

How to be a wildlife photographer

A top wildlife photographer shares some tips



Animals can be tricky to photograph – they are shy, elusive and quick on their paws. But there are steps you can take to improve your chances of capturing a great wildlife image.

You've got to be passionate about photographing wildlife because it's frustrating. There isn't an album in the world big enough for all the excellent photos I've missed through not quite being in the right place or not having the right setting.

Having a long lens can help, but not everyone can afford long lenses. If you've got good field skills or you've got good composition skills, you can take decent pictures regardless of what equipment you have. There are plenty of people out there with loads of equipment but no idea what makes a good picture.

Whatever camera you're using, make sure you're completely comfortable with its settings. Understanding your camera is vital in wildlife photography because, unlike landscape photography, you don't get a second chance. You can't come back in ten minutes and take the picture because the creature's gone.

Photograph your local area, rather than taking expensive trips to Africa or the USA – or to the zoo. There's not much demand for photos of captive zoo animals or captive birds of prey. Concentrate on British wildlife, bugs, plants and landscapes and get to know your local wildlife groups or projects.

If you've chosen a species of bird to photograph, the more you understand that bird, the more likely you are to be successful. For example, birds always take off into the wind so by positioning yourself correctly you've got more chance of a bird flying towards you initially. You've got to know your animal inside out. You need to know its behaviour and what you need to do to get close to it – obvious things like being positioned so that the wind's always blowing your scent away or, if you're stalking deer, using all the trees around you as a natural screen. You just have to be quiet and careful – you don't want to spook the animal.

Portraits of animals on their own are nice, but they can be a bit dull if you're not careful. Keep your eyes peeled for interaction between animals such as feeding behaviour, grooming and fighting. And remember to pay attention to lighting. Get up early in the morning, just before sunrise, so you get the sun coming up and the lovely orange light and the nice glow on animals' faces. Light's really important – it can make or break a shot.

Don't expect to go out and shoot the best photo in a couple of hours. Be patient. Sometimes, if I've been out all morning with a family of otters and I've got 2000 images, I flick through them very quickly and every now and then I hit one and it just grabs you. Once you've picked them, you can go through and edit the others. Get several images together and send them to friends and get them to rank them one to ten. Sometimes what I find is that they're all picking the same image as one of the top two or three – then I know I've got something with a more general appeal.

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Midnight at the oasis



These two nuzzling rhinos may be related – the larger one could be the youngster’s aunt, or a distant cousin.

“We tried to keep out of sight – though there’s a limit to how unobtrusive you can be with six or seven tents and a couple of vehicles,” admits Simon. But fears that their arrival would send wildlife running were quickly dispelled.

“Because it’s not on a tourist route – there’s no path or track to this place – the animals were incredibly trusting,” he says. “There were huge numbers – more giraffes than I’ve ever seen together, and hundreds of zebras.”

And rhinos. Lots of rhinos.

“There were up to 16 rhinos at any one time, but never the same 16,” he recalls. “As many as 50 animals would come and go – males, females and calves.” And they weren’t there just to drink. They were there to socialise. “It was like a party.”

A noisy affair

And like any good party, it was a noisy affair. New animals were greeted enthusiastically. “They squeaked and squealed and skipped around. And roared – like the dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park*.”

The crew filmed courtship, mating behaviour and even what appeared to be party games. “We saw one male pick up a pair of antelope horns and strut around with them balanced on his nose,” Simon says.

There were also the inevitable run-ins with the neighbours. Staggering around in the dark, rhinos and giraffes, in particular, would bump into one another without warning, each spooking the other.

Even those beady rhino eyes came alive. “Instead of being sunken into their sockets and hidden by wrinkles, they seem to open wider at night,” Simon explains. “You could almost see the expressions on their faces.”

The trouble with parties is that there’s always a morning after. Could that be one reason why black rhinos don’t seem to be in the best of moods in the cold light of day?

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