

Before the Shot: Why Binoculars Matter in Wildlife Photography

As I sit quietly on the deck of our beautiful room here at Motswari in the Timbavati, my mind wanders over what to write about today. I have so many reflections from this incredible trip, but they deserve the proper fanfare, so keep an eye out for those over the coming weeks. Then I glance across the table and see my binoculars sitting at the ready, just in case I suddenly hear movement nearby, and there it is - the inspiration for today's article.

When most people think about wildlife photography, the first thing that comes to mind is usually the camera. The camera body. The lens. The settings. The perfect shutter speed. The dream photograph.

And while all of that definitely matters, there is another piece of gear that I think often gets overlooked, especially by young photographers who are just starting to spend more time in the field: binoculars.

For a long time, I think many of us have seen binoculars as something mainly for birders, guides or people who already know exactly what they are looking at. But the more time I spend in wild places, the more I realise that binoculars are not just for identifying something once you have found it. They often help you find the story in the first place.

Before the photograph, there is usually a moment of noticing.

A flicker of movement in the grass. A shape half-hidden in a tree. A bird call that makes you stop and scan the branches. A herd standing in a certain way that tells you something is happening. A predator watching quietly from a distance.

These are the moments that often happen before the camera even comes up.

As young wildlife photographers, it is easy to become completely focused on the final image. We want the sharp shot, the beautiful light, the clean background and the exciting subject. But wildlife photography is not only about pressing the shutter at the right moment. It is also about learning to observe.

Binoculars slow you down in the best possible way.

They encourage you to look properly, not just glance. They help you scan an area before rushing in with a camera. They allow you to watch behaviour without immediately disturbing the scene. They help you understand what an animal is doing, where it is moving, how it is interacting with its environment and whether there may be a photographic opportunity developing.

For birds especially, binoculars can completely change the experience. Instead of seeing a small shape and hoping your camera can zoom in enough to tell you what it is, binoculars allow you to connect with the bird first. You can notice the colours, the eye, the bill shape, the posture and the little behaviours that make each species so interesting.

That is where photography becomes more than just taking a picture.

It becomes storytelling.

My binoculars help me find the story before my camera captures it.

They help me decide where to look, when to wait and when something might be worth photographing. Sometimes they help me realise that the better choice is not to take a photo at all, but simply to watch. And honestly, those moments matter too.

This is also why I think binoculars are such an important tool for young wildlife photographers. They are not only useful for people who already know every bird call or every species name. They are for anyone who wants to see more, notice more and understand more.

You do not need to be an expert to start using them.

You just need curiosity.

A pair of binoculars can turn a distant shape into a moment. A quick sighting into an observation. A simple walk into a learning experience. And for young people who are still discovering wildlife, birds, photography and conservation, that can be incredibly powerful.

I'm incredibly grateful to Steiner Optics for reaching out and trusting me to help bring their binocular optics further into the South African wildlife and birding space. I'm so excited to play a part in introducing more young people to the power of good observation in the field.

For me, this partnership is not only about optics as gear. It is about helping more young people understand the role that good observation plays in wildlife photography and conservation. It is about making binoculars feel less intimidating and more accessible as a real field tool, whether you are birding, photographing wildlife, spending time in the bush or simply learning to look more closely at the natural world around you.

Over the next while, I will be sharing more about how binoculars fit into my own wildlife photography, what I look for in a field pair, and how young photographers can begin using them with more confidence.

Because sometimes the story does not begin when you take the photograph.

Sometimes it begins the moment you stop, lift your binoculars, and really look.