

# AIR TIME

Getting high in the sky with your camera gear is an expensive habit, but addictive. Landscape photography has never been this exhilarating. Words and images by **Ewen Bell**.



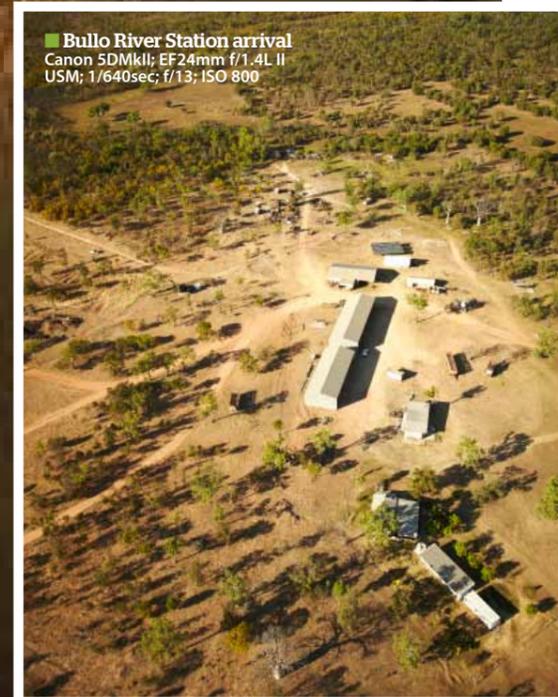
“A few metres from our landing site, a sheer drop of 200 metres marks the end of the Pinkertons”

**W**hen I first heard about Bullo River Station, a half-day's drive southwest of Darwin, I was expecting landscapes filled with boab trees and cattle yards filled with dust as the stock kick up their hoofs on sunset. Seeing the station from the point of view of a helicopter was an added bonus that soon became the main event. For three days we explored the breadth of Bullo River Station from the air, landing on remote waterfalls, chasing water buffalo and shooting the geography of the station with a bird's eye view. »

#### » IN DETAIL

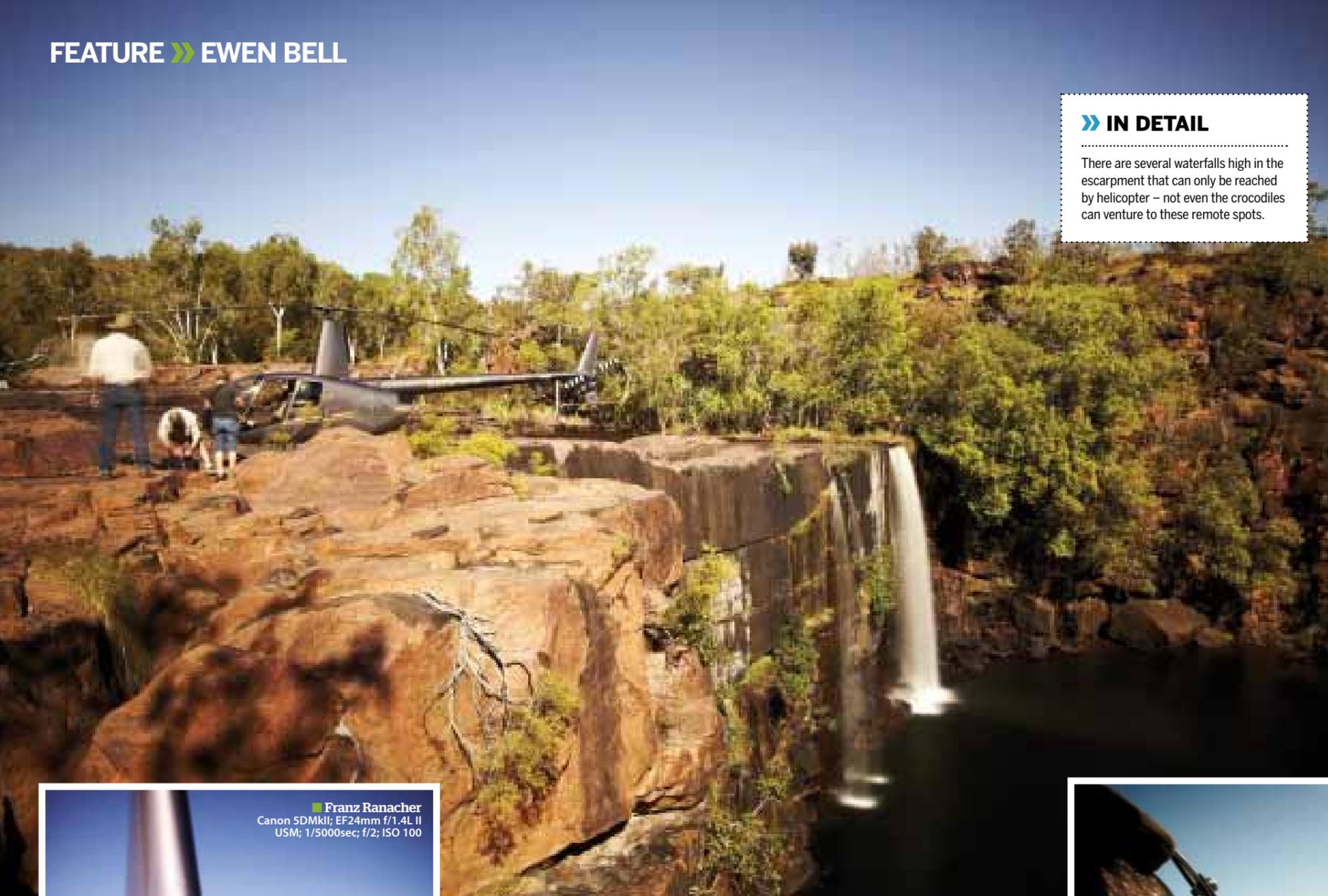
Charter flights to Bullo River Station take about 90 minutes from Darwin or 30 minutes from Kununurra. Or you can rough it by road – all 800km from Darwin.

■ Bullo River Station arrival  
Canon 5DMkII; EF24mm f/1.4L II USM; 1/640sec; f/13; ISO 800



» IN DETAIL

There are several waterfalls high in the escarpment that can only be reached by helicopter – not even the crocodiles can venture to these remote spots.



■ A land of sweeping plains  
Canon 5DMkII; EF24mm f/1.4L II  
USM; 1/640; f/13; ISO 800

Practical perspectives

Shooting from a helicopter not only creates perspectives on the landscape you can't find any other way, but it demands a different way of thinking about your landscape photography in general. Tripods and a slow shutter won't help you much in the air; instead, you want to maximise the advantages of the DSLR format to shoot with high shutter speeds and an accurate autofocus.

The base configuration is much like shooting for wildlife, with around 1/1000th of a second shutter and f/10 or a little higher to ensure some useful depth of field. Depending on your light conditions you may need to kick the ISO up a little – or a lot – to get the balance right. The latest camera bodies will allow you to set the camera to manual and ISO to auto, so you can select the desired combination of shutter and aperture while the camera floats the ISO setting to achieve a balanced exposure.

Choice of lens is rather critical before you even get into

“The more often you get high, the more rewarding your shots will be”

the air. With the doors off you can get great results from a 24mm lens, but just as likely you'll encounter compositions where a 70-200 zoom is the right tool. If you only have one camera body to work with, then a 24-70mm is the right tool for the job. Shooting with the doors off also demands that everything inside the cabin be locked down or stowed away, due to the wind turbulence inside. Grabbing a spare lens out of the bag and swapping a wide for a telephoto is not always an option.

■ Franz Ranacher  
Canon 5DMkII; EF24mm f/1.4L II  
USM; 1/5000sec; f/2; ISO 100



Bullo River Station

When Franz Ranacher said he could land his R44 helicopter on the edge of the Pinkerton Ranges, he wasn't kidding. As the first rays of daylight throw rich orange hues across the sandstone, he guides the small chopper into position between two ridges. A few metres from our landing site, a sheer drop of 200 metres marks the end of the Pinkertons, with a stunning view across the Baines River. Somewhere beyond the winding river course the Victoria Highway is hidden in the landscape, a long strip of tar that connects Katherine to Kununurra.

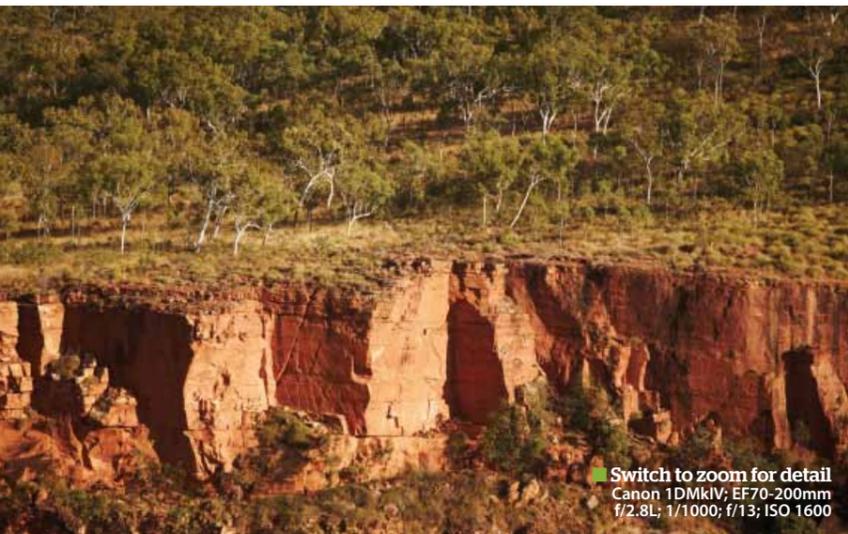
Even a light breeze gathers speed as these modest geographical features push the wind upwards, and landing a helicopter here requires immense skill and patience. That's pretty much the definition of Franz Ranacher.

For photographers, the charms of Bullo River Station are diverse, from wild creatures to graceful boabs. Getting around by helicopter makes it possible to shoot a wide range of locations with remarkable ease, plus the added bonus of aerial photography with the doors off. [bulloriver.com](http://bulloriver.com)



» IN DETAIL

Hold her steady! With so much vibration in flight, you'll need every ounce of your DSLR's high shutter speeds and accurate autofocus.



Switch to zoom for detail  
Canon 1DMkIV; EF70-200mm  
f/2.8L; 1/1000; f/13; ISO 1600

**Seeing is believing**

The higher perspective with heli-shooting doesn't change the usual formula for chasing the best light. Early morning and late afternoon are still the prime times to grab some air time. For most commercial services there's a restriction on flying conditions that requires the helicopters be on the ground within 30 minutes of dawn and dusk. Flying onto a remote mountaintop to catch the sunset, for example, may not always be possible.

Once in the air, most pilots have a pretty good idea of what a photographer likes. You won't be the first he's flown, nor the last either.

But don't rely entirely on their expertise to guide your photographic work; rather, give them an idea of when cutting in low works nicely for your shot or when gaining a few hundred metres of altitude is more to your liking.

Composing your frames while moving at something in the order of 80 knots can consume your conscious mind entirely, so you may not always be aware enough to ask for a second pass or to flip the chopper sideways to give you an angle on the best light. You can expect your ability to think on the fly to improve with air time, so the more often you get high, the more rewarding your shots will be. >>

**PRO TIP**

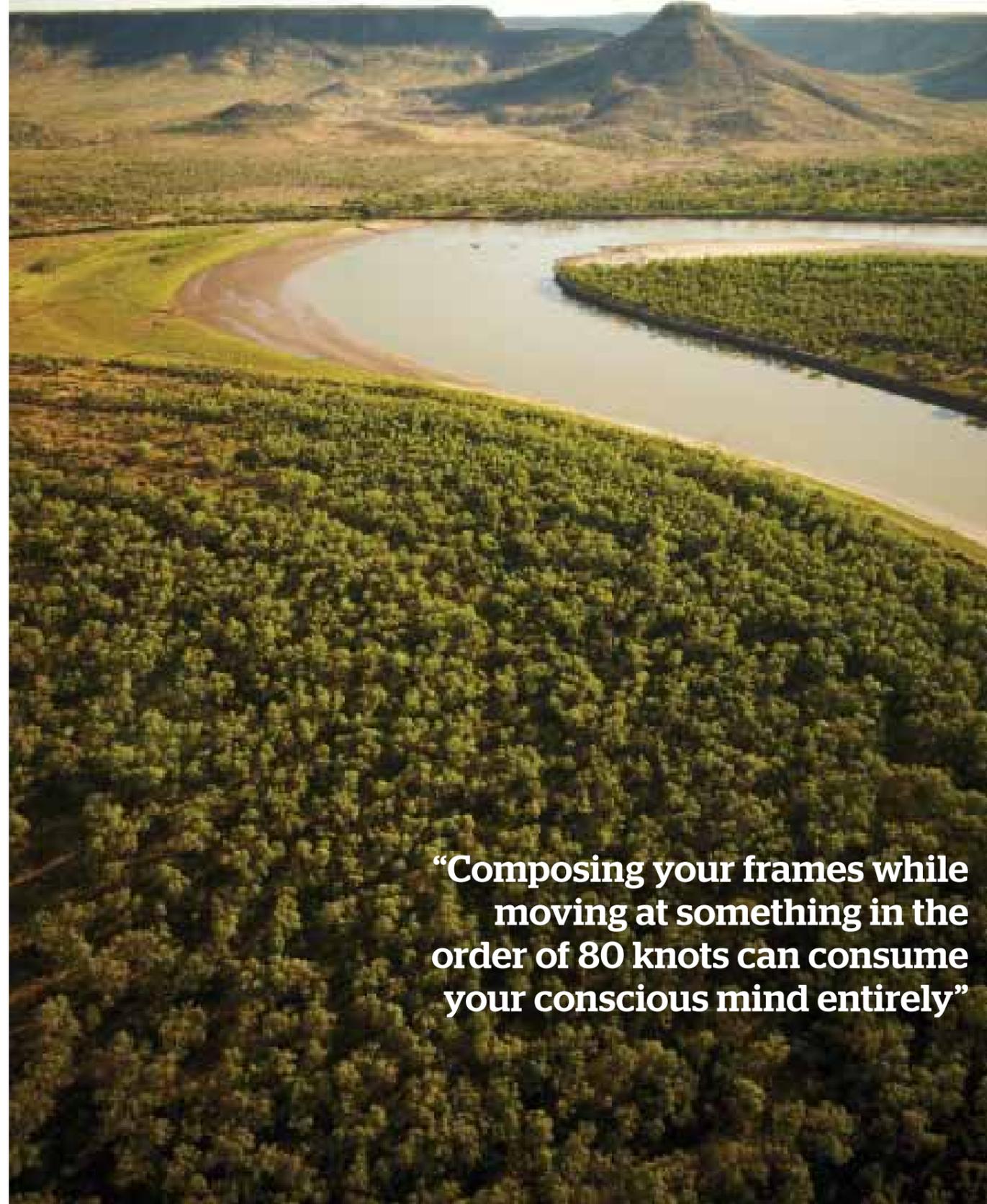
**Choppering your budget**

You pay by the hour for the helicopter, regardless of how many passengers are on board. Expect around \$1000 an hour for a good pilot and a small helicopter such as the R44.



**>> IN DETAIL**

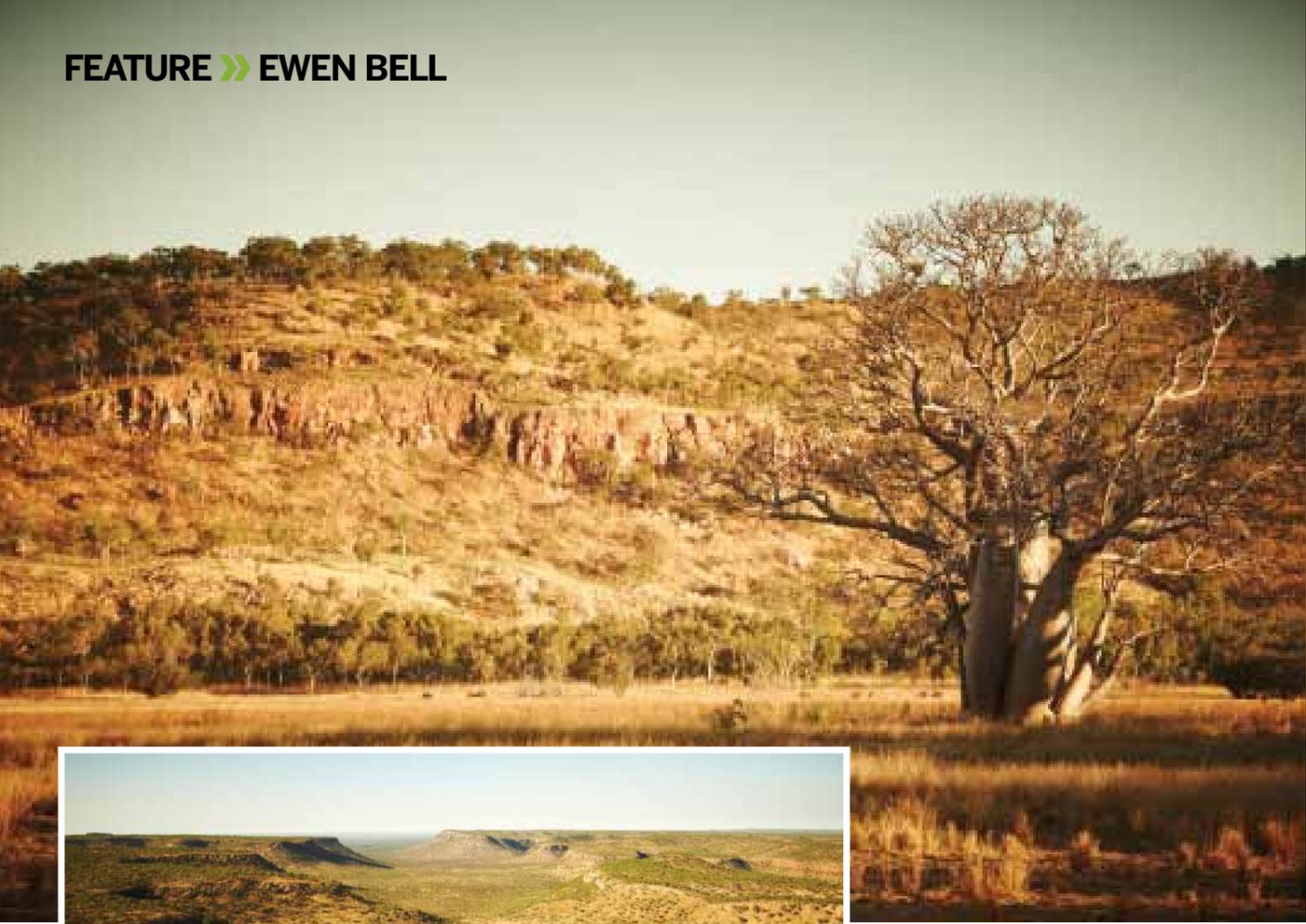
Always try to give your pilot guidance: when to cut in low for a shot, or when to gain a few hundred metres of altitude for a wider perspective. Canon 5DMkII; EF24mm f/1.4L II USM; 1/160; f/13; ISO 400.



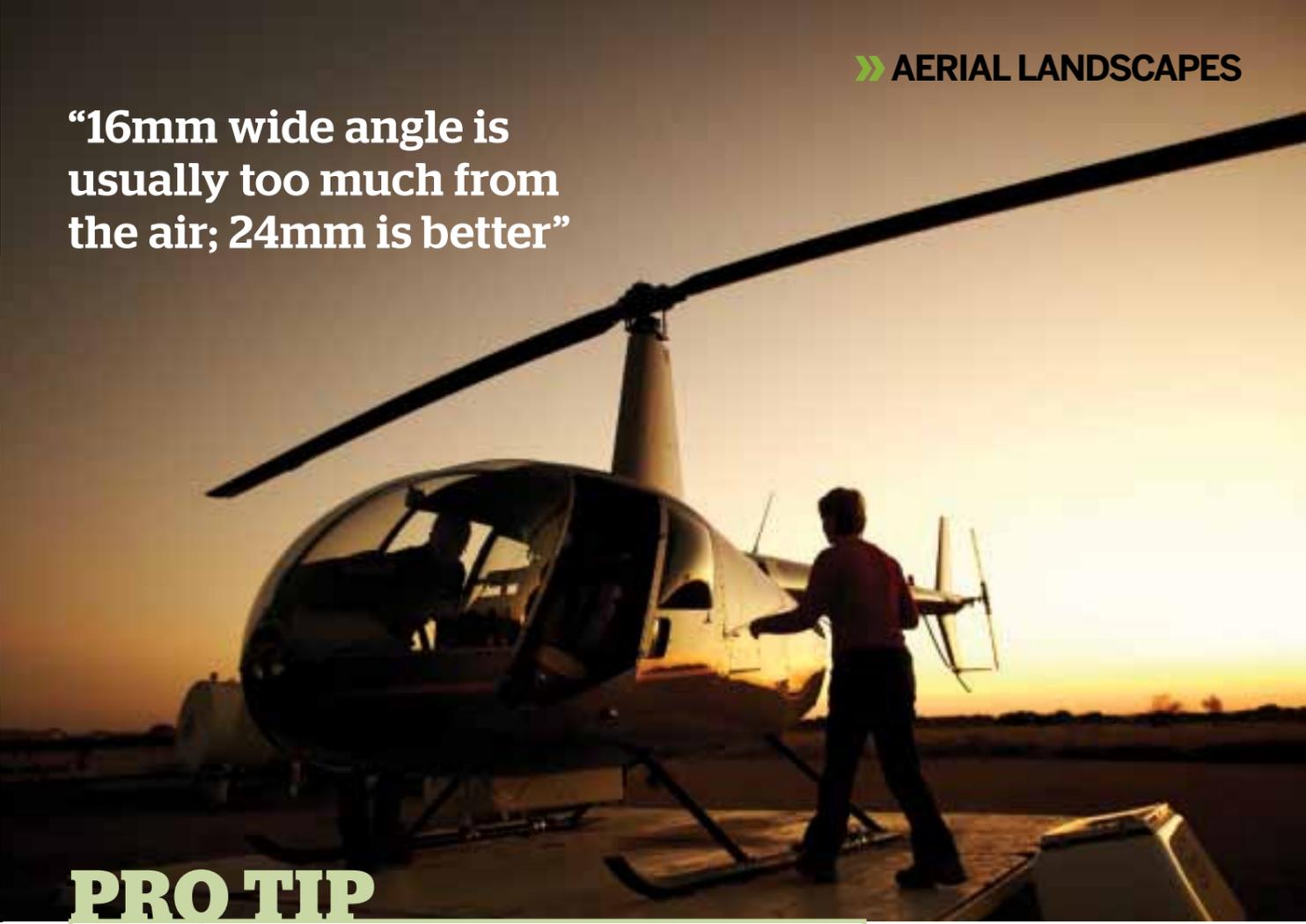
**“Composing your frames while moving at something in the order of 80 knots can consume your conscious mind entirely”**

**>> IN DETAIL**

With the doors off you can get great results from a 24mm, but just as likely you'll encounter compositions where a 70-200 zoom is better. Canon 1DMkIV; EF70-200mm f/2.8L; 1/1000; f/13; ISO 1600.



“16mm wide angle is usually too much from the air; 24mm is better”



**PRO TIP**

**Two are better than one**

- As you move across the landscape, your mind quickly assesses a variety of options, so having a second camera at your feet – with a telephoto lens on one body and a wide angle on the other – will double your value.
- 16mm wide angle is usually too much from the air, 24mm is better, and the 24-70mm zoom lenses are a great option too.
- 70-200mm telephoto zoom is perfect for the other shots, like picking out a boab tree or shooting young jabiru in their nest.



■ **High angle on infinity**  
Canon 1DMkIV; EF70-200mm  
f/2.8L; 1/500; f/13; ISO 1600

**>> IN DETAIL**

“For photographers, the charms of Bullo River Station are diverse, from wild creatures to graceful boabs...” The above image of one of Australia’s most recognisable outback icons was shot with a Canon 1DMkIV; EF70-200mm f/2.8L; 1/80; f/13; ISO 400.

**>> IN DETAIL**

The higher perspective with heli-shooting doesn’t change the usual formula for chasing the best light. Early morning and late afternoon are still the prime times. Canon 5DMkII; EF24mm f/1.4L II USM; 1/160; f/4.5; ISO 1600.



■ **Breach below!**  
Canon 1DMkIV; EF70-200mm  
f/2.8L; 1/800; f/10; ISO 1600



■ **Montgomery magic**  
Canon 1DMkIV; EF24mm  
f/1.4L; 1/800; f/10; ISO 2000

**Where to get high**

**Kakadu / Jabiru**

- Shoot the Kakadu escarpment or land on Jim Jim falls in the wet season

**Buccaneer Peninsula**

- Sandstone islands and azure ocean is magnificent from the air but a long way from Broome. Easier to reach from a cruise boat with a chopper on the deck.

**Montgomery Reef**

- Also part of the Kimberley Coast but closer to Derby than Broome, unique channels and reef structures that are revealed at low tide.



■ **Gonna need a bigger boat**  
Canon 1DMkIV; EF24mm  
f/1.4L; 1/500; f/13; ISO 400