



PHOTOGRAPHING WILDLIFE – WHEN YOU’RE NOT A WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER

Quick Guide
Written by Karthika Gupta



There is just something about the natural world that seems to touch us humans to the very core of our being, especially when it involves wildlife of any form.

When we hear the words “wildlife photography,” wide-open planes of the African Savannah with herds of zebras, wildebeests, and antelope come to mind.

And also in that vision, there are jeeps filled with photographers carrying big lenses and expensive camera gear adorned in camouflage.

Let’s be honest, I am not the only one who has had that mental picture, right?

But that is just one part of the natural world pie!

Don’t get me wrong, visiting Africa and going on safari are really high on my bucket list, but I get equally excited about hiking in a national park that is frequented by bears, bison, eagles, and pronghorn deer.

There are a number of brilliant wildlife photographers out there, and the images they produce have a jaw-dropping reaction from most of their fans and followers.


If you spend some time and really study their work, you will notice a consistent method to their approach.

There are some simple basic guidelines that budding wildlife photographers can follow to create their own memorable wildlife moments!

Here are a few things to keep in mind for a safe, productive, and exciting wildlife photography trip, no matter whether you are just starting out with wildlife photography or even have a little experience under your belt.

Here’s what you will learn:

- How to research and plan a wildlife photo shoot
- How to select the right gear
- How to approach wildlife photography safely
- The importance of practice and patience
- Why you should enjoy the experience outside of your camera

 **Recommended Reading:** Want to learn how to make your photos stand out from everyone else’s? Grab a copy of Photzy’s premium guide: [Effective Storytelling](#).



Photograph by Karthika Gupta

I spent three hours of the afternoon exploring the wonderful forest lodge at Jim Corbett National Park in India, because the park roads closed in the afternoon hours. The closure allowed the animals to move about freely in the jungle without the noise created by countless jeep safaris – something that is not mentioned in most guidebooks.

RESEARCH AND PLANNING

Traveling is one of those tasks that needs an incredible amount of planning and research.

So it is no surprise that when you are planning a wildlife photography expedition, you need to add a lot more to the mix.

You need to scope out the best places to photograph animals, the best time of day, travel times to and from those locations, as well as any permits and paperwork that may be needed.

It's best to do these tasks well in advance to avoid any disappointments once you get to the location.

This way you know what to expect when you get to your destination. And, should you meet any unexpected wildlife along the way – well that's just icing on that chocolate cake!



Photograph by Karthika Gupta

Once we were back inside the park on our safari, I was able to see this juvenile elephant walk across the path on his way to the deep jungle.

SELECTING THE RIGHT GEAR

This is a very important part of any photographic expedition, and it quite possibly deserves an article in itself.

Choosing the right gear for your wildlife excursions is key to your success, especially if you are not an expert, and perhaps you don't have a lot of the necessary gear in your gear bag already.

A lot of factors will determine what lens and cameras you need to carry with you.

Are you primarily going to be traveling in a car?

If so, you could bring more than one camera, and also a long telephoto lens.

Are you going hiking/camping, and will you be constantly on the move while looking for animals?

If so, then maybe you'll need to limit yourself to just one camera, and a medium telephoto lens to reduce your load.

Is there a possibility for you to get up-close and personal with the animals? If so, then carry a shorter focal length, like an 85mm or 50mm lens.

Are you planning on photographing landscapes too?

If so, you may need a wide-angle lens.

Will you have access to your computer?

If not, you may need a portable external hard drive to back up your images.

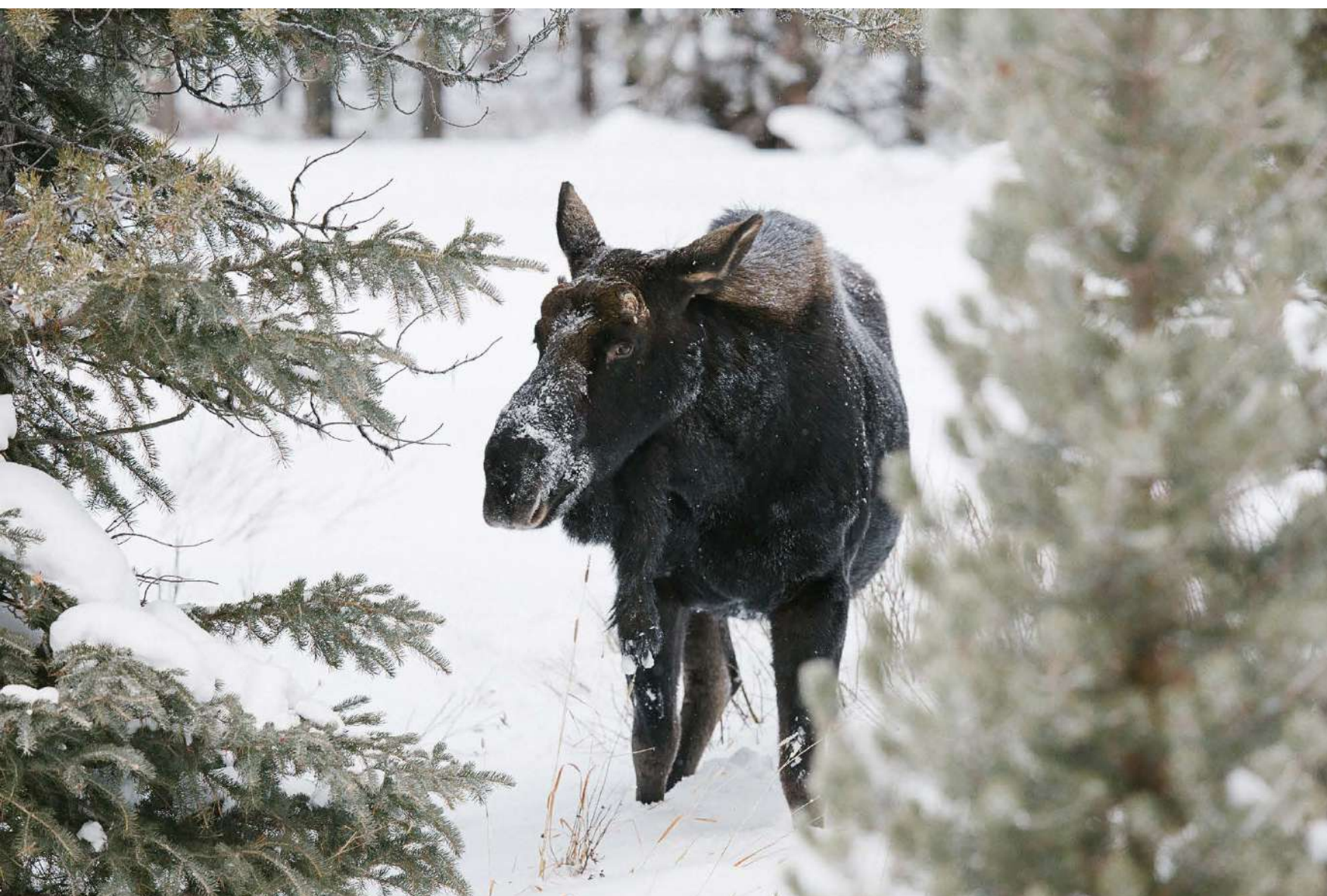
How many batteries do you need?

As you can tell, having a plan as to where and what you are looking to photograph is critical in determining the gear that you should pack.



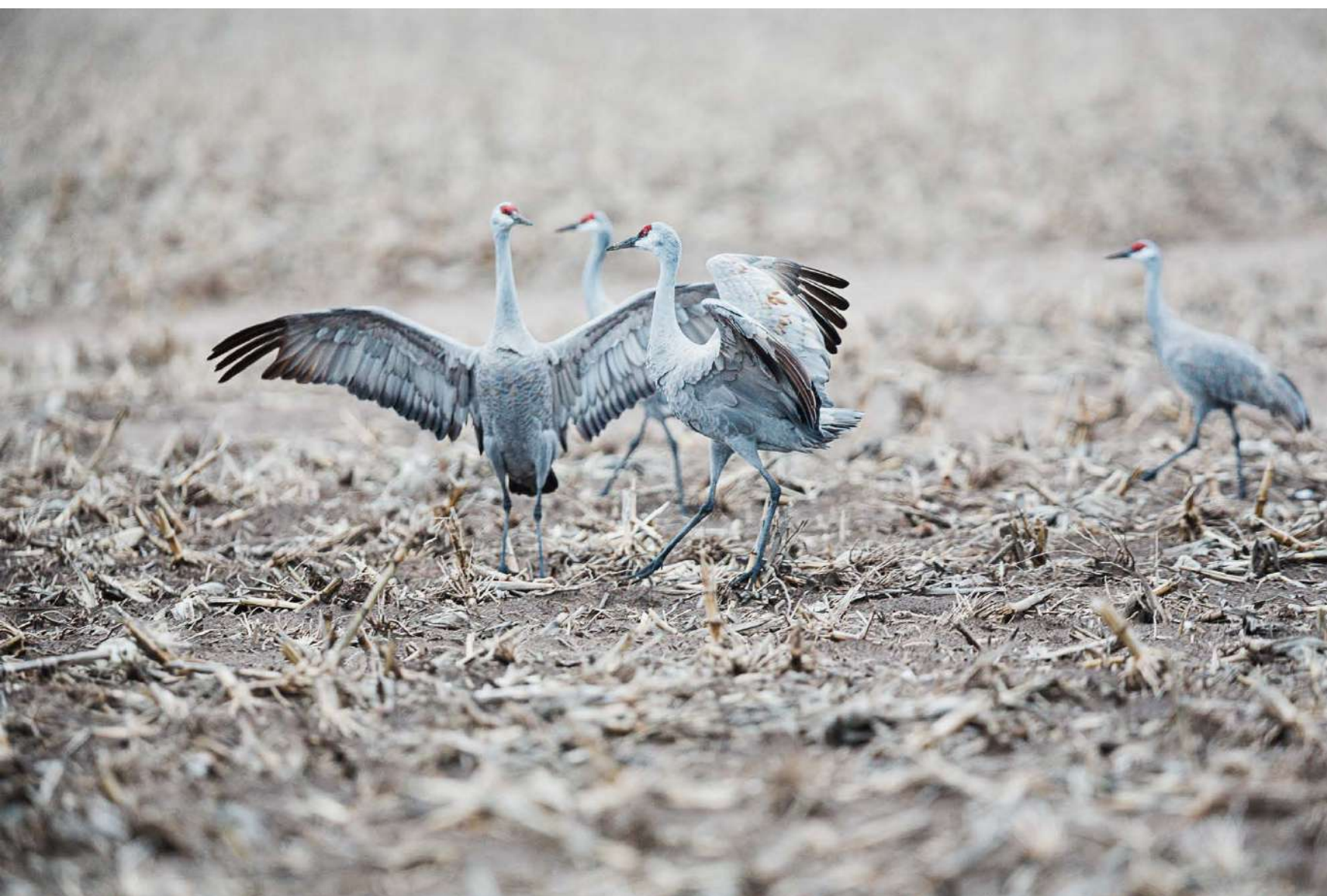
Photograph by Karthika Gupta

While driving around Yellowstone National Park on a December morning, I found myself face to face with this coyote (on the left) who was simply enjoying his morning run. I was too surprised to remember the appropriate lens choice, camera setting, etc. I just took the snap, and while it may not be technically perfect, it is one of my favorite images. Just look at the trot in his paws.



Photograph by Karthika Gupta

On the other hand, a photographic expedition into Yellowstone National Park a few days later gave me a chance to use a 400mm super telephoto lens to capture this moose feeding along a hillside. I used the heavy telephoto lens on a tripod for stability.



Photograph by Karthika Gupta

Every year, a little town in Nebraska sees more than a million sandhill cranes that stop by on their annual migration path to their breeding grounds in Canada.

These birds can be found in the fields along the side of the road, and some can even be seen from the highway.

Research can make you aware of these fun opportunities as you travel to and from your photo safari location.

Now, if wildlife imaging is just a hobby for you, and you are not a professional wildlife photographer or even an aspiring wildlife photographer, then chances are you will not have a super telephoto lens in your gear closet. And that's totally fine. This is where preparation goes a long way.

If you know you are going somewhere where there is wildlife, then you can rent or borrow the right gear needed. There are a number of photo rental companies online; one is borrowlenses.com.

If renting or borrowing is not an option, just go with the expectation that you will use what you have and make the best of it.

Just don't expect to get a close-up of an animal if you don't have the right gear. Or even worse, try to get close and break national park or safari rules just to get a photograph!

You could even get hurt trying that!

Another option to get close shots is to use a 'teleconverter' on your existing lens. Teleconverters are generally less expensive than purchasing a new lens. They increase the focal length of a lens that they are attached to.



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SAFETY

When photographing wildlife, it is very important to keep safety in mind. It doesn't matter if you are going on safari with numerous other people, or hiking alone in a national park.

Wild animals are unpredictable, and it would behoove us to remember that when we are in their space. We need to be respectful of that.

Rules and guidelines in wilderness areas are there for a reason: your safety and security as well as to keep the wild animals wild!

Make sure you follow these rules so that you, or others around you, don't get hurt or injured.

Whenever possible, travel in a group or at least with one other person. There is security in numbers, and that can work to your advantage.

Seek help from experts who have made the journey before you, and listen to their advice.

Hiking in a nesting area, or a denning area, is never a good idea!

Take care of your gear, especially if you are away in remote locations. You don't want to be careless and risk your gear malfunctioning just when you need it.

Dust and dirt are difficult to clean from your gear when you are out in the field.



Photograph by Karthika Gupta

While on a 10-mile alpine hike in Glacier National Park in Montana, USA, the only gear I could comfortably carry was my 24-70mm lens, and I was able to snap this picture. It is not the close-up that I really wanted, but this conveys a message unlike any close-up shot I could have gotten. I'll give you bonus points if you can spot what everyone was looking at! (Bears.)



Photograph by Karthika Gupta

This retention pond is near my home, and it is a favorite for these white and grey herons in the spring. On this particular day, I started photographing two of these birds, and by the time I was done several hours later, there were four in the pond. I was lucky enough to get all four in a single frame! I call this one 'community kitchen table'!

PRACTICE AND PATIENCE

Wildlife photography, like most other genres, needs a lot of practice, and an even greater amount of patience.

Wildlife photographers can spend hours and hours waiting to get the perfect shot – often in less than perfect conditions like the cold, rain, and even overnight while waiting for the sunrise shot.

Depending on what you are looking to photograph, be prepared to be patient. You will need to wait it out.



Photograph by Karthika Gupta

Ask any wildlife photographer and they will tell you that the number of photos that they have of an animal's behind far outweighs the number of pictures they have of an animal looking straight at the camera! Why? These are animals that behave in a slightly unpredictable manner. Just when you think you have the perfect shot, they move. So keep practicing and be patient.

Practicing is a little harder to accomplish, unless you happen to live close to a national park or wildlife area.

A good alternative may be to spend time at the local zoo and try to capture photographs of animals there.


The zoo is a low-cost alternative to testing out your gear, as well as playing around with the camera settings before you go on that expensive safari.

Other options include setting up a bird feeder in your backyard to attract birds and other small game, or you can take a walk in a forest preserve.



Photograph by Karthika Gupta

When all else fails, common critters, such as this chipmunk, can become the perfect subjects to test out your gear and your patience. A walk in a local forest preserve is just as unpredictable as a wildlife safari at times!

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Photograph by Karthika Gupta



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ENJOY THE EXPERIENCE BEYOND THE CAMERA LCD

I don't know about you, but I absolutely hate experiencing my vacation through the back of my camera.

My life is quite busy and hectic, with kids, family, and a full-time business.

Vacations are always a welcome reprieve, and a much-needed break to get away from it all.

Yes, I absolutely want to capture moments through my camera, but I also want to be physically and emotionally present with my family.

I am just as happy seeing that exotic bird or that elusive wild animal with my own eyes as I am getting a shot of it – I don't need to prove it to the world, and neither should you!

While we were hiking in Glacier National Park in Montana, we saw a wolverine – yes, we truly did! About 10 minutes after this photo was taken, the path turned

really narrow with a steep incline, so I did the most sensible thing I could do and put the camera away.

A few minutes after that, we saw a brown patch of fur run along the path! A ranger later confirmed that a wolverine was frequenting the area we had just hiked.

Yes, I have no photographs to prove it, but I have the most wonderful memory of seeing one of the most rarely sighted animals in the wild!

Wolverines are a shy species; so don't expect to see one easily. They live in dens made out of snow tunnels, rocks, and boulders and can be found in remote forests and tundra.

Give these tips a try, and maybe you'll be the one to get a wolverine photo!

Self-Check Quiz:

1. Name three subjects that you should research before going on a wildlife photo safari.
2. True or False: Guidebooks will always tell you when attractions are closed.
3. Name three considerations for packing gear.
4. Is it possible to find photo opportunities while traveling to your location?
5. True or False: If you don't have a telephoto lens, it's okay to get really close to wild animals with a shorter lens.
6. What does a teleconverter do?
7. Wild animals are _____, and we should respect that.
8. True or False: It's a good idea to hike close to nesting areas as you can get a tighter photo with a shorter focal length lens.
9. What easily accessible location can you use to practice your wildlife photography skills?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Karthika Gupta is a wedding, lifestyle, portrait, and editorial photographer based in Chicago. Her style of photography is fun, fresh, and organic. She strives to capture authentic emotions and interactions among her clients and emotive imagery in her commercial work.

She loves connecting with other creatives and photographers and is always ready for an engaging conversation about photography and the art of storytelling.

She can be found online at www.karthikagupta.com and on social media at:

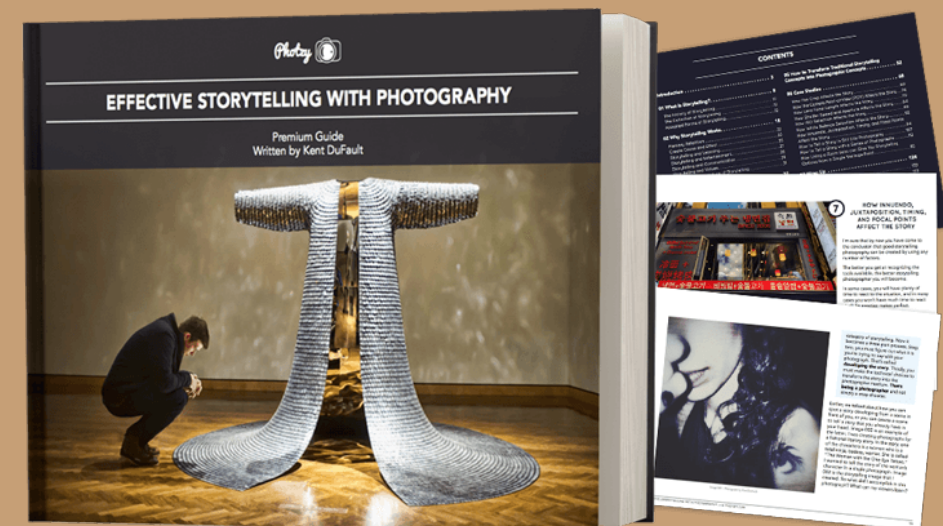
Instagram: www.instagram.com/karthikagupta

Facebook: www.facebook.com/memorablejaunts

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