

# AZIZ AHMED

## GIVING VOICE TO WILDLIFE



*His dedication to these magnificent creatures is such that he will wait days or even weeks just for the chance to capture one perfect shot.*

Aziz Ahmed looks on at the wilderness around him while standing atop a rugged 4x4

Ethiopian Wildlife



**A** man stands alone at the edge of a sparse glade, only a camera in his hand, only the vast emptiness of the savanna around him. The man's focus is sharp, any fear tempered by the gravity of his task. Birdsong stirs the heavy silence and the man adjusts his camera lens. From inside the dappled shadows of the glade two pairs of amber eyes watch him. There is no apprehension in the predatory gaze of the two male lions, they are not threatened by the man who stands but a handful of meters away from them. The man's car is parked far in the distance behind him.

He is alone, he has no refuge, he has no hope of escape. The lions tolerate him; there is indifference in their lazy, wandering gaze, self-assurance in the relaxed, panting breaths. This is the wild; this is their kingdom, and when the man entered it, he surrendered to their power. Only the lions' grace allows the man to walk away with his life still beating in his chest. Only their leniency permits him to escape with the wildlife footage that would amaze millions clutched in his hands.

But his story did not start there. You see, life is built on a handful of defining moments. Moments that wear the labels of fate and chance and come in the disguise of the random or the unexplained, yet they carry inside them the power to make, break or reshape our existence. Eighteen-year-old Aziz was working as a tour guide with a tour company when a moment like this arrived at his doorstep in the shape of a woman armed with a camera. Did this woman know then that when she handed Aziz her camera and told him to give it a try, she had set him on a path of no return, a path that irrevocably changed his life? We might never know.

Having spent a lot of time in Langano and accompanying his father on hunting trips into the wild, Aziz was no stranger to his country's diverse beauty and rich wildlife. He noted from a young age that there was no photographer to capture it, and that it might all have been gone before anyone got the chance to see it.

**FIRA**  
**CORNER**





A famous author once spoke of time by saying, “this thing all things devour,” and he was right. Time will not spare the wild beauty of the untamed world but will see it all fade from existence as humanity marches ever forward on its path of destruction. But the camera has created for us a loophole, a way to preserve what could not be saved. With a camera, we can freeze time. We can capture fleeting moments and give them a shot at eternity. Aziz Ahmed understands the power the camera holds. Moved by what his father had shown him of his wild and beautiful homeland as a child and inspired by the works of people like the BBC’s David Attenborough, he decided that he would be the one to capture and preserve the wildlife of Ethiopia.

Though his work includes nature and wildlife of all shapes and sizes, you only need to spend a few minutes with Aziz to realize that the lions hold a special place in his heart, and demand from him a single-minded focus. “You have to be very sharp, you have to be like the wildlife. Your eyes and your ears, all your five senses have to be open. Because it is very risky with the lions so you have to focus” he tells us. His dedication to these magnificent creatures is such that he will wait days or even weeks just for the chance to capture one perfect shot. Whether he gets it or misses it, it is an investment he will make time and time again. For the past five years Aziz has spent five days out of every month visiting the Haremma forest and the Awash National Park for the sole purpose of documenting lions, and he is now building a team and creating a foundation that will work on protecting Ethiopia’s black-maned lions.

That daunting day in front of the two lions on the savanna marks one of the greatest and most rewarding moments of Aziz Ahmed’s career, yet it is hardly all he has achieved. Aziz has not only brought Ethiopia’s unknown and undiscovered beauty before the eyes of the world, but has dedicated his work to preserving nature and wildlife for future generations.



Aziz Ahmed poses for a photo with a car stranded in a flood behind him

◻ Aziz Ahmed

“Pictures can tell you a lot of stories, and conservation is about teaching people about nature and that if the wildlife disappears, we too will feel the effect.” He said when asked about the aim behind his photography. Aziz’s work is dedicated to promoting and raising awareness about the importance of respecting and preserving nature’s ecosystems and habitats. “All my exhibitions are about conservation”, he says, “to build awareness”. When he just started out, his reach was limited, but with the dawn of the social media age, Aziz got the tools he needed to promote his work and his ideas further. The sad truth about our planet is that its wildlife is disappearing at an alarming and horrifying rate and, in an ironic paradox, humanity is both nature’s biggest threat and her only hope of preservation. Aziz Ahmed’s preservation efforts are many. He volunteers at schools, teaches at universities, and has donated over a hundred copies of his book to school libraries to teach the upcoming generation about wildlife in the hopes that his work might inspire them to care for and value wildlife the way that he does.

Aziz’s photography took on a new dimension when drone technology entered the scene. The camera, like an extension of the



*“Ethiopia is a diverse country and regardless of your interests, whether it is portraits, wildlife or landscapes, it is the best place for it.”*

eye, gave him only a few options in how he could manipulate his vantage point, but with the drone he could go anywhere, he could show the world as it had never been shown before. This potential kindled a fire in him, “Everything is different when I take drone pictures. It’s like I became like the birds, like I started to fly.” He said. The drone has given him a new angle of unique perspective and he plans to share that perspective with us in his next book.

As we all find out eventually, doing what you love is hardly ever easy, and anything worth having has to be worth fighting for. In Aziz’s career, it has been the lack of understanding that has posed the greatest challenge. The challenges were never about photography or filming, says Aziz, because that was the easy part. People didn’t understand him when he started, and that made the process of organizing his video and photo exhibitions



The endemic black-maned lion of Ethiopia as photographed at the Bale Mountains National Park

◻ Aziz Ahmed

difficult and the road to publishing his book, titled ‘Wildlife of Ethiopia’s National Parks’, a long and hard one. Despite these challenges, Aziz has held over a dozen exhibitions around the world over the past ten years and has served as a freelance filmmaker and photographer for organizations such as the Born Free Foundation, National Geographic Africa, the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority, the Oromia Tourism Commission, and many others. Aziz has also started his own Travel company called Nu Ethiopia Tour and Travel and has been awarded the Visit Oromia Tourism Award for Wildlife Photographer.

His achievements are the result of his passion and determination, because, as he would tell any aspiring wildlife photographer in Ethiopia, success is all about perseverance. Aziz tells us that it is tough being a wildlife photographer in Ethiopia, but once you overcome the many challenges, you will find that Ethiopia is one of the best places for photography. It is a diverse country and regardless of your interests, whether it is portraits, wildlife or landscapes, Ethiopia is the best place for it. When I asked Aziz to share with us another of his many stories, we found out that being a wildlife photographer can be pretty dangerous as well. Every trip comes with funny stories, happy stories, sad stories, crazy stories, says Aziz. Sometimes the lions chase you, sometimes snakes bite you. The latter is something Aziz has experienced four times in his career. You take a lot of risks, he says. Though his team has taken to traveling with medical supplies, there was a time when Aziz didn’t have any. At the age of eighteen, Aziz was bitten by a puff adder in the Omo Valley, where there were no medical supplies to speak of and no hospitals or clinics in sight, and so he had no choice but to rely on the local medicine. They cut open my back, he tells us, and when I slept, they gave me blood and milk for three days. He shrugs, “It was tough, but I survived.”