



CASE STUDY

On the trail of the perfect wildlife film

Natural history cameraman Graham Macfarlane on how the VariCam LT meets the challenges of shooting in the wild.

Product(s) supplied:

VariCam LT



Graham has been using the VariCam LT, sourced through VI Rental Bristol, on a number of projects. Late 2016 saw the airing of the two-part *Elephant Family & Me*, presented by fellow cameraman Gordon Buchanan.

Graham used the camera handheld on the show, which followed a herd of orphaned elephants in Kenya's 13,000-square kilometre Tsavo National Park.

The herd live in the wild, but are being nursed back to health by staff from the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust. The charity runs an orphans project, helping elephants and rhino populations recover from the effects of illegal poaching.

Years of close work with staff at the charity meant that the group were very comfortable around people, making filming up close with Gordon a realistic proposition.

Graham was familiar with the VariCam thanks to its many years of affiliation with natural history production. "I used the original VariCams and they were bombproof," he said. "The images were just beautiful and they were tough, so when it came to the VariCam LT I expected nothing less from Panasonic."

"In these kinds of situations you want a camera that you can forget about to some extent in terms of constantly adjusting settings and so on," he continued. "You want to just focus on the viewfinder and the images that the viewers at home are going to see, and with the VariCam LT we were able to do that."

Graham paired the camera with a Canon CN7 lens for the majority of the shoot, with the occasional addition of a CN20 long lens, when working at more of a distance.

Filming primarily at 800 ISO, he was able to make use of the VariCam LT's dual native 5000 ISO setting a handful of times, such as at sunset.

Out on the Kenyan plains during the day, however, there was usually more than enough light. Two separate shoots saw the crew spending a total of around eight weeks out on location.

"The weight of the LT was nice on its own, but the lenses we settled on were pretty heavy so they made a noticeable difference. However I still found the camera to be nicely balanced on the shoulder," Graham explained.

"The viewfinder on the LT is one of the best of the current range of super 35 cameras"

Natural history productions take a lot of patience. The difficult-to-film subject matter means it can take many hours in a given day's shooting to get usable footage. Some can be in the production stage for many years before anything goes to air.

"Going into these really hot and difficult environments is something that I've been doing for the past 10-15 years, so I'm quite used to it by now," said Graham.

"In terms of conditions the jungle is tougher than out on the plain, because it's very humid and we do get problems with other cameras. However the VariCam performed flawlessly."

In often inhospitable environments around the world, cameras shooting natural history need to be rugged enough to put up with all kinds of abuse. "The viewfinder on the LT is one of the best of the current range of super 35 cameras," said Graham.

"It's a real headache to focus in 4K these days so I was spending a lot of time using it, and it was one of the first things I liked – it's clear and very usable. It's the first camera for a few years that I've thought about buying myself."

Graham has also put the VariCam LT through its paces in a forthcoming series following chimpanzees in the Cameroonian jungle. The choice to go with the VariCam came about due to the darkened environment created by the thick tree cover.

The LT's dual native ISO functionality allowed the chimps to stay visible under the tree canopy. The shoot involved difficult work at height up amongst the trees with a scaffold, again demanding a camera that was well balanced and ergonomic to handle.

"The chimpanzees have dark fur, so to the naked eye they really blended into the jungle behind them because you have this dense tree cover. It was quite hard to see them and with a lot of other cameras you would have a problem. Moving the LT up into 5000 ISO gave us so much more extra light that it wasn't a problem getting a clear view of them moving around up high."

After a short break, Graham has returned to home in Japan, working on a *Springwatch* Japan special for the BBC and unlike the typical natural history production, had a very rapid turnaround time between filming and broadcast, going out almost 'as live'.

This year the popular BBC One series has covered the emergence of the cherry blossoms as spring arrives, and Japan's national tradition of Hanami 'flower watching' as the blossom emerges. The shoot has seen the LT involved in a mix of both presenter-led and observational natural history work.

Image credits: Top far right image courtesy of Graham Macfarlane. All other images courtesy of Gordon Buchanan.