

HOW TO SHOOT WILDLIFE SILHOUETTES

By Dhir Jakharria



1. Why Silhouettes?

Golden hour — It's a short period of time that allows a photographer to get the best images possible, assisted by nature itself.

This is what I shoot the most. It's what I live for. The challenge, the beauty, the emotion.

Especially silhouettes — they're not just cool-looking, they're timeless and they say something without trying too hard. And when done right, they feel **intentional**. Almost like you bribed the animal to pose for you.

And here's the cool part — rather than avoiding the light flares, silhouettes and golden hour shots are all about **shooting against the light**.

In this guide, I'll show you exactly how I approach silhouettes — not just the **camera settings, planning, animal positioning, and visual strategy** that go into every single shot

2. Camera Settings That Actually Work

Let's talk settings.

I shoot in **Manual Mode** 100% of the time. Honestly, I wouldn't even know how to use the other modes if you gave me your camera. It's become second nature — and that's a good thing.

Why? Because golden hour isn't straightforward.

You're shooting directly into any bright light. You need to **underexpose**.

And auto mode just doesn't understand that. It'll keep trying to "balance" the scene and give you bright, overexposed images that lose all the richness of the light.



Normal / Over exposure



Under-exposure

The Camera Settings

Remember: You are under-exposing to get the best light possible, meaning your subject will be dark/black. Therefore, we allow less light into the camera.

- **Play with underexposure.** Don't stick to one brightness. Make it darker, then lighter. Experiment.

➤ Shutter Speed

Keep it high – 1/500s or faster. You want sharp outlines. If your subject moves, you don't want blur messing with the silhouette. (Unless creatively intentional)

➤ Aperture

Always play with this:

f/2.8 - f4.5: A blurred background and more glow



f/2.8, 400mm, 1/1000s, ISO 125

f/5.6–f/8: Clean depth and sharpness 



f/5.6, 244mm, 1/8000s, ISO 100

f/16 or higher: Unique sun shape due to the blades of the closed aperture: 



f/22, 400mm, 1/125s, ISO 12800

➤ ISO

Always keep it low – ISO 100–400. Avoid noise.
If it's early morning and a bit dark, push it up slightly,
but only if needed.

3. Planning for the Shot

Silhouettes reward those who plan and are intentional about it. If you wait until the light is perfect to start moving, you're already too late.

Your planning is more important than the camera settings.

The Day Before:

I always tell my guide in advance that we're chasing light the next day and that I want to be out before sunrise.

And I don't just stop there — I show them a few silhouette shots so they understand what we're aiming for.

Not everyone has your vision. But if your guide sees it, they'll help position the car accordingly. It becomes a team effort.

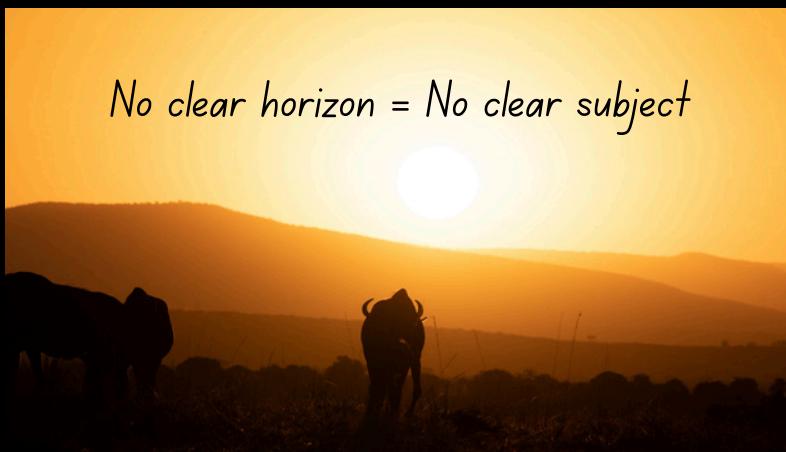
Even though this guide is very safari-specific, the principles apply everywhere.



4. Elements Of A Good Silhouette

a) The Horizon

It's helpful to have a clean one. No bushes, trees, or half-heads. The subject needs to sit clearly against the sky. Even if the animal isn't literally on a ridge, you can position yourself to make it look like it is.



b) The Grass:

Short grass = clean outlines.

Long grass = tricky, but not impossible.

With tall subjects like giraffes or elephants, you can still get great neck and head separation. And sometimes? You can even use the long grass as part of your composition.



Short grass



Long grass (i totally didn't miss my focus here) ☺☺

c) The Animal

Not every animal works well. Giraffes, elephants, ostriches? Yes. Height separates the animal from the tricky grounds.

Hyenas, jackals, lions lying down? Much harder because they're short kings and queens.



Giraffes in very tall grass



Leopard - short animal.

An OK shot, but wish it was more defined - or taller :)

d) The Angle

This includes both your position and the animal's. You usually want the animal in a **side profile**.

If it's facing you or the sun, the body gets compressed. You lose the outline. But if it's side-on? You see the shape, the legs, the ear spacing, the tusks — everything.

Also, your angle may matter too. Experimenting shooting from higher up and lower and see what gets the better outline. (Meaning get up or get lower)

Pro tip: Don't be shy to ask your guide to move slightly. Forward, back, tilt a bit — whatever helps. But always with patience.

The best golden hour shots are a collaboration, not a chase.



Front profile - not so defined



Side profile - Defined

5. Other Silhouette Types: Rim Light

Silhouettes aren't always about solid black. Sometimes golden hour gives you that subtle rim — a glowing outline of fur or features that adds softness to the shot.

Key factors:

1. The Animal

You want **furry animals**. Cheetahs and hyenas work best — their fur picks up light beautifully.

Lions and leopards? Not as much. Elephants? Maybe their tail. Giraffes? Sometimes the top of their mane.



2. The Light Angle

Still needs to be behind the animal — but now, you want a **darker background** (e.g., a shaded forest or hill) so that the rim light actually glows.



This is where you get creative — not every rim light shot needs a clean horizon. It just needs thoughtful exposure and spacing.



6. Final Tips From the Field

- **Anticipate animal movement.** Go ahead and anticipate where the animal can be. Position yourself before it does.
- **Don't stress about nailing exposure.** You can fix exposure in post — what matters more is focus and composition.
- **Master the principles, then break them.** Everything I mentioned is just part of the guide. At the end, it's up to you how you'll use that and create your own magic.
- **You'll miss a lot of shots.** Some animals won't show up. The grass might block your shot. The light might die too fast. And that's okay, because that's the beauty of it.
- **Location kinda matters.** You don't get the open grasslands and positioning freedom everywhere in the world. Some places are genuinely challenging for such places.

Finally, the last page...



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