

More on the project: article for Naturfoto

Balcony safari¹ Around one balcony in Fluntern, Zuerich (Switzerland)

High ranking males (chimpanzees) may go for weeks on end “on safari” with a female, as it is known, in order to avoid competition. (De Waal, 2016, p173).

The Swahili word safari means journey, originally from the Arabic adjective سفر (safir) meaning a journey, travelling, touring or voyaging; the verb for “to travel” in Swahili is kusafiri. These words are used for any type of journey. (Collins dictionary)

I like to believe that my protagonists and I both go “on safari” on/around our balcony.

Introduction

I was working most of my life in high buildings. However, one day I started to telework for one day a week from my house in Amsterdam and I noticed some bird activity. E.g. A blue jay on my balcony with his large nails and beak peeling a peanut showed good table manners. A common wood pigeon tried to hypnotize me from the Lindentree in front of my balcony. Then he formed a pair and they bonded in front of my eyes visualising the concept of “quality time” a partner deserves. Furthermore, a crow and a gull played “night watch” on the lights in my street, and I saw a song thrush without life on the sidewalk downstairs. I recorded them all for eternity.

When I started to stay in Zuerich (Switzerland) for longer periods I became more aware of the birds around the house. I enjoyed the sounds, they kept me company. I started to photograph them, every now and then, randomly. When my father became terminally ill and his condition became ever more severe over a three year period, I used my photos of birds to create some beautiful moments of shared passion for the natural world. He and his father radiated a profound love of nature especially for birds and plants and I guess some of this has passed on to me.

The project

But then my researcher's heart started to beat. I wanted more than a good snapshot. What did the first photos of birds look like? Has anyone already taken pictures of animals on or from the balcony? Researching the catalog of Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam I found very little, but some work attributed to Richard Tepe at the turn of the 20th century. Who depicted the first birds at all? I liked the work by Pisanello in the 15th century. And if an animal is depicted on the balcony, which visual means (perspective, light, color, etc.) were used? Most art depicting balconies view them from outside. Like the famous painting by Goya (“Mayas on a balcony”) that inspired Manet and Magritte. More recent photos on balconies, which take a similar perspective that I aspire to, are Ruth Orkin’s “Views of Central Park” (1978) and Orhan

¹ While having in mind to call the project “Balkon Safari”, our neighbour Frau Franziska Duerr, while seeing me with my camera on the balcony on more than one occasion, used “Balkon Safari” to describe my activities. Then I knew it was the right title. Thank you Franziska!

Pamuk's "Balkon" (2019) which shows his views of the Bosphorus. However, there is no living animal to be seen in their photos.

Since I have not found a long term, year round photo project focusing on wildlife around one balcony, my aim became to dedicate myself to this. In my opinion it could be any balcony, but I chose our Swiss balcony. It's convenient, it's a challenge both ornithologically and visually, and because I get to know the Swiss neighbourhood better. The 1,9x2,7meters balcony is on the second floor at the back of a typical Swiss family house built in 1910. It's now part of the Technical University area in the centre of the city of Zuerich. It is fully enclosed on two sides and gives a wider view to the left.

It's difficult to include the (human built) environment in each photo, even if it's just the building material used or the frame of the door or window.² How often do I see beautiful light, an interesting background, but the living being is not visible there at that moment? Many breathtaking photographs of birds and vertebrates pass by online and off-line, but they do not indicate the location in any way. The nondescript background is chosen to give the animal full attention. My compositions are a play between the attention for the protagonist and the indication of the environment. Sometimes the environment is very clear, sometimes it's indicated vaguely.

Inspiration

My inspiration first comes from my protagonists, the light and the environment, but how I observe is fed by what I've acquired in my research and other images I've seen before in my life. Looking at the earliest "natural" depictions of birds by Pisanello (1395-1455) and the works by Jan van Eyck (1390-1441) I see the species around at their time which were considered interesting to be in their compositions. It makes me feel closer connected to the animals I see, because they were already around then. Moreover, the silhouettes in the sky and the difficulty of depicting flight, but also the accurateness of some of their depictions, make me realize that observation always comes first and then comes technique, which is nevertheless important. It's the spirit of their careful observation and their creative staging that inspire me most. However, I wish to be surprised at what a micro world, an ordinary world like a balcony, may offer for photographic possibilities of today.

Approach

I like to believe that my protagonists and myself both go on safari. We check each other out, accept brief encounters and study each other's behavior. On safari in faraway regions you look at dung and try to figure out which animal passed and when (and maybe why). By taking the same approach in our closest environment I hoped to discover and learn more about my natural environment. And I did. 30 bird species have been photographed! My protagonists can't check my dung but they watch my movements and the

² I discussed the series in a course called "my project" organised by photographer Theo Bosboom. I wished to have "the environment" visible, but I wanted to be free to take the "Ruth Orkin" approach, which means you photograph the view from the balcony, without actually having elements of your balcony visible on your photo". In this way some photos actually show some element of the balcony, others are more aimed at the view from the balcony. Theo, and two other course participants, Madeleine Lenagh and Klaartje Huijben, were bombarded by my enthusiasm but they remained constructive. Thank you!

sounds around our house. They let me witness many faraway safari themes such as offspring, death, migration, food and sanity, care and bonding, working together, and predator & prey.

In each photo, one species is the protagonist. My stars are mostly birds but there are also some insects, a spider and a squirrel. My aim was to show free wildlife (without bait). I also wish to be as free as possible, although I'm enclosed in this small defined space by myself. I only use light hand held equipment.

I'm totally dependent on my prime subjects and on my observations. Each image is spontaneous and afterwards I think about what I have seen and slowly I become more and more connected. To a great tit I am like a female Indian forest elephant in weight or a blue whale in length. Moreover, even the sparrows and tits are not tame. They remain on their own "terrain" that happens to be partially divided between us by chance. I enjoy it and every now and then I see that my "models" also enjoy a moment of rest or just sleep. I look for simplicity and harmonious colors, and show a cross section of what buzzes around in our close environment. Of course the species around differ by season and spring and summer do show a greater variety. What is important to me is that the photo has an element of spontaneity. It's this moment in which I witness a behavior of a species that makes me feel "on safari" that I hope to capture. Do you feel some of my passion?

What's next?

The nice thing about this project is that it keeps digging deeper. There are always new questions and then I feel at my best. A combination of beauty, spontaneity, lightning fast reaction, with learning: what is that/ who is there, why, why now, what behavior do I see and so on. The next series is themed "Buzzing around the Birch" in our garden, which focuses on the functions of the birch for different species. Next, there is a series on "Adolescent birds around our balcony: Feathers, Sleeping, and Siblings". There is also a series on "Natural Backgrounds" in which I feature the "jungle" in which the birds live around our house. The final series concerns "From food to being fed". Every series consists of 12-20 photos with captions written by me. The captions are a reflection of my thoughts mixed with knowledge of birds and of art. The texts will be in Dutch, English, German, and Italian. If you are interested in my book "Balkon safari" please let me know, www.cecilewetzels.com.