

Tips on how to photograph wildlife

If you enjoy wildlife and travel, then natural history photography can be a hobby where you can spend hours observing the habits of animals and birds with the bonus of capturing them on film.

To take competent pictures of wildlife, I would recommend that you need at least a 200mm or 300mm lens, and a camera which has a fast and quiet shutter mechanism. For close-up work such as butterflies, insects and flowers, you will require a lens with a macro facility. I have personally found that the depth of field available on these Macro lenses is difficult to judge, so over the last few years, the combination of a 24mm wide angle lens (f2.8), attached to a 1.4 converter, produced for me perfect close-up shots without a depth of field problem, and with faster shutter speeds.

Wide angle lenses are also useful for taking pictures of flowers and fungi in their natural environment. By focusing on the subject in the foreground, you can also show the environment in which the plant lives as a back drop. This is successful with plants growing on the side of mountains or fungi in woodlands.

I would strongly recommend you mount your camera onto a tripod or in some cases such as photographing butterflies a monopod, which will help to eliminate camera shake.

Another valuable piece of equipment is a flash unit which is compatible to your camera and also, a slave unit which can be triggered off at a distance. Even in daylight situations, it is sometimes advisable to use "fill-in" flash which can bring out feather detail and also provide a catch light in the animal or birds eye, which certainly brings the creature to life in a transparency.

When taking photographs where the subject is against the sky, by using a polarising filter, you can darken the sky and in some instances, provide stronger colours in the slide. This filter can also eliminate bright highlights on water or shiny leaves especially when taking pictures of dragonflies or frogs on lily pads or reeds.

Since most creatures in this country are nervous when being approached by human beings, one of the most successful way of taking photographs is from inside a hide. These can be obtained in several forms some made from camouflage material, or can be easily made to your own specification.

You can purchase camouflage netting in both plastic and string construction, although in windy conditions, the plastic netting tends to make more noise.

To gain experience when you take natural history subjects, you can visit zoos, parks and wildlife conservation areas such as Slimbridge, Formby and Butterfly Farms, where the wildlife are easier to find.

Over the last few years, I have found that it is advisable to choose one subject such as a robin and spend some time researching in books or films where this bird lives, feeds and breeds. I have then spent several weeks either setting up canvas hides or building natural hides, from which I can firstly observe the bird and make sure that there is no distracting elements either in the background or foreground before taking any pictures. It is important that you ensure that the subject is the right distance from the camera and that the natural sunlight is on the front side of the bird.

With the use of camouflage netting, you can successfully take photographs from your car window. You do this with the aid of a bean bag which is placed on the wound down window glass and by supporting your camera on the bean bag and pointing it through the netting, which is draped over the side of the car and window aperture.

It is important that you choose a film which will produce for you good sharp images in natural colours. In the market today there is a wide range of 35mm colour transparency film in different speeds. I personally use Fuji 100asa colour film, which I buy processed paid. In some stores, if you buy quantities of 10 or more, they will discount this film.

To obtain colour prints from the above, I use a laboratory which produce hand prints in Cibachrome and find that they will follow your instructions if you want your prints darker or lighter than the original transparency and can also hold back certain areas which are not to your liking.

In some instances where you use a tele-photo lens, say a 100 to 300mm, this will give you the added benefit of being able to determine the size of your subject in the picture frame.

For some wild life, you will require a special license to take photographs, particularly Schedule I birds. You usually find that the protection covers only the nesting site and you will be allowed to photograph the bird away from its nest.

In all instances, you must not disturb the bird at the nest as this will result in the young being deserted.

Even if you remove foliage from around a nest, this can make the nest more open to being predated.

By setting up and baiting posts or branches, you can entice wild life into a preselected situation. This allows you to make sure that the backgrounds are unobtrusive.

There are several methods by which this can be achieved.

1. By positioning behind the post a container which has either been stapled or pinned out of sight of the camera and filled with the subjects food.

2. By drilling the post and pushing into the holes, such things as peanuts or suet, again making certain the holes are not visible to the camera.

3. Where the bird feeds such as on teasels, or small flower heads, you can thread peanuts onto a needle and then push the needle into the back of the plant.

4. You can also place a feeder tray under branches, which will attract the birds into the area and hopefully, you can photograph them as they come into feed.

5. For species such as a kingfisher, by observing where they catch their food, you can place a selected branch into this area which the birds will adopt and fish from. There is another advantage by setting up branches or perches, in that you can pre-focus onto the branch before the bird arrives and also, you can compose your picture before taking the final photograph.

It is also important that when using hides, to ensure that you are comfortable and have all your camera equipment available, as you will not want to keep coming in and out of the hide which could distract the creature you are hoping to photograph.

In some instances where the creature is particularly sensitive, you will find that if two people set up the hide and one person walks away, this sometimes fools the creature into thinking that the danger is passed. It is important to keep as quiet and still as you can while taking photographs and do not move your lens in and out of the hide windows. Although noise particularly disturbs birds, I have found that flash does not.

I have listed below some foods which seem to be very effective in attracting certain birds and wild life:

Seeds such as sunflower, niger, corn, breadcrumbs and cheese are particularly good for bringing in finches, robins, sparrows and some members of the tit family.

Worms, maggots and casters attract in wrens, woodpecker, robins, wagtails, blackbirds and thrush. These also attract in wading birds such as moorhens, water rail and coot.

Peanuts and acorns attract in finches, woodpecker, pigeon, doves, jays and magpies.

There are special foods such as mincemeat, dead mice or day old chicks which will entice in owls and birds of prey.