



George Turner Profile

- Since turning professional in 2016, George 'The Explorer' Turner has become one of the UK's most published wildlife and travel photographers.
- George's images have been published in a range of major UK newspapers as well as *National Geographic Traveller*, the BBC, and Lonely Planet and Rough Guides publications.
- His expertise in social media was developed while working in advertising for the agency Ogilvy and Mather, and the International Tennis Federation.
- George leads photo tours and workshops every year to the Canadian Arctic and Kenya's Maasai Mara.

www.georgetheexplorer.com



George Turner

With a name inspired by a cartoon and a passion for polar bears, George 'The Explorer' Turner is not as ordinary as his name might suggest. Keith Wilson meets a photographer who is a rising star in the endlessly crowded world of wildlife photography...

All images: George 'The Explorer' Turner



What's in a name? Well, if you google the name George Turner, you could be looking up the late Victorian artist, a Scottish rugby player, a Liberal Democrat politician, or a professional slot car model maker. But key in 'George The Explorer' and there, straight in at number one, is the subject of this interview. Of course, this was not the name he was given at birth, but George is pleased he has adopted the moniker of 'The Explorer' since he became a professional photographer, because it's made his name as memorable as his pictures. When we speak, he's just returned from Norway, a country he visits about half-a-dozen times a year, photographing the wildlife and scenery from Oslo to the Arctic Circle. As a country famed for its

vast areas of wilderness, this is the sort of destination that befits the image of George The Explorer, so finding out more about the story behind his name seems like a logical place to start...

You market yourself as 'George the Explorer'. How did that initially come about?

The truth of it is that I lived in New Zealand for a couple of years and my name on Instagram was 'Exploring NZ', so all my photos were of New Zealand landscapes and birds and that kind of thing. When I moved back, I couldn't keep my name as 'Exploring NZ' because I was no



Within 12 hours I had two-and-a-half million views, \$15,000 was donated to the charity and I got two new jobs

Previous page: February brings big rains to Ndutu, leading to this magical moment.

Camera: Nikon D5
Lens: 500mm f/4
Exposure: 1/1600 sec, f/4, ISO1000

Below: This western lowland gorilla looked wistfully to the canopy, as if she was soul searching.

Camera: Nikon D5
Lens: 500mm f/4
Exposure: 1/1000 sec, f/4, ISO5000



Above: 'Ghost', one of Ruaha National Park's most famous leopards, is massive for his species yet he seemingly glides through the long grasses.

Camera: Nikon D5
Lens: 500mm f/4
Exposure: 1/160 sec, f/4, ISO5000



longer in New Zealand. My name is so plain – George Turner was already taken and even my middle name, George Benjamin, was taken and George Benjamin Turner was taken too, so I didn't know what to call myself! Then my friend jokingly said, 'Well you're a bit like 'Dora the Explorer' the cartoon, so I became George The Explorer Turner.

It seems to have worked for you... It's been quite good because for SEO (search engine optimization) my name doesn't stick; I'm way down. Unfortunately, my name wasn't Horatio Turner, or something. Oddly, George The Explorer has stuck and I don't regret it, even though I think it sounds a bit childish sometimes.

I'll be introduced as George The Explorer, which is nice – it breaks the ice and starts a conversation. A lot of my clients quite like it because it's a nice piece of branding.

Bears are one of your favourite subjects. What's the attraction?

Most of my work is with larger mammals, and I did a project a few years ago on Eurasian brown bears in Finland. I've also done polar bears at this amazing place called Nanuk Polar Bear Lodge with Churchill Wild. They are the only operator in the world that enable guests to go on foot with polar bears. So, you're not behind fences, you're not on boats, you're not on one of these big tundra buggies; it's just you and the →

*** TIME FOR A KNEES-UP**

GEORGE PACKS A LOT OF GEAR, BUT THERE'S ONE ACCESSORY HE RELIES UPON THAT HE NEVER FAILS TO TAKE WHEREVER HE GOES... MAINLY BECAUSE HE CANT!

What is the most unusual accessory that you pack?

Sometimes I will wear headphones, not when I'm searching for an animal because it's important that you can hear. But once I'm with animals I'll put my headphones on, which people can find a bit odd, and that really allows me to zone in to the moment itself. Another thing people find odd is that in a vehicle I don't use beanbags, I use my knee. I have a shot of a western lowland gorilla looking up into the canopy, the face is all lovely and lit. It was taken on the 500mm and I took it at 1/500sec – it's pin sharp. People think I must have been using a tripod, or even a monopod. I do own a tripod and monopod, but I never take them, I always go handheld and depend on my trusty right knee. So, you could say my best accessory is my knee!

polar bear, which is an experience I cannot put into words.

It sounds terrifying!

No, not at all, because the guides are all polar bear specialists. When they're not guiding in the winter almost all of them are in British Columbia, guiding with black bears, spirit bears and grizzlies as well. What you can learn from them is a massive benefit to your photography, because understanding the animal is the most important part of enabling you to get the images that you want.

In the case of photographing bears, what are the main lessons?

Make sure you're in the right position, but also be aware of your safety. Where incidents do happen in other Arctic locations, it's usually a result of people walking towards bears, which is a very threatening behaviour. When the guides on Hudson Bay spot a bear they will just wait. If the bear decides to walk towards you, great, but if the bear decides to walk away, well that's the bear's prerogative and you don't decide to follow it or chase it. Yes, I'm pretty obsessed with bears and I'm going back there later this year, and I'll be doing some workshops as well.

It's not just wildlife – your catalogue reveals a versatile array of landscape and travel images. Is there a unifying theme in your subject matter?

It's travel in terms of showing people places that they might never see themselves, or trying to inspire and educate them about why they should care about those places. With the world quickly changing in terms of climate, people don't necessarily care about somewhere that's very far away and not affecting them directly. They're not seeing the impact on their daily lives when in fact it's all very much connected.

How much planning do you do in terms of a shot list, or is that all set by the client?

It's both. It depends on the client. Recently, I was shooting Barbary macaques in Morocco, and it includes the landscape where they live and the habitat in the Atlas mountains, which is being deforested, so people come into it as well. It's a case of conveying the story



that needs to be told, and then just capturing whatever comes along the way. For a job like this you swap ideas with the client, but there's always going to be mandatories such as a portrait of a macaque. The emphasis is on me to adapt when I'm on the ground, to make sure I'm capturing the story that I promised.

What are the main cameras and lenses that you work with?

My primary camera is the Nikon D5. A lot of people ask me why I don't use the D850 and I know it's incredible in low light, but the D5 is also amazing in low light and has the capability of 12fps, which is very useful for what I do. My backup body is the D810, which I will probably upgrade to the D850 or even the D500, which I have used a lot on assignments. For lenses, I use the 500mm f/4, the big one. I've used the smaller one as well (the Nikon AF-S 500mm f/5.6E PF ED VR). I've tested it and it's incredible, but it's f/5.6 and for



I only took about four photographs because I stood there just looking at it in complete and total awe

Above: Perched high on one of the Serengeti's iconic kopjes, this male lion stirs from his afternoon rest.

Camera: Nikon D5
Lens: 500mm f/4
Exposure: 1/400 sec, f/4, ISO640

Above right: On this spectacular Maasai Mara morning, hot air balloons lit up in the distance, wonderfully contrasted with this lioness.

Camera: Nikon D5
Lens: 500mm f/4
Exposure: 1/4000 sec, f/4, ISO2000

Below right: Three brothers nuzzled for over 100 metres as they approached the vehicle – a unique glimpse into the male lion's social behaviours.

Camera: Nikon D5
Lens: 70-200mm f/2.8
Exposure: 1/1000 sec, f/4, ISO500

a lot of my work there can be a big difference between f/4 and f/5.6. That being said the weight of it does make me question my decision because it's just so small!

I use the 300mm f/4 as well, but my favourite lens is the 70-200mm f/2.8 because it's so quick and sharp. When I'm out driving in the Maasai Mara I would have the 500mm f/4 attached to the D5 and I would have the 70-200mm f/2.8 attached to the D810. Sometimes, I have it the other way around because that 70-200mm on the D5 is a combination that is not to be messed with. The sharpness is impeccable.

But with that combination don't you ever think you're being compromised on focal length, or do you add an extender?

No, I think that's to do with a couple of things. The first is that one of my clients has made a special photographic vehicle where the sides fold down, so you get really low, like below a male lion's eye level, and if a lion is that close you need to be somewhere between 70mm and 200mm. Most of the time I'm quite purposeful with what I'm doing, so I do have the time to change lenses and not worry about the situation.

My style is tending to get further away to show more of the animal in the environment rather than just really tight portraits. I still do it, →





but that 70-200mm means you can be an extra bit further back.

Have you used the Z 7 yet?

I tested the Z 7 in Kenya in January – and talk about sharpness! I have a portrait of a lion that I took with the 70-200mm with the adapter on the Z 7. Honest to God, you can crop into the eye of that lion and it's still pin-sharp to the point where I think you can see the soul of the fly that's on the lion's eye. It's that sharp! When Nikon starts releasing longer lenses for the Z-mount, like a 400mm, it could be a serious consideration for me.

It sounds like you definitely see a future for mirrorless cameras? Absolutely. But I have to admit I like the bulkiness of the D5. It suits what

I'm doing: it's sturdy and weatherproof and I don't mind it getting splashed or being in -45°C in Canada. But one of the things I struggle with is the amount of gear I carry around in terms of weight and size – mirrorless is a game-changer in that regard. I'm a Nikon diehard and having tested the Z 7, I think mirrorless is there in terms of quality of image in all forms, including

“The 70-200mm f/2.8 on the D5 is a combination that is not to be messed with. The sharpness is impeccable

Above: Sitting in a perfect silence, this inquisitive young male stared straight down the camera barrel. With the iconic, crisp Arctic light, it made for a truly unforgettable scene.

Camera: Nikon D5
Lens: 500mm f/4
Exposure: 1/400 sec, f/4, ISO1600

performance in low light, the AF system and sharpness. The ergonomic experience when I had the 24-70mm on it with the Z-mount was amazing. I like to do little video clips and the video autofocus was pretty impressive as well; it tracked a cheetah hunt, which was one of the hardest tests I could put it through.

When people ask 'how do you become a wildlife photographer?' what do you say?

You just do! If there was a step-by-step programme to becoming a wildlife photographer I'd be a rich man, because I'd just talk about how to do it. I'm thankful that now it seems to be that the work is more coming to me than I'm having to chase it. I'm still chasing work too, because I have lots of ideas about

where I want to go. For example, later this year I'm doing a project on Ethiopian wolves. It's Africa's most endangered carnivore, there's fewer than 400 left, and the threat is so real that the next generation probably won't see them. That story is something I dreamt up myself and I went out of my way to make it happen, because I'm determined to tell that story.

You're determined to tell that, but who's going to take that story, or has that already been determined?

That's already determined. For example, I work with BBC Earth. But also what counts today is social media because it's so immediate and you can reach massive audiences at the click of a button. You can also bring people into the story because, with things like Instagram Stories, people can get behind the scenes every day of what you're doing and seeing why you're doing it. So when you deliver that story people can feel so much more connected to it – they understand the context of why you're there and why they should care.

How do you utilise Instagram as a professional photographer?

On Instagram I have two pages and they have 60,000 people or more that see everything I do. When I start posting about stories, other editors that follow me, or anyone that might want to tell the story, will contact me.

I know beforehand that I have lots of coverage secured, then I'll post it on my pages and 99 percent of the time more coverage will come as a result of me sharing it. Social media is not something that photographers should be scared of – own it and embrace it and use it to tell your own story. The fact that you can reach so many people immediately can only be a positive thing.

Do you have an example of a social media posting really paying off?

I have a photo of a cheetah taken in very heavy rain with some nice backlighting – I planned that photograph for months... I went at a specific time of year for a couple of weeks specifically to get that shot. I got lots of other pictures along the way, but I was really trying for that one and I got it. Rather than reserve it for the big awards in anonymity,

*** THE WINDS OF ORKNEY**

On a trip to the Orkney Islands off the far north coast of Scotland, George secured his camera bag safely away from the edge of a sea cliff – or so he thought...

What has been your embarrassing moment in your career so far? Where do I begin? Last year, I nearly had my camera bag blown off a cliff in the Orkneys. I literally had to dive on a cliff edge to save my

300mm, 70-200mm, my 24-70mm and my D810! That's how windy it was. I'd actually put the camera bag behind this big rock and somehow the wind had blown around and was pushing it towards the cliff. My friend shouted 'George!' and I dived for my bag – I caught it just two metres from the cliff edge! That was pretty embarrassing. I underestimated the winds of Orkney, which you should never do!

I thought 'I can't save this, I put so much work into it, I want people to see it!' So I posted it on a website called Reddit with a whole bunch of conservation messaging. I put links to the charity that I was working with and within 12 hours I had two-and-a-half million views, \$15,000 was donated to that charity, the Cheetah Conservation Fund, and from that I got two assignments. Those clients are still working with me to this day. That was two-and-a-half years ago.

How do you edit and manage your workflow, especially with so many frames shot at 12fps?

I'm extremely selective with what I photograph. When I started out I could take a thousand images a day quite easily, but now it's not unheard of that I might take less than a hundred a day. That's because I'm setting out to get something very specific. But there can be days where that big hunt comes up, or I'm just seeing an animal that's usually quite hard to see, then I could come back with 700 or 800 images.

Like a lot of photographers, I will know already which ones I will want to look at straight away. When I'm travelling, I've got a MacBook Air with external hard drives, so I dump the images on the external hard drives, then I look at the shots that I think were good in the first place. I'll rate them from one to five, then I'll go through the remainder in the

evenings and rate those. I'll leave them all on there until I get back to the UK and then put them on my iMac here, because sometimes there can be some surprises or little nuances in the image that you wouldn't have seen before.

Eventually, I'll whittle it down to my favourites, but I'll still leave a few in there, like the threes and fours, just in case I come back in a month's time and look at it all a bit differently.

What about image processing?

I don't do fine art style where you can spend one hour on just one image. Obviously, a Raw file can be quite flat, so I'll try to breathe a little bit of life into it in terms of texture and depth. If I've messed up the white balance, for example if I've had it on Cloudy and some sun has come out, I'll change that around, but otherwise I don't do a huge amount. I try to keep the image within the realms of reality – just as I saw it in the camera.

What has been your career highlight so far?

I think of moments that make me leap out of skin, the first one being 25 metres away from a polar bear on foot last year. That was just an experience that I cannot describe. Then there was my first encounter with a polar bear and I only took about four photographs because I stood there just looking at it in complete and total awe.

What's the best piece of advice you'd give to someone wanting to follow in your footsteps?

The main one is do your research and understand the animals and the place. Then there's the really small things, such as forgetting to clear your cards. If you're shooting a hunt and you're at 12fps you will eat through storage very quickly.

Before we go out I always say to clients make sure your cards are clear. I say it repeatedly, 'backup and clear your cards', but still I hear in the middle of a hunt someone shouts, 'Oh my God, my card's full!' Then they try to delete images as fast as they can, but by the time they do that and with a hunt happening so quickly they have missed out on getting anything. So make sure you always have spares. I always keep at least one spare card at all times. ■

Next Month
Donna Crous,
pro food
photographer