

Getting the Shot...
Gadgets and Ingenuity

While on assignment as cinematographer for the television documentary *Tiger, Tiger*, Mike Price matched wits with night stalkers of the jungle in service of a colleague's research project. Technical wizardry applied with good measures of tenacity and humor produced a remarkable series of photographs:

Dr. Charles McDougal, director of wildlife activities at Tiger Tops Jungle Lodge in the lowlands of Nepal, sought my help in developing a system for photographing animals moving around Royal Chitwan National Park at night. Chuck was writing at that time a book about tiger behavior and needed good-quality, head-on photos allowing him to identify individuals by the pattern of their facial markings. The photos would also help link the faces of animals to the pattern of their pug marks – another way of ascertaining which specific animals were in the area. Chuck had been unsuccessful in previous efforts to get the tigers to take their own pictures using trip lines threaded across their trails and attached to a camera shutter.

The first device I came up with was a pressure-plate arrangement consisting of two boards held apart by strong springs. Electrical contacts attached to the boards completed a circuit when pressed together, firing the shutter of a motorized camera connected to a strobe/ flash. We buried the device just beneath the surface of a game trail and hid the camera close by. Utilizing fairly strong springs, we tried to ensure that only animals weighing more than two hundred pounds would trigger the device. We did not at that stage want everything moving around at night to set it off. (It also had to be robust enough to be rhino-proof!)

The device did in fact produce results. However, it had obvious limitations – the most frustrating being the likelihood for an animal to pass by without putting its dainty little foot in exactly the “right” spot on the trail.

The second device I designed solved that problem by using a photoelectric cell, which projected an infrared beam over a range of six feet. Anything interrupting the beam would once again fire off the camera. We deliberately set the beam low to the ground this time to document some of the other nocturnal animals. The improved system was versatile enough to set up across a tree limb to investigate what animal had been scratching the bark – it turned out to be a sloth bear. The hidden set-up also produced some unforeseen results, such as “catching” on film local villagers illegally entering the park at night to cut vegetation.

One of the tiger photographs obtained with this system eventually was used on the cover of McDougal's book, *The Face of the Tiger*.

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Getting the Shot...
Don't Blink First

Sometimes the hunter becomes the hunted – even when the prey is photographic and the “weapon” is a camera. Mike Price encountered one of his intended “subjects” up closer than expected on a photo shoot in the mid-1970s during his work on the film, *Tiger, Tiger*, produced by Survival Anglia, Ltd.:

I was working with another cameraman, Dieter Plage, on a one-hour documentary about tigers. We had permission to film in the lowlands of Nepal, which is part of the northern Indo-Gangetic plain. That’s a fancy term for an area of jungle and grassland that’s home to rather large creatures such as leopards, tigers, rhinos and bears.

Tigers aren’t seen moving around much in daylight. After consultation with wildlife experts in Nepal, it was decided that I would spend my time on the ridge above the jungle lodge – called Tiger Tops. Dr. Charles McDougal, director of wildlife activities at the lodge, told me tigers used a particular trail, so I set up my equipment every afternoon in a canvas blind overlooking that trail.

Ten days or so passed seeing nothing. Then one day, sure enough, up the trail came this tiger. I was able to get some shots when it stopped on the trail, twitched its tail a few times. The next thing I knew, it had climbed up this little ridge where I was sitting in my portable bird blind – a canvas tent with gauze strips hanging over little eye holes. There he was, looking into one of these slits, at a distance of about four feet.

My movie camera had been pointing out the front of the tent. The tiger just stood there, looking in the side window. I wasn’t quite sure what to do about this. It seemed likely he would stand there for quite some time. I plucked up enough courage, unbolted the camera from the front, put the lens back to wide angle and filmed this shaky shot framed by the jagged hole of the canvas flap, which is where you usually stick the camera lens.

The Arriflex I was using sounded like a coffee grinder. I was expecting the tiger to get excited and come in and join me, or run away. Well, it did neither, but just continued to stand there. So I then picked up my still camera and took about five shots, one of which Tiger Tops made into a poster. The animal finally began to lose interest. It moved around behind the blind and laid down at a distance of about 30 feet. The flap of the blind was half open; I could see the tiger but wasn’t sure if he could see me. He just sort of settled in there as if to watch and see what happens.

The funny thing was what happened next. I had swept all the leaves in the four-foot square space inside the blind into a corner, to avoid making noise when taking shots. The next thing I knew, up the hill came a skink, a kind of lizard, looking for food. It came under the flap of the blind and went rooting through that pile of dead leaves, making a heck of a racket. So I crouched in there ready to grab my metal tripod—if this tiger did come in looking for a skink, every man and cat for himself, I was going to have to hit it over the nose. After another ten minutes or so, it lost interest completely and went away. I was able to get out of there just before dark.

Dieter added a walk up the trail, and they were able to use the little bit of footage in the film. And I got the photo – not quite “still” but definitely in the moment.