

## **The significance of the Record Shot in wildlife photography: A comprehensive definition and analysis**

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### **Abstract**

Wildlife photography plays a critical role in documenting and conserving the natural world, with Record Shots serving as vital tools in this process. Despite the term's widespread use among the photographers, its definition and significance remain ambiguous, especially in the context of wildlife photography. This study explores the concept of the Record Shot through a combination of qualitative methods, including an extensive literature review, interviews with expert wildlife photographers, and an autoethnographic case study. The study identifies key characteristics of a Record Shot, emphasizing its role as a non-artistic, documentary-style image captured with the primary intent of documenting a subject or event for conservation and identification purposes. This research also distinguishes Record Shots from Snapshots, highlighting the deliberate and the expert-driven nature of the former. Three case studies illustrate how Record Shots have contributed to significant wildlife conservation efforts, such as documenting rediscovered species and confirming the existence of endangered fauna. This study concludes by emphasizing the importance of the Record Shot in wildlife photography, as a means of capturing evidence and as an essential tool in ongoing efforts to preserve biodiversity.

**Keywords:** *definition, record shot, snapshot, wildlife photography*

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## **Introduction**

Wildlife photography is an exclusive subject area of photography. It has been established as one of the leading genres of photography and as a recognized profession. Further, it has become a trendy, popular hobby among worldwide photographers. Wildlife Photography is classically introduced within the genre of Nature and Wildlife Photography (Podduwage, 2016).

Defining wildlife photography has been quite challenging as there were many approaches to identify its scope and specific characters. As a solution, a few international photographic associations collaboratively introduced a standard definition for nature and wildlife photography in 2014 (Royal Photography Society, 2014). In this lengthy definition, nature and wildlife photography are categorized into two distinct classes within the broader umbrella of nature photography. This definition outlines several key characteristics through which wildlife photography is distinguished from nature photography. Accordingly, the principal criterion that distinguishes wildlife photography is that its subjects must be free and unrestrained within a natural or adopted habitat (Podduwage & Ratnayake, 2020).

These subjects of wildlife photography are primarily wild creatures, and capturing them is not an easy task. Wildlife photographers generally have to go into natural habitats where wild animals roam free and unrestrained. Consequently, a photographer who is specialized and dedicated in wildlife photography is recognized as

a wildlife photographer. *Collins Dictionary* defines a wildlife photographer as “someone that specializes in taking photographs of wild animals, especially in their natural habitats and plants” (collinsdictionary.com, 2022).

Considering both wildlife photography and the photographer, it demonstrates a very specific scope compared to other genres of photography. The key concept behind all nature and wildlife photography is that it has to stand up for wild animals and the environment. Specifically, the end result of wildlife photography has to be the conservation of wildlife and its habitats (Hanisch et al., 2019). In this regard, the camera works as a conservation tool and the photographer becomes a naturalist and a conservationist. Therefore, it is essential to acquire knowledge of natural science, at least to a certain level, to become a wildlife photographer. The photographers are required to learn and practice skills such as identifying different animal species, habitats and behaviours of wild animals and plants, seasons, and changes in the environment. When practiced in this way, wildlife photography can significantly enhance engagement with biodiversity raising emotional attachment, awareness, and deepening knowledge, concern, and interest among photographers and audiences alike (Hanisch et al., 2019; Smith, 2020).

There are many ways to use the camera as a wildlife conservationist tool to apply conservation practices (Hanisch et al., 2019). With this perspective, wildlife photography goes beyond making

aesthetically appealing images or becoming just another storytelling medium (Herrera, 2019). In this background, Record Shots are becoming a crucial aspect of wildlife photography.

### **The Record Shot**

The term Record Shot is a commonly used term among photographers, especially in photographic discussions and critic sessions. However, it has become quite difficult to determine a standard or an accepted definition to recognize the concept of Record Shot in photography, and it is not included in popular subject dictionaries of photography or photography encyclopaedias (Peres, 2007; Präkel, 2010; Warren, 2006).

However, the significance of this term has been discussed in many photography-related conversations like in the “Letters to the Editor” section in the journal of the Photographic Society of America (PSA) (Letters to the editor, 2015). According to the discussion, 03 different perceptions by three photographers are pointed out.

- a. *It is a term that describes an image that portrays the subject, not from an artistic point of view, but purely to show its likeness.*
- b. *It is (captured image) for just that purpose - to have a record of something that took place and nothing else.*
- c. *(It is a term to introduce an image which) was taken essentially as a grab shot without any consideration on the part of the taker about trying to make it an effective or interesting image. (Letters to the editor, 2015)*

Mike Johnston, the editor of a photography website, has described the Record Shot as follows; *“I even have a name for those aesthetically drab 'n' dispiriting but accurate and informative frames: "record shots." And I've always conceived that about half my shooting consists of record shots, meant to record a memory: I was here. I did this. I was with this person. I saw this. That sort of thing. Sometimes the record shots do turn out to be good photographs too, and I love it when that happens. But it's relatively rare.”* (Johnston, 2013). The photokonnexion.com website (another photography website) includes the Record Shot in a glossary and defines it as a captured image where the *“emphasis is on creating a record of the photographed object. You are (the photographer) not trying to portray the object in an artistic representation”* (Guy, 2014).

Given these various perspectives on the Record Shot, it is evident that the term holds a commonly accepted meaning in the field of photography that is yet to be accurately assessed and standardized. Considering this gap, this research has been undertaken to elucidate the definition of a Record Shot and its significance within the genre of wildlife photography, both in theoretical and practical contexts.

## **Materials and Methods**

The research employed a qualitative approach. It began with an extensive literature review, focusing on the Record Shot concept as applied in wildlife photography. Subsequently, an interview method was employed to gather data regarding the practical aspects

of this concept. Ten expert wildlife photographers were selected for these interviews. Additionally, an autoethnographic case study was applied to provide clear evidence of the successful applications of the Record Shot concept in supporting wildlife conservation in practice.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***Assessing and Defining a Record Shot***

The results concluded two viewpoints that can be used to assess a record shot. One is by looking at the production process of the image, and the second is by looking at the produced image. The production process is the way that the photograph is produced. According to this viewpoint, a Record Shot can be characterized by 03 attributes.

- a. The photographer has not captured the image in a premeditated manner.

The recording shots are usually taken before the photographer is completely prepared to capture the image. In such situations, the photographer might not be ready in a proper physical pose to capture images. Also, it could be a situation where the camera settings were not in a properly adjusted position to capture an image successfully, or suitable gears like lenses and tripods could not be applied to capture the image. Such situations certainly cause the photographer to miss photographing the subject or incident

at a suitable angle or position, causing the images to become less valuable and visually compelling.

- b. The choice of the subject/s and the subject's relativity with other elements within the image is not matched.

Choosing the subject, placing it, and framing it are crucial aspects of the production process of a good photograph. There might be situations where the photographer misses this kind of workout session or time to capture an image. In such situations, the photographer has to photograph just the subject/s or the incident without considering the behavior of the subject, its nature, and background, foreground arrangements. This will result in creating a dull, awful representation of the subject and, photographically, a less valuable image.

- c. The photographer has not effectively manipulated the technical proficiency in the image.

The photographers have to have both creativity and technical skills to produce a good image. Sometimes, when they cannot utilize the correct camera settings or camera gears to capture an image, the results could look uninteresting or generate a "just a shot" sense.

The second viewpoint, the produced image, refers to the way that the photograph is presented as the final result of a photographing

and editing process. Under this viewpoint, a Record Shot can be characterized by another 03 attributes.

- a. The subject and the setting of the photograph are not effectively presented.

Presenting the subject in a way that captures the viewer's attention is a key element of a good photograph. Therefore, the main subject of the photograph should stand out from other elements (theoretically, in general). Elements in the photograph's background, foreground, and focal plane (middle ground) should help the viewer to engage or build undisturbed attention to the presented subject/s of the photograph. These supporting elements should help the viewer engage with or focus their attention on the subject of the photograph. However, when a photograph does not incorporate these elements in a way that highlights the subject, it can be considered a Record Shot, lacking the creativity and artistry of a well-crafted photograph.

- b. Frame, composition, lighting, and colors are not effectively presented.

A good photograph primarily consists of aesthetically appealing qualities. This aesthetical appeal is based on the careful arrangement of photographic elements like framing, composition, lighting, and colors. The image can be identified as a record shot when a photograph lacks this

aesthetical appeal, even if the subject and setting have been captured accurately or skillfully.

- c. The subject or the incident is presented in a documentary form of feeling or mood.

Beyond all the above characters, Record Shots often give the impression of “just a shot” or “just a documentary image” when viewing them. On such occasions, whether the image represents an interesting action/story or a subject it still generates this feeling of “just a shot” as it lacks photographic skill or artistry.

Beyond these two approaches, if a photographer's intention in the process of producing an image was just to collect photographic evidence, with no intention for professional publication or for creating a visually striking image for high-quality output, then such attempts can be recognized as Record Shots. On such occasions, the photographer primarily aims to record a subject or a scene on their camera in order to collect photographic proofs for the following questions:

- a. What has happened in front of the photographer?
- b. Who / what was there in front of the photographer?
- c. What are the specific details that the photographer has thought to collect about the situation or about the subject/s?

In this regard, the photographer becomes a reporter and tries to collect images to answer the above questions. However,

the answered photographs have to have the characteristics of a Record Shot, as explained under the two approaches. Thereby, a Record Shot always targets the answers for the above questions, and generally, they are not photographically or aesthetically appealing.

Furthermore, all the interviewed photographers unanimously concurred that Record Shots are primarily created by experts or experienced wildlife photographers with the intent of capturing particular subjects or incidents to document photographic evidence of such specific subjects or natural phenomena. Therefore, photographs that are inadvertently taken or captured with lack of technical or aesthetic skill and without the intention of creating a Record Shot cannot be classified as such.

### **Snapshot and Record Shot**

The concept of a Snapshot is another term that is sometimes confusingly used among photographers, inaccurately replacing the term Record Shot. A Snapshot is a photographic practice commonly employed by amateur photographers and non-professionals. It involves capturing events from everyday life, such as family gatherings, friends, pets, children at play, birthday parties, celebrations, sunsets, and various locations. Typically taken using devices like mobile phone cameras and point-and-shoot cameras, snapshots are characterized by their spontaneous and swift capturing, often without prior photographic preparation or

composing. (Beasley, 2016; Parnell-Brookes, 2020; Wikipedia, 2022)

In the book *Snapshot Photography-The Lives of Images*, the author comprehensively explores snapshot photography, delving into its use and evolution. The book explains that the snapshots are commemorative records of intimate and personal moments, concurrently mirroring widely embraced cultural norms and conventions. (Zuromskis, 2021)

Accordingly, a Record Shot differs distinctly from a Snapshot. A Record Shot is typically taken by a competent photographer using suitable photographic equipment, with the deliberate intention of documenting a specific subject or phenomenon for evidentiary purposes.

### **Use of the Record Shot in Wildlife Photography**

As discussed, the term Record Shot is more commonly used among wildlife photographers than photographers of other genres. A Record Shot should possess meaning and a purpose. Accordingly, the research reveals several common situations where a wildlife photographer is inclined to take a Record Shot.

- a. When the subject (faunal/floral species) is hard to identify at the photographing moment and needs to capture an image for later identification purposes.

- b. When the subject (faunal/floral species) looks different from its familiar/usual colour patterns or shows some specific features than its other specimens.
- c. When the subject (faunal/floral species) exhibits distinctive behaviour that cannot be captured in a visually appealing manner due to technical, environmental, ethical, or regulatory constraints.
- d. When the photographer has previously photographed a better visually appealing image of the same subject or the scene.
- e. When conflicts or disturbances arise between humans and animals, particularly in unethical actions and unlawful activities by humans, prompting the need for documentation and reporting.
- f. When the photographer must quickly retreat for the safety of the animal/environment and themselves.
- g. When the subject (faunal/floral species) is exceptionally rare or elusive to photograph.
- h. When it is more advisable to observe the subject (faunal/floral species) from a distance rather than attempting to get closer for a photograph.
- i. When the photographer must capture the subject/phenomena using the available photographic equipment.

- j. When using a camera setup deliberately positioned to capture Record Shots (e.g., Trap Cameras, Remote cameras).

Referring to these identified situations, it becomes evident that creating a Record Shot is a crucial attempt in wildlife photography, requiring expertise. Therefore, in the production of a Record Shot, it is essential for the photographer to possess expertise in floral and faunal species, an understanding of the environment and nature, and knowledge of photography.

### **Importance of the Record Shot to wildlife Conservation: an autoethnographic case study**

Following are three cases that the study analyze as an autoethnographic case study. These cases represent a few of the author's experiences in which the concept of Record Shot was applied in the practice of wildlife photography, resulting in effective outcomes for wildlife conservation.

#### *Case 01 – Visual Evidence of Living Sri Lanka Emerald Spread-wing (Sinhalestes orientalis) Damselfly.*

On March 13, 2013, a small team of wildlife enthusiasts embarked on an expedition into the wet montane jungles of Sri Pada Forest Reserve in Sri Lanka. The primary objective of this expedition was to locate and photograph a long-lost damselfly species, recently sighted by a scientist within the team. The visual evidence was crucial for the team to compile a research paper on this discovery.

Equipped with only a mid-range DSLR and an 18-200 mm f/5.6 kit lens for their photography, they dedicated several days to their endeavour but could not spot the elusive species.

However, on their return journey, the photographer (Author) spotted a distinct, large damselfly perched above a stream on a stem. With swiftness and precision, the photographer captured Record Shots of this specimen before it disappeared into the thick jungle. These Record Shots served as compelling evidence for rediscovering this long-lost species, which have been classified as Data Deficient in the Red Data List and considered extinct for over 130 years. This rediscovery marked a significant milestone in scientific exploration. (Sumanapala & Bedjanič, 2013)

*Case 02 – Rediscover and first record of Sri Lanka Lesser Gull (Cepora nadina cingala) Butterfly.*

On March 14, 2013, the same team, returning to the forest edge through the footpaths of the Sri Pada Montane Forest, had to stow away their camera gear due to the heavy rains they encountered. However, at a specific location, the photographer (Author) and his colleague observed two to three yellow butterflies that appeared notably distinct from the other known species (Family Pieridae). The photographer made a concerted effort to capture them in photographs within the brief window of time when they touched down on the ground before vanishing into the forest. Upon reviewing the captured Record Shots, they came to a significant realization: this marked the first instance of photographing this

butterfly species and the first time it had been documented in over a century on the island. (Jayasinghe; et al., 2015, 2020)

*Case 03 – First live photographs of the Dendrelaphis effrenis (Synonym D.sinharajensis)*

In November 2012, during a field visit to the Athwelthota rainforest, the photographer (Author) and their colleague came across a distinctly unique snake on a tree. Equipped with only an entry-level DSLR and an 18-55mm F5.6 Lens, they faced the challenge of capturing the species. The limited photographic equipment required them to exercise extra caution for their safety. They made every effort to document the species comprehensively for later identification. The photographer successfully managed to capture several Record Shots before the snake retreated into the forest canopy. This marked the first-ever instance of photographing this specific species in its natural environment, and it constituted the second recorded encounter with the reptile after over two decades. (Danushka; et al., 2020)

The Record Shots captured in case 01 (*Sinhalestes Orientalis* Damselfly) provided convincing visual evidence of the species' existence, effectively dispelling the belief that it was extinct. This is a good example of the importance of a Record Shot to validate the new discoveries and rediscoveries of fauna and flora through wildlife photography. As described in case 02, the Record Shot of the Lesser Albatross Butterfly marked a historic milestone by capturing a live species for the first time in history. This showcased

the significance of the Record Shot in preserving historical records of biodiversity, underlining their role in documenting and safeguarding species over time. In case 03, it proved how Record Shots can be vital for species documentation and identification, particularly for rare or lesser-known species, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of biodiversity.

Accordingly, the attempts in the examined cases to capture Record Shots not only confirmed the continued existence of the species but also highlighted its presence in a specific habitat. This information is crucial for conservationists aiming to protect any endangered or vulnerable species and its respective environments.

## **Conclusion**

The study has examined the concept of the Record Shot, especially referring to wildlife photography. The term Record Shot has been discussed and analyzed from various perspectives, ultimately culminating in a comprehensive understanding of its principles and purposes.

The Record Shot serves as a vital tool in wildlife photography, capturing moments that may otherwise go undocumented. Through a series of interviews with expert wildlife photographers and an autoethnographic case study, this research has established clear criteria for assessing a photograph as a Record Shot. It has been revealed that a Record Shot is characterized by attributes related to both its production process and the final presented image.

Furthermore, the research has distinguished a Record Shot from a Snapshot, highlighting each term's specific application and intent. While a Snapshot captures everyday moments without artistic intention, a Record Shot is meticulously crafted by experienced wildlife photographers with the purpose of documenting specific subjects or incidents for evidentiary purposes.

The autoethnographic case study provided three compelling examples of how the application of Record Shots contributed significantly to wildlife conservation. In each case, the Record Shots served as convincing evidence, dispelling beliefs of extinction and contributing to the documentation and understanding of nature and wildlife.

In conclusion, this study has standardized the importance of the Record Shot in wildlife photography, emphasizing its role as a conservation tool and a means of capturing invaluable moments in the natural world. This study has contributed to the broader discourse on wildlife photography by providing a comprehensive definition and analysis, underscoring the essential relationship between photography and conservation efforts.

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