

Through Young Eyes: A Generation Behind the Lens

There is something quite different about seeing a photograph on a screen and seeing it hanging on a wall.

We have become so used to photography being consumed through phones, laptops and social media that sometimes I think we forget what happens when an image is actually printed. Suddenly you notice the details differently. You step closer. You step back. You spend more than half a second looking at it before your thumb instinctively moves on to the next post.

And perhaps that is part of what makes what we are currently working on at Young Wildlife Photographers of Southern Africa feel so special.

This year marks five years of YWP, and to celebrate, we wanted to do something that felt a little bigger than another social media post saying, "Happy birthday to us."

So, somewhere along the way, the slightly mad idea of an exhibition was born.

Now, after months of planning, reviewing, sorting, emailing, designing, printing and more spreadsheets than I would care to admit, Through Young Eyes, our YWP 5-Year Showcase, is starting to become very real.

And I don't think any of us quite anticipated the response when we first opened submissions.

More than 800 photographs were submitted by young wildlife photographers from across our community.

Eight hundred.

I still have to say that number twice sometimes.

They ranged from intimate wildlife portraits to explosive moments of behaviour, tiny creatures most people would probably walk straight past, birds frozen in action, dramatic black and white images, landscapes filled with atmosphere and those wonderfully strange little details in nature that photographers somehow train themselves to notice.

The challenge was never simply finding 60 good photographs.

It was trying to choose only 60.

From the beginning, we were very clear that this wasn't going to be a photography competition. There are already plenty of incredible competitions out there, and that wasn't what we wanted this to become.

Instead, the idea was to create a collection.

Something that would represent the way young photographers see the natural world.

That meant looking beyond technical perfection alone. Of course, image quality matters, but so does storytelling. So does behaviour. So does light, atmosphere, creativity, conservation relevance and, sometimes, simply noticing something that everybody else ignored.

The photographs were reviewed anonymously by a panel of reviewers, with each photographer limited to a maximum of one image in the final collection. From more than 800 submissions, around 100 photographs made the shortlist, before the final 60 were selected for the exhibition.

Those 60 images now form a remarkably varied little snapshot of young wildlife photography in Southern Africa.

There are the iconic animals, of course. It would be rather difficult to put together a Southern African wildlife exhibition without a lion, elephant or rhino making an appearance somewhere.

But some of my favourite parts of the collection are the photographs that remind us that wildlife photography has never only been about the biggest animals in the bush.

There are birds, insects, reptiles, smaller mammals, patterns, textures, moments of movement and scenes where the animal is almost secondary to the landscape around it.

Because wildlife photography is really about learning to look. And young photographers are often very, very good at looking differently. That is probably the part of this entire project that means the most to me.

When YWP started in 2021, I was 13 years old. At the time, the idea was fairly simple, create a space where young people who loved wildlife photography could meet other young people who loved the same thing.

Five years later, it has become something I could never have properly imagined back then.

Photography may have been what brought everyone together, but it certainly hasn't remained the only thing connecting them.

I have watched friendships form. I have watched members help each other identify species, work through camera settings and celebrate first sightings. I've seen people who were once nervous to share their photographs become the same people encouraging somebody new a few months later.

I've watched interests in photography grow into interests in conservation, guiding, filmmaking, biology, veterinary science and environmental careers. And that is why standing among these prints feels like more than simply organising an exhibition. Every photograph represents a young person who chose to spend time noticing the natural world. Sometimes they travelled somewhere extraordinary to make that image. Sometimes they were sitting in their garden. Sometimes everything came together perfectly.

And, because this is wildlife photography, sometimes I can almost guarantee that 400 photographs were taken for the one frame now hanging on the wall.

That is part of the fun.

There is also something wonderfully full-circle about giving these images a physical life. For many young photographers, most of their work exists digitally. It gets uploaded, liked, shared and eventually disappears further down a feed. Printing it changes that. A photograph on a wall demands to be looked at. It says that the image, and the photographer behind it, deserves space.

And when you put 60 of those photographs together, something else begins to happen. You stop seeing individual images and start seeing a generation. A generation that is curious about wildlife. A generation that cares about conservation. A generation that isn't simply waiting until they are older to become photographers, conservationists, scientists, filmmakers, guides and storytellers. They are already doing it.

That idea runs through the entire showcase, including a dedicated conservation element looking at some of the pressures facing Southern Africa's wildlife and habitats. Because celebrating wildlife without talking about what threatens it would feel like telling only half the story.

Photography has an extraordinary ability to make people care about things they may never personally encounter. A photograph can introduce somebody to a species. It can make them curious. It can make them uncomfortable. It can make them ask questions. And, every now and then, it can change the way somebody sees something completely.

That is a pretty powerful thing to place in the hands of a young person.

Over the next little while, Through Young Eyes will bring those stories off our screens and into a physical gallery space at Outdoorphoto in Fourways.

There will be wildlife photographs covering walls, stories behind the images, conservation messages, photographers from different parts of our community and, hopefully, plenty of people standing slightly too close to prints while discussing camera settings.

It wouldn't be a wildlife photography gathering otherwise.

But beneath all of that is something much simpler.

Five years ago, YWP began with the belief that young people deserved a space of their own within wildlife photography.

Through Young Eyes is what that belief looks like five years later.

Sixty photographs. More than 800 submissions. Hundreds of young photographers and thousands of stories.

And one rather exciting reminder that the future of wildlife photography and conservation isn't something we have to wait for.

If you look closely enough, it is already here.