

Animal Photography Tips and Tricks

Wayne Bierbaum

I intend to give pointers on animal photography, then show some photos that I took at the Chesapeake Environmental Center and finally I'll show photos that pertain to points from the talk. The slides and photos will be put on the website.

Location, Location, Location is number one for getting unusual animals but I'll also try to show how to get close to backyard birds. Looking up locations for photos on flickr or asking fellow club members like Laurie Brice and Bill Miles can get you started on the trek for unusual birds.

First of all, I have to admit that I'm really boring as a photography partner. I tend to stand still for an incredible long time; I don't talk much and don't mind walking through a swamp. I also wear green or brown clothing and an old green baseball cap.

I take lots of hikes but most are for exercise and maybe a few photos. But when I do go on a photography walk I prefer to go into an area, observe and take photos and not disturb the animal's daily habits. I get up way before sunrise and take my time.

For taking a wildlife hike, I avoid wearing bright colors, having dangling strings or straps and I don't wear shiny jewelry. Animals are keenly sensitive to sudden movements, loud noise and bright objects. When I'm in a good spot I either stand still or move very slowly. They are also much attuned to eyes which is why I wear a cap.

Each individual animal also has a personal space and won't tolerate intrusion. It is fairly easy to see when the comfort level has been breached. They will fidget and look around for an escape route. But they get accustomed to certain activities and objects and if you follow a similar pattern you will also be tolerated. For example, by keeping to well traveled trails you may be allowed to get very close. Cars also may be more tolerated than a person on foot. Take a photo from inside the car before getting out.

How to get close and clear shots:

I follow the principle that birds can fly and it is better figure out where they want to be and beat them to that spot rather than to chase them.

In the spring, birds defend territory and call to mates. They frequently are in the open and return to the same spot, making photos fairly easy.

In the fall and the winter, the birds are looking for food and warmth and they tend to move through an area. It sometimes is hard to know where to wait for the birds. But there are tips to finding the best spot. Listen for sounds of feeding bird. The best feeding sounds are the small calls that a flock of feeding birds make to keep track of each other. The bird that has the funniest flocking sound is the Brown-capped Nuthatch. They sound exactly like a puppy's squeak toy.

Resident birds will give grief to the migratory species. Titmouse, Chickadees and wrens are good complainers that can lead you to more unusual species. But crows are my favorite complainers. Many of the owls I have seen have been due to crows pointing them out. Crows are also the sworn enemy of Red-shouldered Hawks.

Knowing where the food sources are is very important.

On cold days, many animals will feed or just warm-up in sunlit spots.

I always attempt to take photos of animals at eye level and to get a sharp focus of their eye. I also try to plan on getting the best lighting. That is why, when I find a spot that seems good I will move to put an animal into the best lighting and stick with the spot for a while. In Florida, I'll put down a plastic bag on a mud flat and sit down waiting for the birds to come to me. If I stay still long enough, they will ignore me and feed at my feet.

Reptiles, amphibians and insects can be approached very closely by moving slowly directly at them. They are more alerted to thing moving across their visual field than directly at them. Extend your arm and use the live mode (LCD screen) or the central focus spot. The camera then will be hiding your eyes.

1. Camera settings for stationary shots.

For animals bird sized and larger, I like the background to be soft and blurred. That makes the subject stand out. For walking around, camera is set to Aperture Priority, ISO = 400 and the lens will be as wide open as comfortable. If it is overcast or I'm in dark woods, the ISO will be 800 or 1200.

In a bright setting, I will decrease the ISO before closing down the aperture.

The focus point is set to the central one. That way I know I can get the subjects eye in focus quickly. If the animal will hold still long enough then I will recompose (but usually I only get one chance on that perfect pose).

The camera's meter selection is central-weighted average metering. I've found that spot metering frequently doesn't work well and average metering makes the EV adjustments too necessary.

2. Camera settings for movement.

Birds in flight need to have shutter speeds 1/2000 or above to freeze movement. I usually try for 1/1000. Lower shutter speeds can be show a pleasing action effect. When using a slower shutter speed some part of the bird should be sharp enough to see what it is. Movements like running and foraging can still be blurred at 1/400 sec.

3. Adjusting the EV- .

There is nothing more disappointing than taking a photo of a bright yellow Goldfinch and finding you came back with a yellow burnt-out glob. A camera's light sensor will adjust the settings to make the picture equal to a neutral grey. If there is a large disparity between the lighting on the subject and the background then the sensor's EV needs to be adjusted. The way I remember how to do make the change is remember that the background has to be changed to how it looks. A bright sky will remain bright by turning the EV+ up by 1.5 to 2 stops. (The light sensor will make it dark grey.) A

bird on a branch in front of dark woods will be burnt out too bright. The EV needs to be turned down by 0.3 to 1.0 EV-.

Bracketing can help but it will be likely that you will miss the best shot trying to get three. Getting a shot that is slightly too dark is much more desirable than one that is blown out.