

My Approach to Animal Photograph

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First, I have to say that I prefer to photograph animals in a natural setting (even with native vegetation). Of course, that isn't always possible but that is one of my goals. I spend a lot of times outdoors and try to learn the habits and whereabouts of the animals I am seeking. The longer you are out and being observant, the more opportunities there will be.

Next, I try to have the subject come to me rather than chasing. I can then choose the lighting, background and maybe the pose. I will wait over an hour for bird to come back to a frequently used perch and not go running all over as the bird gets more and more nervous. I also like to intercept their path. Many birds will work down a tree line and I will wait for them to work their way to my spot. Move slowly in a quiet or deliberate manner.

I always start with my camera at my comfort setting (ISO-400, Aperture Priority f/5.6, Center weighted average metering, center spot focus, ALServo). From there I can change the settings, if needed, without looking away from the potential shot. I usually take a documentation shot of an unusual find and then try to adjust myself for a more artistic pose or background. I like using the telephoto lens as wide open as possible to remove distracting background.

I prefer photos that are at eye level with the animal. Frequently that involves getting a little messy. So, I also prepare for that by bringing extra clothing or snow pants and plastic sheets to sit or lay on.

Birds in flight are difficult. I like to use Canon 400 f/5.6 lens for its light weight and rapid sharp focus, spot metering and servo-focus. I always pre-focus to where I think the best shot will be.

Equipment:

A wide brimmed hat that will my head look less human.

Appropriate colored clothing as birds have color vision and evidently infrared too.

Water-pooof boots.

Insect wipes and wet wipes to prevent the insect repellent from ruining the camera.

A macro lens, wide-angle lens and a telephoto lens.

A tripod. I would like to not have to use a tripod but I recognize that I can't hold still enough for sharp photos in low light. The rule for a hand-held shutter speed is 1/focal length. A 500mm lens is best hand held at 1/500 or faster (IS can bring that down)

When I go out for a half-day wildlife shoot, I like to plan ahead. I will go to one location at high tide and another when the tide is low. I research what animals are around and try to predict what will be out and where. I try to get to the location thirty minutes before dawn. Almost all of the action and activity occurs in the two hours around sunrise and the hour around sunset.

I try to keep alert to what is going on around. What are the crows yelling at? I find owls, hawks, foxes and eagles by listening to the crows. Why did the Dunlins suddenly flush? They are a favorite target for Peregrine Falcons and will see them long before we can. I listen to the birds singing and try to ID them. Cuckoos, Tanagers and Orioles stay in the canopy can be located by their voice.

But I also keep my camera with me at all times in case...

Canoeing with a camera is really hard because the boat is almost constantly moving. I secure the camera on a tripod that is in turn bungeed to the canoe. I only go out in calm weather and keep away from open water. Some birds are really afraid of the canoe and some ignore it. The close to the water photos can be really dramatic and worth the risk.

Locations:

Kenelworth Aquatic Gardens: Beautiful flowers (lotus), Night Herons, Orioles, flycatchers. Late Spring and Summer

Bombay Hook NWR: Foxes, Harriers, ducks – year round, Avocets, stilts, unusual sparrows, Bobolinks, grosbeaks and buntings. Year round

Blackwater NWR: The best spot for year round eagles, geese, ducks and early migrating Swans (Feb-March), Delmarva Fox Squirrels, Great Blue Herons. Year Round but winter is best.

Conowingo Dam: High concentrations of Eagles in October and November. Crowded Pawtuxent NWR: Red-headed Woodpeckers, Owls, ducks, Trumpeter Swan, swallows and sparrows. Winter and spring

Jug Bay: Osprey, eagles, migrating ducks, tanagers, and warblers (Prothonotary Warbler nesting area). Early spring to early summer.

Chesapeake Bay Environmental Center: Owls, ducks, eagles, Brown-headed Nuthatch! Late winter and early spring.

Barneгат Lighthouse: Unusual ducks (Harlequin) and loons. Mid winter.

Kent Narrows: Ducks in the mid-winter. Go when the Chesapeake Bay is icing over.