



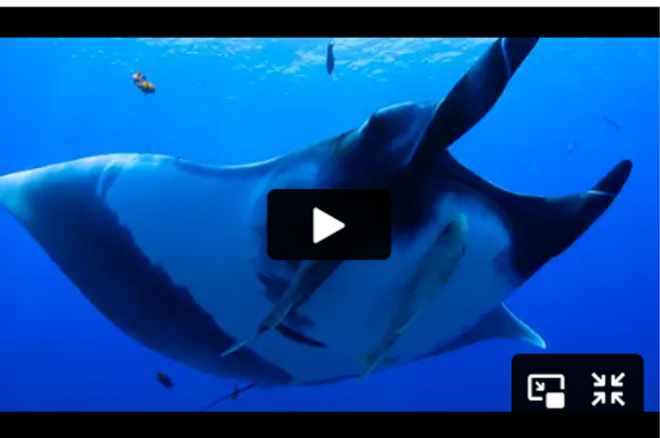
ZDF Studios' *Bison: An American Icon*.

# Nature in View

**Distributors discuss nature and wildlife programs that take a single-subject focus. By Jamie Stalcup**

Wildlife and nature programming has been a key component of broadcasters' slates for many years. Sweeping, high-quality pieces that survey an area and its species are loved by audiences everywhere. It's a crowded market, however, and it's only becoming more so. Standing out can be tough. Distributors have found one way to break through the overly saturated genre: offering focused, single-subject programs.

"Since there is hardly anything left that has not been filmed, it can only ever be a matter of finding a new approach," says Armin Luttenberger, head of content sales



Autentic Distribution's catalog features the Terra Mater Studios doc *Alien Contact*.

Albatross World Sales. "This can be a new way of storytelling, for example, in an in-depth portrait of a particular species that the audience might even be very familiar with or through unique access to a specific topic or area. Find the unknown in the known, and for this, you need to dive deeper into the subject matter (or species)."

Olzmann offers *Superbirds—The Secret Life of Tits*, produced by Altayfilm, as a prime example. "It is a species that almost everybody knows, and you think there's nothing special or surprising about them, but we now know that they have individual character traits and show different behavior."

## LESSONS TO LEARN

"There is still so much to learn about the different animals in their beautiful and varied forms," Autentic's Strasser adds. "Focusing on a single species allows viewers to fully immerse themselves in the world of an individual animal, a world they may not have known much about before. These documentaries get up close and are therefore captivating and emotional."

The Autentic catalog features an array of titles that fit the bill, including *The Himalayan Ibex—Monarchs of the Mountains* and *Spirit of the Mountains—The Snow Leopard*. It also includes the Terra Mater Studios slate, which features its own single-species programs such as *Alien Contact* about manta rays.

In addition to that, you have to make this interest last for 50 minutes. The story needs strong characters and fresh insights, and, in combination with cutting-edge technology, this can be a real winner."

In both *Superbirds* and *Wolf—Wanderer Without Borders*, one lead animal is followed the entire time. *Superbirds* sees an individual male fly from his origins in Germany to Southern France, where he starts his own family. *Wolf—Wanderer Without Borders*, meanwhile, follows a wolf named Scout, who roamed from Eastern Germany all the way to the Netherlands.

**"There seems to be an appetite to discover parts of the world."**

**—Nikolas Huelbusch**

"Viewers appreciate it when they can accompany a main character through the film—or, in the case of wildlife, an animal with whom they can laugh, empathize and sympathize," ORF-Enterprise's Luttenberger says.

In ORF-Enterprise's catalog, Will and Lianne Steenkamp have followed leopards and lions in Africa for many years, telling their stories across generations. "Those who, like these two, take the time to do so and are able to do so, naturally achieve extraordinary results," Luttenberger notes. "Their new documentary *Desert Phantoms—Surviving the Skeleton Coast*, which will be on the market in early 2024, will prove that once again."

international at ORF-Enterprise. "James Cameron was not the first to make a film about the Titanic, but he was probably the first to think that a sinking ship alone is not enough."

Luttenberger continues, "There are dozens of high-quality documentaries about lions and leopards in the market that all show more or less the same thing. Standing out from the crowd is a great art—and that is defined solely by profound storytelling and a unique visual language."

"Premium wildlife content was formerly defined by high-end camerawork, but 4K and even 8K filming is not enough anymore to make a film stand out," notes Mirjam Strasser, head of sales and acquisitions at Autentic Distribution. "Now, it is either never-before-seen animal behavior, access to an animal habitat that

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hasn't been shown before or fresh storytelling that stands out. By focusing on a single species that is mysterious, elusive and has not yet been covered by many wildlife programs, films can still compete for viewership."

"You need to find your special approach and what makes your film different," concurs Anne Olzmann, managing director of



*Desert Phantoms—Surviving the Skeleton Coast* is among the offerings from ORF-Enterprise.

ZDF Studios, meanwhile, has in its slate *Bison: An American Icon*, a profile of this enduring icon of North American wilderness.

Along with single-species docs, high-quality

factual fare that takes viewers deep into the heart of a specific location are in high demand. "There seems to be an appetite to discover parts of the world that have been underrepresented in documentary filmmaking in the past," says Nikolas Huelbusch, Director Unscripted at ZDF Studios.

He points to *Africa from Above*—produced by Off the Fence in association with ZDF, Arte, ORF and UKTV—as an example. "Africa in the past was mostly present when it came to the archaeological sites of Ancient Egypt, the Rift Valley as the home of early humans and a handful of well-known national parks such as the Serengeti or the Maasai Mara. In our series *Africa from Above*, we show a much broader vision of ten African countries, their landscapes, wildlife and people, including such rarely shown countries as Mozambique, Ghana, Cameroon and Morocco. We realize there is a big demand for such series in the market."

While a compelling feature of wildlife and nature documentaries is the cutting-edge technology used to produce them, all of the executives agree that storytelling is the most important element.

"Storytelling is crucial," Albatross's Olzmann says. "As a filmmaker or producer, you have to find the personal, emotional story that the audience can relate to but still learn something new."

All manner of broadcasters and platforms are interested in this hyper-focused style of doc, and FAST channels are presenting new opportunities. "AVOD and FAST buyers are currently standing out, as interest from these clients is increasing rapidly and more and more clients join the queue," Strasser says.

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**—Mirjam Strasser**

"VOD platforms tend to be more open to experiment," Olzmann explains. "When it comes to single-species films, there is a difference between VOD platforms and public broadcasters. Broadcasters have a few fixed slots—and the market for these is very competitive—so they have to be more selective, as the offer to their audience is simply limited."

At the moment, she notes, "broadcasters usually decide to go with the 'safer' wildlife docs," meaning those centered on the "Big Five" and other predators, which could be a single-species documentary, and programs that cover wide areas.

For distributors, producers and broadcasters alike, though, "it is a very rewarding genre," Olzmann says. "It is universally attractive to a global audience, does not really seem to age and has a long shelf life."