

Photographic Essays of Place ~Kwa Zulu Natal, South Africa~

by Roy Beckemeyer

“...few can sojourn long within the unspoilt wilderness...surrounded on all sides by its confiding animals, without absorbing its atmosphere”—James Stevenson-Hamilton (South African nature reserve warden)

Kansas has long been a land of large mammals. First the mastodons and mammoths, then the bison; now the cattle that dot the pastures. Africa is also home to an unmatched diversity of mammals, writ large. On a trip to South Africa a dozen years ago, my wife, Pat, and I trekked for two weeks through Kwa Zulu Natal. Stevenson-Hamilton’s words, “its confiding animals,” seemed to capture the essence of our experience with big game animals of South Africa. Here are some photos accompanied by the thoughts they bring to my mind about this remembered place:

Blesbok (p. 2) are striking animals. Their white spats and the white, upside-down-exclamation-mark blaze that dominates its face are instantly recognizable. So I especially

liked this shot (next page), that silhouettes an adult and calf walking through the grass. The lack of its characteristic color and pattern reduces the animals to their inherent shapes, their forms alone. The two are in lock step, the right front leg of each lifting, the knee joint pointing the way forward, the angle of the right ears the same, the shoulder humps repeated. To me it gives a sense of the anonymity of individuals, continuity of generations, the march of time, the evolution of life that is so evident in Africa, in Kansas.



Blesbok, endemic South African antelope.

The Kudu (p. 3) carries corkscrew horns to extremes. Here is an exercise in shadow and light, stripes and curves. I particularly like the way the horn's spiral shadow morphs

its way across the antelope's flank, the shadow tip ending up parallel to the first white stripe. The Kudu's face emerges, sunlit, from its shadowed neck and



A Greater Kudu bull antelope.

legs, its teardrop white marks and white muzzle vees anticipating the diverging horns. The lovely ears form a different sort of horn, all curves and spirals that twist just so to collect and concentrate sound. Imagine the intricate foldings and twistings of DNA that caused these shapes to occur, how they are both embodied and symbolized in this animal's morphology.



Members of a herd of Blue Wildebeest antelope.

These Blue Wildebeest peering back at us, intent, focused, encapsulate for me the idea of the herd— individuals gathered together into a coherent group to take advantage of the benefits of numbers. Particularly striking

to me in this photo is the symmetry of the gaze of the two animals to the left, and the way the tail-end of the animal to the right sort of fits into the open space beside the center animal, the great vertical markings on the sides of the wildebeests, and curve of the dark blue hair on the back of the center animal matching that of the tail of the one on the right, the sense of community the whole gestalt encompasses.

I love the sense of chaos on its way to becoming order in this study of patterns. Here three Burchell's zebras



Burchell's zebras - Red-billed Oxpeckers along for the ride.

pose in front of a random branching of tree limbs, the relatively orderly stripes of the zebras putting a sense of some predictability to the scene, but not quite complete due to the overlapping portions of the different parts of their bodies, and the different angles of view. The picture strengthens the herd image begun with the Blue Wildebeest, and is even further enhanced by the four Red-billed Oxpeckers perched on the zebra in the foreground. The birds bring us to the idea of the complex interactions of species. Once thought to be a mutualistic relationship, the birds reducing the parasite load (eating ticks off the zebras), some now consider the birds as parasitic, as they also keep tick bites open by pecking at them, and feeding on the resulting blood flow. So, chaos in imagery, perhaps chaos in interpretation as well.

Now, when you look carefully at the portrait of a Southern White Rhino on the next page, you see ticks attached to its head. Shortly after taking this picture, I watched one of the birds go into the rhino's ear in search of ticks. Every appearance of the rhino appreciating the interaction. I consider this picture to also be a study in character: The horn smeared with red dirt and bits of roots

from tearing into the turf, all the wrinkles and cracks and crevices, all say this is a beast to be reckoned with. And yet the birds stroll nonchalantly all over its face.



Southern White Rhino attended by Red-billed Oxpeckers.



An Impala buck with ridged horns and gentle face.

This photo seems to me to be a study in contrasts. The Impala is lovely, a gentle-looking creature, large, long-lashed eyes, soft, blended markings instead of bold

splotches of pattern, all belied by the long, tapered, ridged, arching horns. The way, perhaps, of all nature: peaceful or aggressive as the situation demands.

So, from Africa, a sense of ancient beings, ancient ways, of origins, of places from which we ourselves might have arisen, a familiarity; in spite of the strangeness a sense that even here, in this different spot, among these different life-forms, we find and share some aspects of home.

Photos by Roy Beckemeyer. Taken in 2005 in Kwa Zulu Natal Province, South Africa. Nikon DSLR with 500 mm Nikon manual focus telephoto lens.

Roy Beckemeyer of Wichita is a contributing editor of *Konza Journal*. He and his wife Pat, married for 56 years, have traveled extensively, and have visited all seven continents in their wanderings. He is author of the [2015 Kansas Notable Book Award](#) winner [Music I Once Could Dance To](#) (2014, Coal City Press). He blogs at <https://phanaerozoic.blog/>.