**Wildlife Photography**

Photographing wildlife is perhaps one of the most challenging yet rewarding types of photography. Don’t worry, you don’t need to travel to far-away locations or own an expensive camera to enjoy wildlife photography.

To begin, let’s forget about the camera for a moment. One of the best ways to become a better wildlife photographer is to learn everything you can about your subject. Pick up a book, search the internet, watch a nature program, visit zoos, or talk with others to learn about wildlife. Take the time to learn about behavior, feeding patterns, mating rituals, migratory patterns, and anything else that may help your photography. The more knowledge you acquire, the more successful your photographic efforts will be, and, perhaps more importantly, you’ll gain a deeper appreciation of our precious wildlife.

Here are a couple of examples of what I have learned about wildlife behavior that has helped my photography:

- Geese often bob their heads up and down and are very vocal before taking flight. If I am trying to get flight images and notice this, I’ll quickly get my camera ready.
- When angered, moose will raise their hackles and lower their heads. If I’m photographing moose and this happens, I leave the area immediately.
- Female moose (called cows) become *very aggressive* when young are present. If I encounter a cow during the calving season (late spring and summer), I use extreme caution even if I don’t see a calf. Sometimes a calf can be hidden and she will do everything in her power to protect the calf.
• Many animals are more active in the early morning and late afternoon. I’m an early riser, so I’ll often head out first thing in the morning.

• Egrets sometimes will ‘wiggle’ their toes to stir up small fish, one of their favorite prey. If I see this, many times I will have an opportunity to photograph one feeding.

Before we get into the specifics of wildlife photography, I’d like to mention a couple of points on ethics and safety. No photograph is worth harming an animal or altering its natural behavior, no matter how innocent it seems. I’ve witnessed photographers chase birds and throw objects at them in order to get flight shots. Please resist the temptation to do such things - survival is often very hard for wildlife as it is. Recently super-zoom cameras have become quite popular, and if you enjoy photographing wildlife, these are great tools. Super-zooms will allow you to photograph from a distance, thus minimizing the possibility of altering natural behavior.

Sometimes it may be tempting to use calls to attract wildlife. Birds in particular, at certain times of the year may respond very favorably to calls. Before trying any type of calls, do a little homework and find out if the use of calls will disrupt natural behavior and cause unnecessary stress. You can usually find a local Audubon or National Wildlife Federation chapter nearby and by asking around, you should be able to get some information.

Also give a thought to safety. Many animals can be quite dangerous, particularly during mating season, when young are present, or when feeding. So, taking the time to learn about biology and behavior can be one of the best things to help keep both you and the animals you photograph safe.
Where to find wildlife

It may sound obvious, but before you photograph your favorite species of wildlife, you’re going to have to find them! Wildlife photography does not have to involve traveling to exotic locations; start by looking right out your door - you may have wildlife literally in your backyard. Squirrels, birds, rabbits, reptiles, amphibians, insects and other animals can usually be found in many neighborhoods. Always keep your camera handy while you are at home - you never know what might show up in your yard!

Above - Moose in front yard!

You can even attract wildlife to you by setting up a feeder. Feeding wildlife (where it’s legal, of course) can be a great hobby and you can often photograph right from the
comforts of your home. We'll discuss feeder set-ups and photographic strategies in more detail in another lesson.

Local parks are a great place for wildlife photography as well as a place to enjoy nature. Ponds or lakes in parks are perfect for photographing birds and other aquatic creatures, particularly if people feed them. You'll never have a shortage of subjects and if you have a new camera or want to try out a new technique or camera setting, you'll have ample opportunities to practice.

In addition to parks, boat docks are a photographer’s dream. You’ll often encounter many different birds including gulls, ducks, geese, wading birds, and pelicans
looking for an easy meal. Depending on where you live, you may also find sea lions, seals, manatees, dolphins and other marine creatures such as crabs and marine invertebrates. Birds around docks are typically very used to human presence and you can spend many hours photographing them. This is a great spot to practice close-up portrait-style images and flight shots. If you see a fishing boat approaching, have your camera ready - birds will usually trail a fishing boat in search of food. When photographing around docks, try to pay attention to your backgrounds. You may have to scout around a bit if you don’t want other boats, houses, docks, or other distractions in your image.

Above - Egret on boat dock

Zoos (or wildlife parks) and aquariums are also places to practice as well as learning about wildlife. If you have a flexible schedule, check with the facility’s staff to find out
the least crowded times. Like photographing around docks, you may have to look around for the best vantage point for your desired compositions. Zoos, wildlife parks and aquariums sometimes also feature special events (feeding displays, lectures, interactive exhibits) that may provide good photo opportunities. In addition to taking photographs, take some time and read the interpretive displays, talk to the staff, watch educational films, etc to help improve your knowledge of wildlife behavior and biology. Remember - you can have the best camera setup money can buy, but if you don’t know about the animal you are trying to photograph, you may not have much luck. It’s also a good idea to inquire about any special rules for photographers - some facilities may restrict the use of tripods or flashes to protect the animals as well as the general public.

Left - Bears at Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center

Right - Aquarium photograph
Photographic techniques

The first thing you’ll notice when you start to photograph wildlife is that they are very rarely stationary. Granted, wading birds such as egrets and herons can sometimes resemble statues when feeding, but for the most part, critters are usually constantly on the move. For this reason, try to have your camera ready to capture action. Some cameras have a ‘sports’ or ‘pet’ mode that can help you get started. These modes often use the highest shutter speed possible to capture moving subjects. Do be aware, however, that your camera may automatically boost ISO in order to achieve these faster shutter speeds which, depending on how high it goes, may increase the amount of noise in your image. Pretty soon, you’ll get an idea of what types of shutter speeds you need to capture your subject depending on it’s speed and ambient lighting levels. In general, the smaller the subject and the quicker it is moving, the faster shutter speed you’ll need to stop the action. When you become more familiar with the required shutter speed, you can use the shutter-priority mode and dial in exactly what you want. For example, if I’m trying to photograph a bird such as a cormorant or goose taking off from the water, I’ll select a shutter speed of at least 1/500 second to ‘freeze’ the action of the bird’s wings. The picture above required 1/1000 second.
Something else to consider regarding shutter speed is the focal length setting of your lens. As you zoom in on a subject, camera shake becomes more apparent that can result in a blurry image. The general rule (before the availability of stabilization systems) concerning shutter speed and focal length is to select a speed at least 1/the focal length of the lens. As an example, let's say that you are photographing an animal using a 400mm focal length setting on your camera. You should look for a shutter speed of at least 1/400 second to counteract camera movement. Fortunately many camera manufacturers today are equipping cameras with some sort of image stabilization system that only a few years ago was available solely on high-end cameras. Stabilization systems electronically stabilize the camera allowing for slower hand-held shutter speeds. With today’s extreme focal lengths available in superzoom cameras, stabilization systems are very useful and remarkably effective, but you should always keep an eye on your shutter speed/focal length relationship to maximize image sharpness. Also, be aware that although stabilizations systems can prevent camera shake, they can’t take the place of high shutter speeds that are often necessary for moving subjects.

You can also use shutter speed creatively. By using slower shutter speeds and panning (moving the camera with the subject), you can depict movement and blur the background for a dramatic effect. To do this, I’ll usually start with 1/30 second and capture images while panning. After a few images, I’ll then check my LCD to see how it looks. Here is where practice really is necessary, as this is going require a lot of trial and error. One of the best ways to practice is to spend some time at a pond where
people feed ducks and other birds. Experiment with different shutter and panning speeds to get the look you’re after. With enough practice, you’ll be able to dial-in exactly the right setting depending on the speed of your subject matter, lighting level, and desired creative effect. Below is a photo taken at 1/30 second while panning the camera to create a blurring effect in both the swans and background.

![Photo of swans in motion](image)

One thing that you’ll notice very quickly (especially with compact cameras) is that there usually is a delay when you push the shutter button to capture your subject. Compact cameras cannot focus as fast as their D-SLR counterparts, so to minimize this delay, practice pre-focusing your camera. If your camera is pre-focused, you can capture an image very quickly. To pre-focus, press your shutter button down halfway and hold it in that position. When the moment is right, fully depress the shutter button to take your picture. Some cameras have a continuous-focus setting, and it may be worth
experimenting with, although many times you’ll find that pre-focusing on your own is quicker. When photographing wildlife, try getting into the habit of continuously pre-focusing and tracking your subject while waiting for the ideal moment to capture your photograph.

Along with pre-focusing, having your camera set to continuous drive mode, or burst mode will help increase your chances of capturing fast-moving wildlife. Today’s compact cameras have very impressive shooting speeds. My current camera, the Canon SX-50HS will capture 10 frames in under one-second! Take a look through your camera’s manual to learn more about your continuous setting, as it’s one of the most helpful tools for your wildlife photography. If you are looking for a new camera and are interested in wildlife photography, consider this with your search. There are many camera review websites and resources that can help you select the best camera depending on your interests.

One final thing about camera settings. Most cameras feature a power saving option in which the camera turns itself off after a while of inactivity. Do yourself a favor and disable this feature (it’s usually somewhere in the set-up menu system). I can’t tell you how many times I missed a shot simply because my camera was powered down. This may use more battery power, so you may want to consider having an extra battery, but believe me, it’s worth it as opposed to missing a potential shot of a lifetime!

Wildlife Photography Methods

To capture photographs of wildlife, you essentially have two choices; you can go to them or allow them to come to you. Generally speaking, unless your subject(s) is
extremely used to human presence, you’ll usually have better luck waiting for them to come to you. Here is where learning about behavior and biology can really pay off - the more you know about habitat, feeding, behavior and your local area, the more you can use it to your advantage in capturing your photograph. For example, if you know that certain species of wildlife frequent a local pond to feed early in the morning and late in the afternoon, you can scout out a location to wait for the ideal photo opportunity. This will typically work much better than trying to approach an animal trying to feed.

Waiting

In waiting for wildlife, it is often helpful to use some sort of blind or cover to help conceal your presence. You can use a natural blind such as brush piles or downed trees, or a commercially available blind (the kind hunters may use). There are many different types of blinds available ranging from units that resemble camouflaged tents to a simple piece of material that you place over your body while seated. Regardless of the type of blind you use, make sure that you have enough room and flexibility to move and operate your camera, especially if you use a tripod or monopod, and make sure that you have a clear view to photograph.

Cars can often be used as a blind. I’ve discovered that wildlife don’t particularly mind an approaching vehicle, but if you get out of the vehicle, they will usually flee. There are even window mounted camera supports available to help you get sharp images. One of my favorite tools is the “Puffin Pad” that slips on the window supporting my camera.
If you don’t have a blind, don’t worry. Sometimes the use of blinds isn’t completely necessary. One of my favorite ways to photograph wildlife is to find a spot in the woods near a game trail and just sit at the base of a tree. I’ve used this method with much success in Alaska. I’ve had moose, fox, marmots, and many different species of birds come quite close allowing for fantastic photo opportunities.

Left - Waiting for marmots with a friend
Stalking

I’ve been less successful stalking wildlife, but with the right approach (literally and figuratively) it certainly can be done. The key to stalking wildlife is to be very quiet and move extremely slowly and try to anticipate the animal’s movement as you adjust your position. As you move about, watch out for any twigs or brush that may give away your presence (although chances are whatever you are trying to stalk is already aware of you). Take a few steps, pause for a minute or so, and then continue slowly. You can use trees and other natural sources of cover to help you while approaching the animal. It may sound silly, but avoid eye contact. Animals often see eye contact as a threat and if you are continually looking at them, chances are they will become very uneasy and will usually run away.

Stalking can work surprisingly well for shorebirds. However, you must be lying flat on your belly while you are approaching them. Again, move very slowly and pause frequently. It also helps to have something to support your camera. I’ve had good luck with a tabletop tripod placed on an aluminum baking pan or an overturned Frisbee. With this setup, I’ll just slide the camera and tripod along in front of me as I am making my way forward.
Be sure to take the time and look around while you are on the ground. I was once photographing a Yellowlegs on the beach and noticed some movement out of the corner of my eye. When I looked, I saw several Piping Plovers moving about looking for food. Slowly, I repositioned myself and was able to capture a couple of photographs of a beautiful endangered species.

Water approach
A canoe, kayak, or small rowboat can be a great tool for wildlife photography. Like photographing on land, you can choose to wait at a particular location or try to approach your subject. I have a 12-foot recreational kayak with a wide beam for added stability as well as an enlarged cockpit area to accommodate my camera and tripod. I’ve found that backing into some sort of natural cover (grasses and other shoreline growth) produces the best results. There’s nothing like an early morning paddle with a thermos full of coffee and my camera to start the day!
Another approach that seems to work well is to simply paddle into the middle of a lake or pond and just wait and drift. You never know what might show up. In an Alaskan lake outside of Anchorage, I would frequently have a family of Loons come over and see what exactly I was. Evidently they didn’t see me as a threat since they would always continue to feed and swim about allowing for some nice photos.
If you have a pond nearby, a fun way to spend a summer afternoon is photographing dragonflies and damselflies. Find a patch of lily pads and just wait and observe. Chances are that you'll encounter lots of dragonflies and damselflies. Don't be afraid of them! Many people think that they sting, but they are completely harmless. They do us a great service by eating thousands of pesky mosquitoes. While you are photographing, place your paddle alongside your boat; often they'll be looking for a spot to land. Don't be too surprised if they land on your head! With a little creativity, you can often take a photograph with your new friend.

**Types of Wildlife Photographs**

Before you head out to photograph wildlife, give a thought to how you’d like to depict your subject in your images. You can photograph them close-up as a portrait, you can photograph them as part of their environment, or you can depict some sort of behavior. Let’s take a look at them in more detail:
Portrait images isolate your subject. To take portrait-style images, a long zoom is helpful but not totally necessary, particularly if you are photographing wildlife used to human presence. To minimize background distractions, choose the widest aperture your camera will allow at your given focal length. This will also allow the fastest shutter speed to minimize camera shake and to ‘freeze’ any possible movement of your subject. When focusing, I always focus on my subject’s eyes. As long as the eyes are sharp, I don’t mind so much if other parts of the animal’s body are less sharp as a result of the wider apertures. I’ll often use a continuous or burst mode when photographing wildlife, particularly with portraits, as sometimes I have found that the second or third image of a sequence is the sharpest.
Environmental photographs of wildlife are my favorite types of wildlife photographs to make. Animals do not exist in a vacuum, and depicting their environment can give your viewer a powerful sense of place. Also, environmental wildlife images can be influential as a conservation tool since many natural areas are threatened (development, pollution, etc) and photographs can show the importance of conserving our wild lands. In photographing wildlife in their natural environment, try to treat it as a landscape photograph, with the animal being the main focal point. Just like your landscapes, give thoughts to composition, lighting, and depth of field in making your photograph.
This is where waiting (as discussed above) can really pay off. When I’m out to photograph an animal in its natural habitat, I don’t start by looking for the animal. I’ll look at a scene that is aesthetically pleasing and just wait. Again, knowing about your subject is very important. For example, I know that egrets and herons frequently feed in wetland areas. In Connecticut there is a delightful wetland area in Rocky Neck State Park (located in East Lyme) with a viewing platform specifically built for observing wildlife. Throughout the day, I’m able to photograph egrets, herons, osprey, and other birds feeding in their natural habitat. The late afternoon is particularly beautiful since the setting sun bathes the entire marsh in wonderful golden light.

If you have a limited zoom range on your camera, don’t worry. Powerful environmental images can be made with all types of compact digital cameras, regardless of zoom capability. In addition, remember that you don’t have to be in exotic locations to photograph wildlife. Ordinary, everyday subjects can become extraordinary images in the right lighting and moment.

Behavior

Here is where things can get really interesting and fun! One of the challenges of wildlife photography is that you have virtually no control over what happens, so always be ready for the unexpected. If you are capturing portraits or environmental images of an animal, be on the alert - you may be able to capture interesting behavior in as well as the portrait or environmental shot. To put it simply, behavior involves the animal doing something, unlike portrait style images where the subject is usually static. This can
mean feeding, moving around, interacting (with others or its environment), mating, rearing young, building shelters, or any combination! Since you never know exactly what may happen, always have your camera ready, and be sure you know your camera and how to adjust settings quickly. With my current camera, I know that four clockwise “clicks” on the mode dial from the “P” setting (where I normally photograph) will bring me to the special scene mode (labeled SCN) in which I have the high-speed burst set.

If I’m photographing a portrait or an environmental scene, in a second or two I can be in burst mode if I anticipate some sort of action. Some cameras have a custom mode (usually depicted by a “C” on the mode dial). If your camera has one, consider programming it for action shots (higher shutter speed, burst mode, continuous focus, etc) and practice accessing it until it’s second nature. The key to successful behavior shots is to always be on the alert - you never know what may happen!
Concluding note

Wildlife photography takes a tremendous amount of patience. Sometimes it may take several outings to get a photograph, and when you do get some photographs, don’t get discouraged if most of them are somewhat disappointing. To give you an example, I’m extremely happy if I keep one out of every one hundred wildlife photographs I take. Every outing is a learning experience and you’ll soon realize what a tremendous experience it is to be out in nature and in the company of wildlife.

Finally, learn when it’s appropriate not to take a photograph. Use good judgement when contemplating photographing wildlife during certain circumstances (feeding, mating, with young, while sleeping, etc). As noted earlier, animals have a hard enough time merely surviving, and sometimes the memory in your mind is better than an image produced by your camera.