

Words of WiNZdom

THE WINZ POCKET FIELD GUIDE TO WILDLIFE
PHOTOGRAPHY

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An introductory field guide to wildlife photography

By Roger Cox

As a hobby wildlife photography can be a fun and rewarding pastime. However it isn't something to undertake without a healthy respect for nature as well as the environment. If you're determined to hone your skills as a wildlife photographer and at the same time would like to keep things as harmless and as enjoyable as possible, then balanced with your own safety the welfare of your subjects should always come first.

These days you don't have to go very far to find a wild animal or plant to photograph. Zoos and wildlife centres are just one way of turning what can start out as a passing interest into a passionate one.



However to photograph out in the wild often means hiking and hiding out in the freezing cold or blazing heat, else sitting or lying cramped for hours while waiting for the right animal to show up. So without a decent plan or strategy going after a particular subject could take years or not at all if you're simply relying on luck to get exactly what you're after.

For a more select style of images it pays to study your quarry, beginning with a single sighting to keeping a complete record of dates, times and location. It also helps to know if your subject is territorial, seasonal or just passing through. Once you've compiled a dossier of the particulars much of the hard work for getting an ideal shot can be ironed out with a little background reading; the use of any local knowledge or employing the services of a guide.



One popular method of photographic capture for wild mammals and birds is to bait them into a feeding pattern. Only do be aware of any bylaws in force that prohibit the feeding of wildlife in certain public places, gulls on resort beaches for example. If you're setting up next to a bird feeder in your own garden then all well and good, simply hide-up and have your camera ready. You might also want to try the same thing around some of the more established, unintentional wildlife hotspots like rubbish bins, fish and meat markets as well as waste disposal sites.



When it comes to deliberately placing food, birds are the quickest to give up their images to this type of capture. Mammals are somewhat slower but will generally develop a scavenging habit so long as the food lasts. However it could take days, weeks or months before some of the more wily ones become bold enough to allow you to photograph them at leisure. Naturally winter makes the prospect of an easy meal far more enticing for a hungry animal than at any other time of the year. So don't expect the same response to bait once food for them becomes plentiful throughout the summer!



For this jay shot I discovered that their favourite winter food was peanuts and freeze-dried mealworms. Once the birds became accustomed to taking the bait in front of a wide-angled lens (disguised as a pile of leaves), it was just a matter of triggering the shutter at the right time via remote control.

Once all your research is done and you know where your subject is, or likely to be, you're halfway home to a decent amount of shooting. To ensure the right animal shows up you need to be specific with the bait, the time and location.

A daytime set-up for something nocturnal else nowhere nearby will



have little to no success. If you know the nature of the animal to be one of shyness then a crowded, noisy open space isn't going to work as well as a quiet, covered secluded one.

Also the food needs to be strategically placed so that it's likely to be found by the foraging habits of whatever it is you're after. For example, a seed dispenser high up in a tree isn't going to work on ground feeding birds like thrushes and pigeons!



For that "pure nature" effect a good bait spot should look as realistic as possible since there may be no way of keeping it out of the shot (even after cropping). Besides which, a more canny subject may never approach it should things appear too man-made, or the food conveniently placed in front of an uncovered camera. So choose a place that will compose your subject well, i.e. with the best possible light and setting, making sure your

background is clear and your foreground free of any unwanted distractions.

If you find bait showing up in a shot that you'd like to keep then you'll need to learn about "cloning", a digital post-processing technique of masking unwanted objects with tiny copies of a picture's background and surroundings.



Left: brown rat surrounded by bird seed.
Right: seeds cloned out for a cleaner, more "natural" effect.

So what next if your subject is a no-show? In nature nothing is ever wasted (a precept that should also apply to your time). In seemingly uneventful situations be prepared to make the most of whatever else turns up and if you want to give yourself plenty of scope for the unexpected:



1. **Don't be a "species snob."** Common and garden variety creatures have just as much to offer as the next rare or unusual find. So make use of the time by making use of them.

2. **Never under estimate the power of water.**



On hot dry days birds like nothing more than to bathe and to drink. Sooner or later every animal will need to do the same. So if you happen to be lying low next to a puddle after a downpour then stick around. A good source of water is usually the place where a number of surprises often come from.

3. **Don't be put off by the weather.**

Barring extremes, packing up early on account of the weather is often a bad idea when other things might so easily present themselves. Grey skies or blue your objective should always be to capture wildlife when and where you find it. It may be too cold or wet for one kind of animal and yet perfect for another.



4. **Keep an alternative subject matter in mind**

Excursions can be expensive and equally disappointing. Apart from getting back safely with all your equipment intact the important thing from an extensive trek into the wilds is not to return home empty-handed. So if your quarry does manage to elude you then better to compensate yourself with a nice landscape or some insects, plants and waterfalls etc.



A ptarmigan it may not be but after spending over £1000; five days in the Cairngorms and a strenuous uphill walk in deep snow, this mountain hare had to suffice for the time being.

Gearing up for inspirational wildlife photography requires the use of a decent hide at a proper distance; a tripod at the correct angle and height and a DSLR camera (shooting in RAW) with a 100mm plus lens. However you'll also need to practice what it really takes to refine the art of good picture taking: **patience** and **perseverance**.



If there's one thing all those stunning wildlife images on magazine covers never show is the actual time and effort required for the best possible picture for that particular moment.

If you're going after small birds and mammals up-close i.e. less than four metres, then don't be too eager at the first sighting. The ultrasonic sound of your auto-focus can sometimes be enough to ruin everything long before your shutter opens!



So hold your nerve and choose that first shot carefully. It might be the only thing you'll have to show after weeks of waiting! With a steady target try to resist the temptation of taking as many shots as possible. Yes it pays to have more pictures than you'll ever need, but for a good amount of portraiture it's best to wait for those more unguarded moments of poise and expression.

The third rule

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One yawning, scratching, jumping, flying, fluffing or fighting shot can have more impact next to a write-up than dozens of images of your subject simply looking "as is."

Filling the frame and isolating your subject dead centre is generally the hallmark of a beginner, but by applying the rule of thirds* and thereby showing something of the animals environment, makes better copy for publishers these days. So try too for the professional touch.



*An artistic rule of thumb for dividing a picture equally into three, horizontally or vertically and placing the main subject to one of the thirds up or down, or to the left or right.

There's an unwritten rule in wildlife photography that's more a matter of etiquette than good photography, but no less important to a fellow photographer out in the field striving to get the best from a subject.

There's nothing more infuriating than taking the time and trouble of getting a pitch going, only to have it ruined by another photographer barging in for a "poaching" opportunity.



If you had to crawl a dozen yards or more to a subject like this, followed by a long wait only to end up with a few minutes of shooting time on account of another photographer pulling up next to you in their car with the engine still running, ask yourself how you'd feel after your quarry had suddenly bolted.

Wildlife photography isn't a paparazzi pastime or something done by its enthusiasts to attract dog-walkers and stampeding herds of tourists. The unwritten rule is simple enough for any decent person to follow: **kindly respect the interests of others, admire from afar or better still, find a subject of your own to work on.**

That said, not every subject needs to be photographed in isolation using the latest and best equipment. Insects, flowers, nest sites, burrow entrances as well as less reactive animals like sitting ducks, spiders, newts and snails etc are always good to go with a "grab shot". They're also ideal for anyone interested in wildlife to get started with some photography.

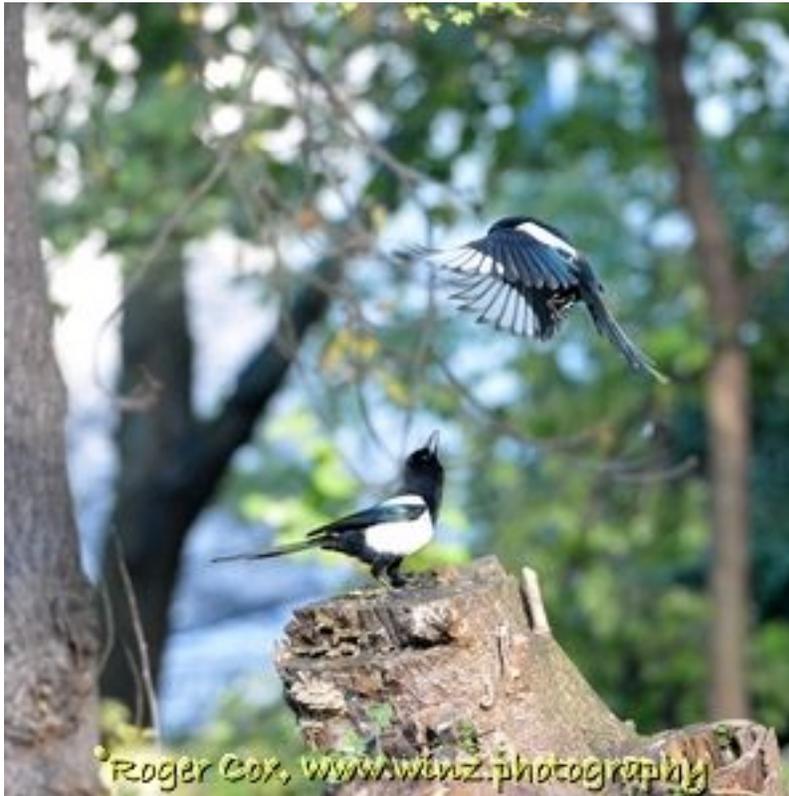
Common toad



Taken with a Microsoft Lumia 640 LTE Smartphone!

As high as your aspirations may be, the key to becoming a dedicated wildlife photographer isn't in being more mercenary or by turning every assignment into a do-or-die glory hunt but by keeping things in perspective. So learn to accept dry periods as well as missed magic moments along with problems from people, pets and pests; bad light; bad weather; equipment failure and the best teacher of all, your own silly mistakes!

Wildlife wouldn't be wildlife if it was ever happy to see you coming or stay put once it's learned that you're near by. For the most part you're dealing with highly uncooperative, unpredictable subjects situated in places often hazardous to your *wellbeing (see p.13). So work carefully and patiently, if not long term with certain subjects and only then with your own safety in mind.



Few people ever make it to become full-time professionals in this field let alone get rich by it. So what should your motivation be for taking it up and sticking with it in the first place? If you value nature and love wildlife then putting in the time to brave the elements is a small price to pay to see and capture some of the most amazing wonders. There's also the satisfaction of being able to share some of

your more remarkable moments with those who can appreciate your endeavours with the same degree of interest. As rare and as fascinating as those moments may be the important thing is to never give up on trying to capture them. The fortunes of photography are such that no matter how many times you miss a great shot there are always more to be had than lost. The key to your enjoyment and success is to simply persevere until you're not only a better person for it, but hopefully a better wildlife photographer too.

*Thankfully the UK has a very short list of dangerous wild animals and plants to photograph. Speaking from experience, never get too close to nesting swans, or any nesting bird for that matter! The same goes for wild horses, deer and wild boar especially during their breeding and birthing seasons. When out in the field it's always a good idea to carry a few plasters and some disinfectant. Lone, dead-of-night working is not recommended. The same goes for shooting in bogs, mud banks and in extreme weather conditions. Avoid hiding-up at ground level near ant colonies or in places known to be inhabited by adders, ticks and processionary caterpillars. Always wear protective clothing around wasp nests, bee hives and around water courses with mosquitoes, leeches and those razor sharp reeds! Learn about the poison potential of plants like giant hogweed and certain fungal spores. Always be mindful of the disease factors from animal waste and carcasses. It goes beyond saying, but if you must eat out on a stake-out, always wash your hands first!

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