

Les animaux



“We see animal documentaries on television every day but, curiously, there’s never been a full-length feature that captures the amorous displays of the animal species until now,” remarks producer Jean-Pierre Bailly.

The epic *Les animaux amoureux* (*Animals in Love*) is a stunningly beautiful film that captures the romantic escapades of 80 animal species around the world: from the spider crab to the rhesus monkey of Japan, and from the lesser frigate bird of Mexico to the green fig bird of Australia. “The result is a warm and moving spectacle; sometimes comical and sometimes a bit violent. As with humans, rivalry exists amongst them. Like us, they watch each other, search each other out, approach and embrace. Without the need to underscore, the parallel to humankind is evident,” he says.

“There was really no need to discuss 35mm in the planning stages of *Les animaux amoureux*, as it far outmatched the other solution. Even if digital cameras

have evolved, they still don’t produce good photos. I am and remain a defender of traditional film” says Bailly, delighted with his recent 35mm film on elephants, which he describes as magnificent. “Traditional film influences our way of shooting. The only sequence in *Les animaux amoureux* shot on HD was the whales. We ended up with nine hours of rushes! With traditional film, one’s state of mind is different. You step back, salvage a shot and memorise the existing material more easily.”

Bailly and Director/DP Laurent Charbonnier have known each other for ten years and were reunited in 2004 on *Le dernier trappeur*. Charbonnier also lensed *Le peuple migrateur* (*Travelling Birds*) for Jacques Perrin and has made more than a thousand documentaries since 1984.

Charbonnier used EASTMAN EXR 50D 5245, KODAK VISION2 250D 5205 and KODAK VISION2 500T 5218. “The location scout in Costa Rica sent us photos recording each time exposure for every environment where a bird came to sing. By noting that he was working

in 1/60th of a second at full aperture on ASA 400 film, I knew straightaway that I needed 5218,” he notes. “I also used the stock in New Guinea where the forests are quite dense and dark and you can only see ten feet in front. In fact, there was virtually no light available during the entire shoot, except in the shot of the small tree frog singing at night in the Camargue.”

Short focal lengths

Charbonnier sometimes worked with reflectors. He chose Zeiss series lenses and two zooms: a 25-250mm and a 150-600mm Angenieux and used a 400mm Canon with a 2.8 aperture for the darkest places. “I generally favour working in short focal lengths, but that can be difficult as the animals can be quite savage or we might be a distance from them,” he remarks. He chose an ARRI IV camera for 150 fps shots, an ARRI II, two Aatons and CinemaScope 2.35, despite the difficulties of using that format with animals.

“When you succeed in isolating

two birds among 150 others, there’s always one that ends up somewhat out of focus at the exact moment when the two you’re watching begin their dance of love. Or, if you have the two in close-up, one quickly plays the idiot and exits the shot. When filming for television, it’s essential to fill the shot completely. For a movie, it’s necessary to leave space and have an eye for the photographic, which is different from an eye for the documentary. For example, in *Les animaux amoureux* when the camera rises in a forest to film the bird of paradise, a small amount of black remains that one doesn’t see on a television screen. On the other hand, the audience sees it quite well on a theatre screen and understands why it is there. For each shot, one must always devise something to improve the aesthetic quality of the image,” explains Charbonnier.

The ambitious project incorporates a fictional style and, despite the difficult natural terrain, a moving crane. “I’ve always loved a wandering camera,” he says. “The concept of working in a wide-angle shot with a moving camera has

amoureux



always seemed more cinematographic and aesthetic to me. The ability to start above the reeds and then descend slowly to arrive at the same moment that a Eurasian reed warbler descends to its nest is inescapably more beautiful and lifelike."

30 second shot

Charbonnier admits he's impatient in Paris traffic jams, but filming wildlife is an entirely different matter. "The only way to capture the dance of the New Guinea bird of paradise is to lie in the dark with the camera lens protruding from a minuscule hole." The parade lasts for one-and-a-half to two minutes, but it took him nine days to obtain 30 seconds of film for *Les animaux amoureux*.

The shots of the bird of paradise in Australia's Victoria state were filmed in 18mm nearly 30 feet above the forest on a crane perched on a tower. It was equipped with a very long arm which threaded its way

"The concept of working in a wide-angle shot with a moving camera has always seemed more cinematographic and aesthetic to me."

amongst the branches. "The camera allowed us to discover the environment while rising so slowly as if it would never stop. The 30-second shot is one of the longest in the film and, as the camera rises, the sound amplifies. I am delighted when I achieve a successful shot like that."

Bailly also experienced dizzy heights. He perched on a 50-foot scaffold, sometimes for several weeks, waiting for birds to begin their dance of love. "Laurent and I wanted the film narration to finish gradually. It wasn't a question of putting together a scientific catalogue of the species. Our main theme remains the natural cycle of animal love, with all that it entails – kisses, fights, jealousy and life as a couple until the birth of offspring. It's clear that a film like this would still have been quite difficult to shoot a few years ago. I believe that Jacques Perrin re-opened the path to

finely-crafted films for a wide audience with *Microcosmos*" states Bailly, whose own venture into nature films began in 1978.

Knowing how to capture animal lovemaking and visualise the most profound intimacy of each species requires, by definition, a great deal of experience. Charbonnier recalls that when Jacques Perrin asked him to work on *Le peuple migrateur* (*Travelling Birds*) he flew "to the ends of the earth 54 times. An animal filmmaker must know how nature functions and organise filming without disturbing the environment. In my 30-year career, I have never caused a bird to abandon its nest, even when feeding its young and my camera was within a foot of its nest. In certain situations, one must begin within eight feet of a bird before approaching to three feet. It's important to know how to work minute by minute and to be aware when to stop," he says.

Beautiful nature

The selection of animals took one year; the shoot of *Les animaux amoureux* took two years. "In a secondary way, this is an activist film, but it doesn't try to be educational. Our intent has always been: 'look at how beautiful nature is. Allow yourself to be amazed and perhaps you will look at things around you a bit differently!'" anticipates Bailly.

As a result of pre-sales throughout the world, the film's \$10.7 million budget was covered at the beginning of the shoot. Bailly is grateful to TFI International, TFM Distribution, TFI Vidéo, France3 television network, JMH Productions, TPS, Canal Plus and SND (M6 DA Group). *Les animaux amoureux* was produced by MC4 and is currently screening in 500 French theatres.

1-4 Laurent Charbonnier, Director and DP, in action Photos Eric Travers/Agence Sipa