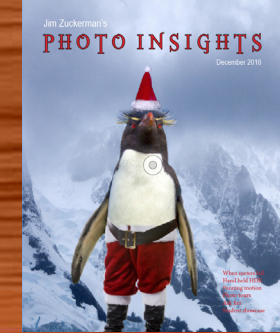
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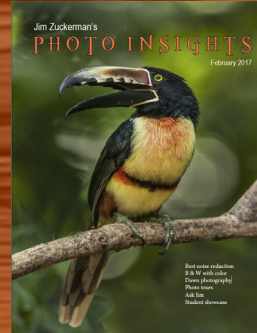
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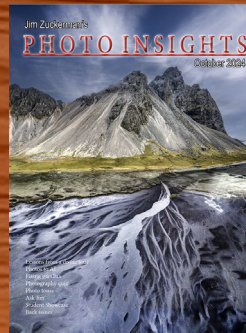
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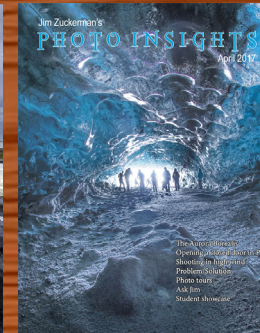
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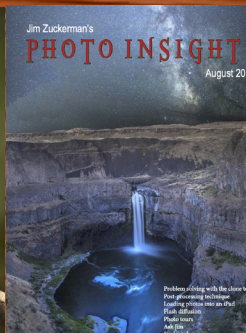
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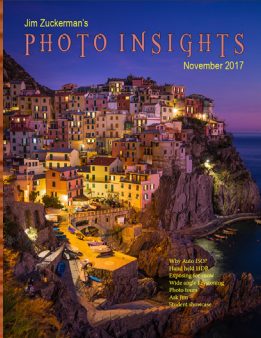


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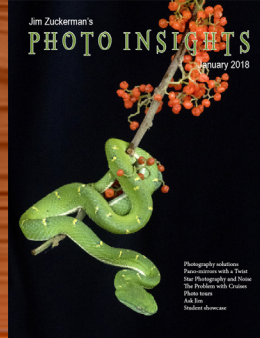
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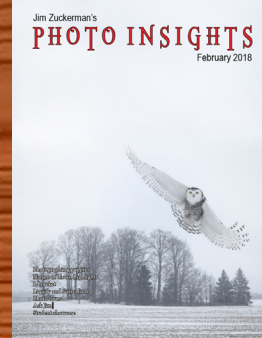
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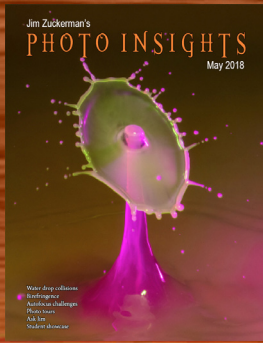
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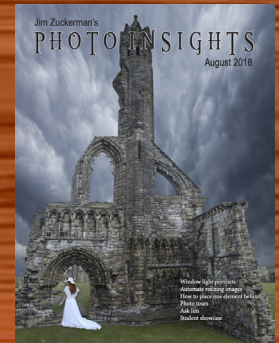
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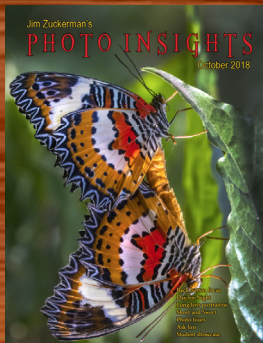
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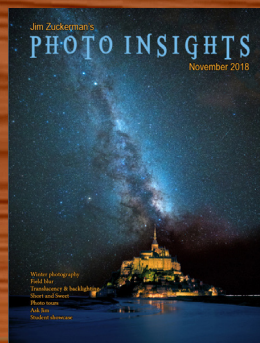
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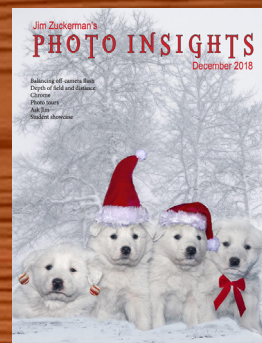
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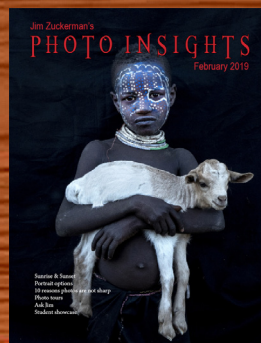
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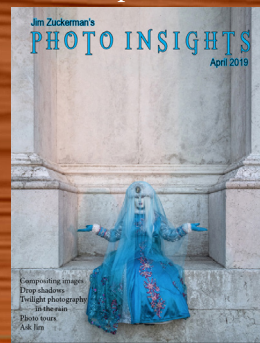
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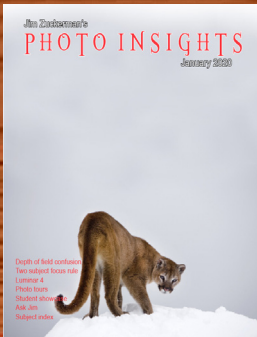
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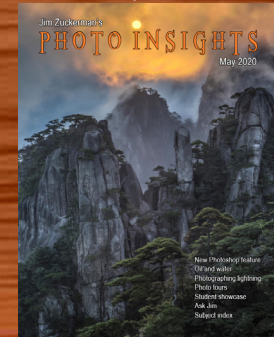
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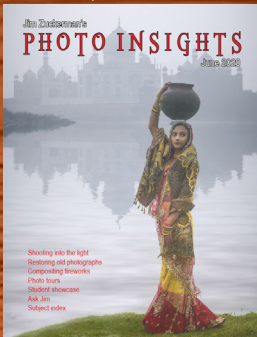
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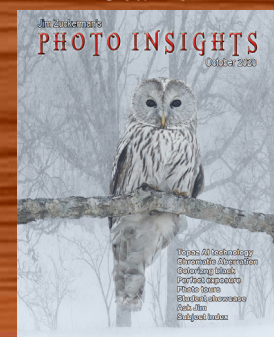
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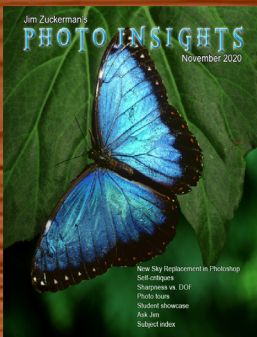
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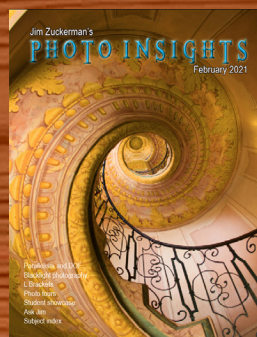
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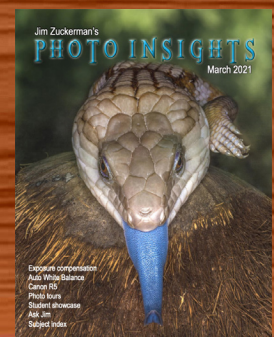
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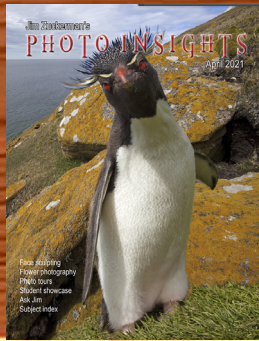
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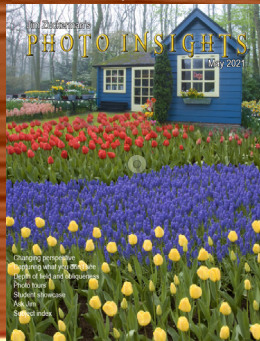
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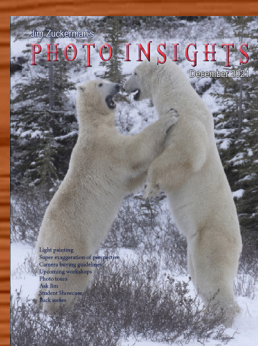
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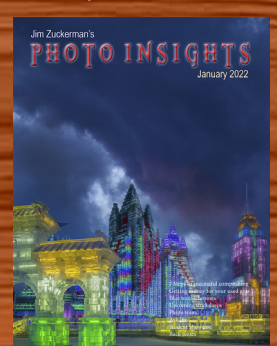
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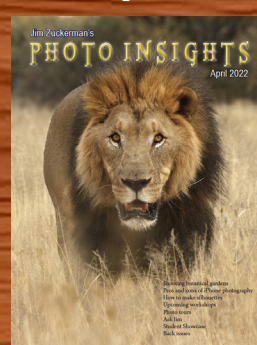
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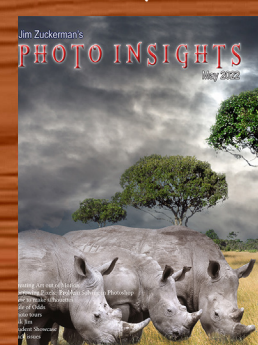
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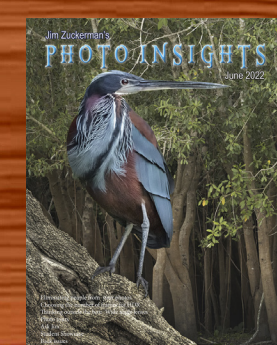
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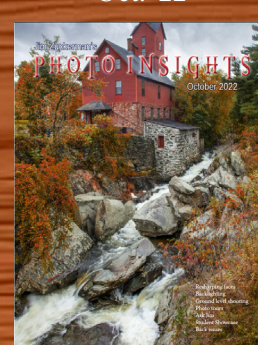
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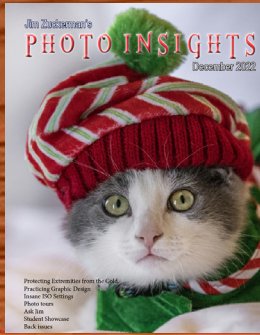
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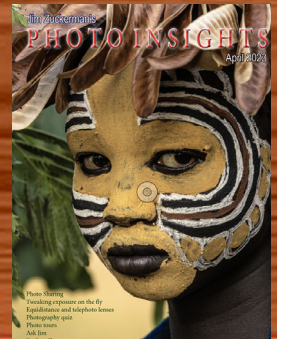
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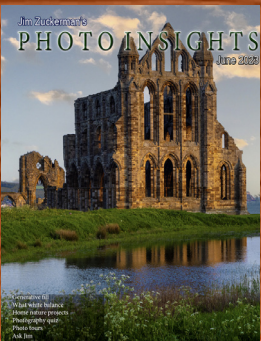
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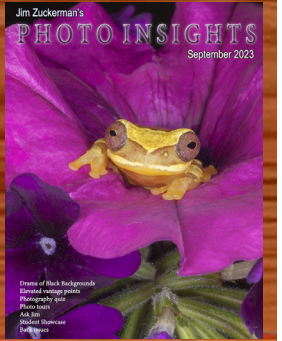
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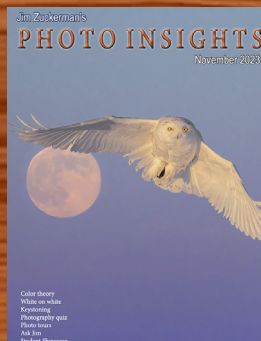
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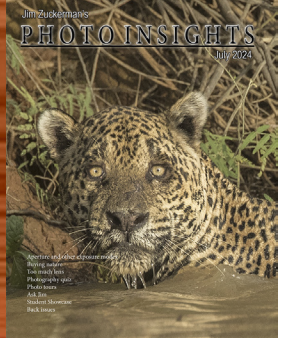
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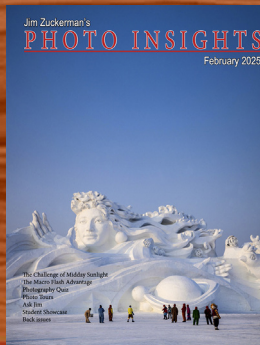
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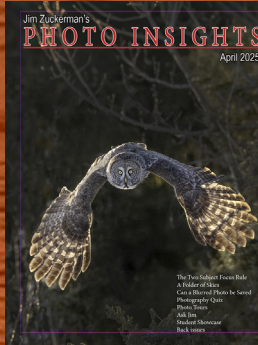
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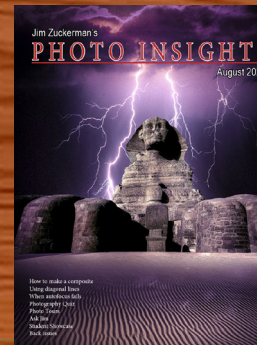
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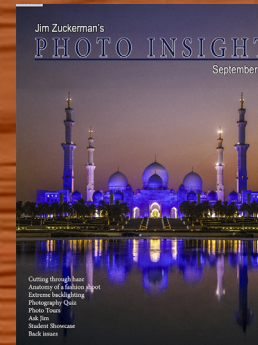
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Quiz answers

1. b
2. b
3. d
4. a
5. b
6. d
7. a
8. c
9. b
10. btt

Your score

90% - 100%: You could have been a pro

80% - 89%: Your glasses probably need a new prescription

70% - 79%: Just don't quit your day job

< 70%: You should really be using an iPhone

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PHOTO INSIGHTS

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Leopard drinking, Botswana