

7 Tips for Making Your Wildlife Images Even Better

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1) Know your equipment.

Do you know how high you can push your ISO? If not, this is something you'll want to experiment with *before* you're in the field trying to get the shot of a lifetime.

You should also know how to change your focus points, shutter speed, ISO and aperture **without taking your eye from the viewfinder**. Once operating your equipment becomes second nature you'll be busy taking photos instead of trying to figure out your settings.

2) Know your subject.

The better you know your subject the greater the chances of being able to anticipate action. Some examples are how Sandhill Cranes lean before the takeoff run or how eagles defecate before liftoff. Other behavior may be more subtle. The best way to learn it is to spend time observing the animals/birds so that you understand what they do; why they do it and when to expect that they'll do it. [See Tip #6]

3) Background. Background. Background.

Of course I recognize that with wildlife photography you don't always have a choice about what's in the background. The animals are where they are. But sometimes a slight shift in your position can make a really big difference and eliminate bright spots or other distracting elements in the background. The important point is not to be so focused on your subject that you forget to look for what's behind it that might distract viewers from the animal's awesomeness.

4) Try different focal lengths.

So often we get caught in the long-lens-fill-the-frame mode of bird and wildlife photography that we forget to think about trying other options. But when applicable, give a shorter lens a shot in order to show more of the animal's environment. You might create what I call "animalscapes." Conversely, add a teleconverter and get REALLY close to show lots of usually unnoticed details, e.g., perhaps a single eye, a portion of a feather, etc.

5) Level with me.

Look for opportunities to photograph your subjects from unique perspectives. One I especially love is to get on your subject’s level. Images shot at ground level lend an intimate feel to an image, especially ground-dwelling creatures. Getting eye level with flying birds – or, even better, getting *above* them! – creates a really different perspective.

6) Patience, Grasshopper.

You already know it, but I’ll say it again: wildlife photography involves a lot of patience. So many give up too soon and leave before they get the best shots. The chances of something interesting happening at the moment you arrive on the scene are pretty slim. You’re going to have to wait for it. I spend a lot of time watching jaguars and pumas sleep. Eventually they will get up and do something, I promise! But first I usually have to get hot and sticky and thirsty, but the shot-worth-waiting for is a great payoff (so too is that shower!).

7) Don’t forget to enjoy the experience.

Okay, so maybe this tip won’t improve your images, but for me it’s still an important one. Even though I do this for a living I am still able to just kick back and enjoy the wildlife and the photography. Don’t let yourself get so caught up in technical details, composition, getting the perfect shot, etc., etc., that you miss out on the *experience*. We’re incredibly privileged to be able to observe our wild neighbors and travel to exotic destinations. Every now and then consider setting the camera down and just soaking it all in with a grin.

Award-winning nature & wildlife photographer, Jeff Parker, leads photo tours & workshops for the naturally curious. Explore in Focus with him in Costa Rica, Ecuador, Patagonia, Colombia, the Pantanal, Europe, Texas, and the American West.

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