



A View of Reality

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Byline:

Barrie Watts, a professional photographer, talks about working on children's books.

Barrie Watts is one of a small band of professional photographers (you can count them on the fingers of one hand) who have made their reputations working on children's books.

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After working as an auditor in the Health Service for many years, and finding the prospect of doing this for the rest of his working life awesomely unacceptable, he became a milkman and a factory hand to finance a three-year photography course at an Essex college. Here he built up his portfolio and eventually knocked on the door of Jill Coleman at A & C Black - resulting in the now famous 'Stopwatch' series.

With over 50 titles to his credit, he is widely recognised as the leading photographer of nature books for children. His books are published worldwide in many languages. In 1989 he was awarded the TES Junior Information Book of the Year Award for one of his 'Stopwatch' books.

We asked this engagingly shy and diffident photographer to explain how he put together the '24 Hours' series for Franklin Watts (the publisher, and not a relation in sight!) and to give us a View of Reality.

Like many others working in the visual media it seems, I find it next to impossible to talk coherently about why my chosen art-form, photography, is important. I gave a great deal of thought to the options available when I embarked on a career in wildlife photography, choosing to work in still rather than cine - and making a conscious decision to concentrate on children's information books. I wanted to help educate future generations on the importance of preserving our natural heritage and I cared a great deal about books; the thought that my work would be pulped and recycled after a few weeks, as happens with most magazines and newspapers, appalled me.

Ideas for books constantly appear and are stored in the back of my mind, ready to be brought out and committed to paper when the time is right. Many are not possible, given the constraints of publishing budgets and the need to earn some sort of a living. But one idea that fortunately came to fruition was the '24 Hours' series published by Franklin Watts. At the time I felt a need to escape from the studio, after spending so much time in it for the 'Stopwatch' books. I wanted to do a series of habitat books with a difference: to be in a habitat to witness its daily rhythm of life, to experience the changing light that fell upon it, and to photograph and record any animal behaviour as it actually happened.

With new books there is inevitably a long gestation period. This is often very frustrating, especially when an author is keen to tackle a project. Nevertheless it is an important stage in the birth of a book: opinions are sought, synopses are produced and studied, rough designs are mocked up. With each '24 Hours' book, I meet with Ted Kinsey, book designer extraordinaire, to work out a rough design framework.

After this, research on each habitat can get started. This is vital because it's unusual for wildlife to present itself readily to a photographer. You have to go and find it, and you must therefore know where to look. With publishing schedules to meet, time is often short. You simply can't travel to another country at great expense and come back with an inferior set of photographs.

Many armchair wildlife watchers are misled by the excellence of TV documentaries because wildlife appears so plentiful and approachable on television. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth; most animals disappear when they see or hear a human being. What viewers don't realise is that the person behind the camera may have spent two years of his life working with great dedication and skill to bring them the magnificent spectacle they mostly take for granted.

For '24 Hours' **Game Reserve** I decided to go to Tanzania and realised that the logistics were somewhat more complicated than for the home-produced **Seashore** and **Forest** books. I needed the assistance of a reliable, experienced safari company. Luckily I found just the right one in Wildlife Explorer Ltd who are based in Cornwall. They arranged everything: permits, transport, campsites, etc. With only four weeks to complete the project, I could not risk anything going wrong.

Throughout the trip, I kept a detailed field diary which was invaluable for writing the text upon my return. On location I worked from sunrise to sunset, over 14 hours a day, either making notes or looking for photos. Sometimes I would sit patiently all day at a swamp waiting for birds to visit; other times I would drive around to see what I could find. Sometimes only a few frames would be exposed during one day of photography but more often than not it would be many rolls of film.

Nature has a habit of surprising you; if you are not prepared, you can miss the photo of a lifetime. An element of luck certainly helps to make good pictures but the more you know your subject and the harder you work, the luckier you become!

I went to Tanzania in November which coincided with the start of the short rainy season. Each afternoon heavy showers rolling in from the east, and lasting minutes or a couple of hours, would refresh a tired and dusty landscape. The result was often very muddy, even impassable roads and the end of photography for the day. But after four weeks, there were nearly 200 rolls of precious film in my bag and I was hopeful that there was enough material for the book.

Upon my return I edited out 100 pictures from over 7000 and these formed the basis of the final design. This initial selection is often agonising as some personal favourites have to be ditched because they do not fit the original conception or the general atmosphere of the book.

After picture editing, the next stage was design and this was where the book finally took shape. Ted and I met and planned the whole book: cover, endpapers, and spread by spread. I felt it essential to be involved in this because only I knew the importance of the photos in relation to each other and the theme of the book. I acted as picture editor for my own work, which would make most photographers green with envy.

Finally the text was written when I knew how much space was available. Then I could read my notes, compare the pictures and think back to the actual instant of exposure. In this way, these books become true accounts of what happens during a 24-hour period.

Some weeks later, the first colour proofs of the finished book arrived, as always a time for concern and worry - about colour bias or mishaps like upside-down photos. I am a perfectionist and go to great lengths to ensure that everything is as accurate as it can be. But, in the end you have to pass your months of work over to someone else and pray that they take as much care as you do.

Is the life of a wildlife photographer an ideal one? Many would think so but, as with any other occupation, onlookers won't know about the grindingly hard work, the hours of endurance in heat or cold, and the biting insects one has to suffer. Still, it sure beats working for a living...

Technical Information

I use a variety of cameras and a multitude of lenses, anything from a 600mm to a 20mm. I tend to use the camera to suit the job I am working on. This can be a 35mm, a 6x6cm or even a large format 5x4ins Linhof. With film, my favourite is without doubt Kodachrome. Although Kodak's processing can be erratic and often disastrous, it is a wonderful film. I have used it for many years.

The '24 Hours' series is published by Franklin Watts with titles at £8.95 each. As well as **24 Hours in a Game Reserve** (0 7496 0696 7), currently available are **24 Hours in a Desert** (0 7496 0540 5), **24 Hours in a Forest** (0 86313 902 7) and **24 Hours on a Seashore** (0 86313 903 5).

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