A FREE FIELD GUIDE by FOCUSED ON WILDLIFE

Wildlife Photography

Practical skills for creating stronger images of wild animals, from first light to final edit

Light • Settings • Focus • Composition • Hides • Cold weather • Ethics • Gear • Editing

Welcome

Wildlife photography rewards patience more than almost any other genre. The best images rarely come from the most expensive lens or the luckiest encounter. They come from understanding an animal, reading the light and being in the right place with the right settings when something happens.

This guide brings together the fundamentals we teach on our photography tours: how to prepare, how to set up your camera, how to compose with intent, how to behave around wildlife and how to get the most from your images afterwards. It is written for beginners and improving photographers alike, and every chapter includes ideas you can practise this week, close to home.

You can read the guide from start to finish or dip into the chapters that matter most to you. Each one ends with a short list of key points, and the final chapter collects checklists and practice exercises to help you put it all into action.

Above all, remember that the welfare of the animal always comes before the photograph. Ethical, patient photography is not only the right way to work, but it also produces the most natural and rewarding images.

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CHAPTER 1

Think Like a Naturalist First

The photographers who consistently make compelling wildlife images are rarely the ones with the biggest lenses. They are the ones who understand their subjects. Before you worry about shutter speeds or autofocus modes, the most valuable skill you can build is the ability to read an animal: what it wants, what it fears, where it will go next and how it will behave when the light changes.

This chapter is about developing that understanding. It is the foundation on which every other technical and creative decision in this guide rests, and it is the quickest route to better pictures, because it puts you in the right place at the right time with a camera that is already ready.

Observation before photography

It is tempting to start shooting the moment an animal appears. Resist that urge for a few minutes. Watch what the animal is doing and let your eyes, not your camera, do the work. Is it feeding, resting, grooming, scanning for danger, patrolling a territory, calling, or interacting with others? Each activity produces a different kind of image and each has its own rhythm.

Spend time noticing the small things. Where does the animal look before it moves? How does its posture change when it is relaxed compared with when it is alert? Does it return to the same perch, the same rock, the same track? Wildlife is far more predictable than it first appears, and the patterns you notice in the first twenty minutes will often repeat several times during a session.

- **Feeding:** look for the repeated movements that reveal where the animal will go next, such as the line a fox takes along a ridge or the stretch of water an otter works.
- **Resting:** sleeping or dozing animals give you time to refine composition, though the most interesting moments often come as they wake and stretch.
- **Grooming:** a relaxed, unhurried behaviour that produces intimate, characterful frames.
- **Alert or wary:** raised heads, tensed bodies and ears turned in one direction suggest something is about to happen, and it is usually worth having the camera up.
- **Social interaction:** play, courtship, parenting and conflict all create emotional images, but they unfold quickly and need you to be ready.

Learn the biology of your subject

A little natural history goes a very long way. Knowing what an animal eats, when it breeds, how far it ranges and when it is most active lets you predict where it will be. A photographer who knows that a species feeds at dawn and dusk will plan their day around those windows. One who knows when young are born or when the rut begins will visit at the time the behaviour is at its peak.

You do not need to become a biologist. A few good field guides, a reputable conservation organisation's website, and a conversation with a local guide or ranger will teach you most of what you need. Ask

specific questions. Where do the animals tend to appear? What time of day is best? What disturbs them? What have you seen them do recently?

- **Diet:** it tells you where an animal will be and what it will be doing when you find it.
- **Daily rhythm:** many species are most active in the first and last hours of light, which is also when the light is best.
- **Seasonal cycle:** breeding, migration, moulting and hibernation all change what is photographically possible at any given time of year.
- **Territory and home range:** animals that defend a territory tend to patrol it on predictable routes.
- **Signs of stress:** learning what disturbance looks like helps you recognise when to back away.

> **Try this:** Choose a species near your home, such as a garden bird, a squirrel or a duck on a local pond. Spend an hour watching it without a camera and write down five behaviours that repeat. The next time you visit, photograph those behaviours. You will be surprised how much easier it is when you know what is coming.

Fieldcraft: becoming part of the landscape

Good fieldcraft is the practice of moving through wild places without alarming the animals that live there. It is partly common sense and partly skill built through experience. The aim is to become a calm, predictable presence rather than a threat, so that animals carry on with their natural behaviour while you work.

- **Move slowly and deliberately.** Sudden movements, especially of the arms and head, are read as danger by most species.
- **Mind the wind.** Many mammals detect scent long before they see you, so approach from downwind whenever you can.
- **Use cover.** Hedges, rocks, vehicles and terrain features break up your outline and make you less noticeable.
- **Stay low.** A smaller silhouette seems less threatening, and a lower camera position often improves the picture as well.
- **Avoid direct eye contact and head-on approaches.** A curved approach path feels less like stalking than walking straight towards an animal.
- **Wear muted colours** and avoid noisy fabrics, loud zips and shiny objects.
- **Be patient and let the animal decide.** If it approaches you, that is far better than any image you could get by chasing it.

Reading body language

Every wild animal communicates its mood through posture and movement. Learning to read these signals serves two purposes. It keeps you and the animal safe, and it helps you anticipate behaviour so you can capture it as it happens rather than a fraction of a second too late.

A bird that crouches and looks around often takes off within moments, so be ready with a fast shutter speed. A mammal that lifts its head and freezes has seen or heard something, and you should stay still until it relaxes. Animals that yawn, stretch or groom are usually comfortable with your presence. When an animal changes its behaviour because of you, such as stopping feeding, staring at you or moving away, you are too close and should back off slowly.

Use local knowledge

Local guides, hosts and rangers spend hundreds of days a year in the places you may visit only once. They know where animals tend to appear at different times of year, how the weather and tides affect behaviour, which tracks and viewpoints work in which conditions and, often, the individual animals. This knowledge shortens the learning curve dramatically.

Treat guides as collaborators. Tell them what you want to photograph, ask for their advice about timing and positioning, and follow their instructions about distance and behaviour. They are invested in the long-term welfare of the animals in their area, and their guidance protects both the wildlife and the access that makes photography possible.

Keep field notes

A simple notebook or the notes app on your phone becomes one of the most useful tools you own. After each outing, record what you saw, what the light and weather were doing, what behaviour took place and what you would do differently. Over a season, these notes reveal patterns that you would otherwise forget, and they help you decide where to go and when.

- Date, time and location
- Weather, wind direction and light conditions
- Species and behaviours observed
- What worked and what did not, in both technique and approach
- Ideas for next time

Patience is a skill

Wildlife photography involves a lot of waiting. Some of the best moments arrive after long periods of nothing happening. Instead of treating that time as wasted, use it. Watch the light. Refine your composition. Check your settings. Observe how the animals around you behave when they believe nobody is watching. Patience is not simply the willingness to wait. It is the ability to stay alert and ready while you do.

Over time you will find that the waiting becomes part of the enjoyment. The quiet hours teach you more about the animals and the landscape than any amount of reading, and they make the moments when something finally happens all the more rewarding.

Key points to remember

- Observe first and shoot second. Behaviour you understand is behaviour you can anticipate.
- A little natural history knowledge dramatically improves your chances of good images.
- Good fieldcraft keeps animals relaxed and gives you more natural pictures.
- Learn to read body language, and back away when an animal shows signs of stress.
- Make the most of local expertise, and keep notes so your experience builds on itself.

CHAPTER 2

Understanding Light

Light is the raw material of photography. A great subject in dull, flat light will often produce a forgettable image, while an ordinary subject in beautiful light can become something special. For wildlife photographers, who rarely have control over where an animal appears, learning to recognise and use good light is one of the most useful skills you can develop.

This chapter explains the different qualities of natural light, how they affect your images and how to plan your days around them. You cannot change the sun, but you can choose when and where to be, and you can learn to make the most of whatever conditions you are given.

The golden hours

The first and last hour or two of daylight, often called the golden hours, produce a soft, warm, low-angled light that flatters almost any subject. The long shadows add shape and texture, the warm colour tones bring out the richness in fur and feathers and the low angle allows light to reach your subject from the side or behind, creating depth and atmosphere.

These periods are also the times when many animals are most active. Dawn and dusk are the traditional feeding times for a wide range of species, which is why experienced wildlife photographers build their days around them. If you only have limited time in the field, early morning and late afternoon should be where you spend it.

- Be in position before the light arrives, not as it begins. The best light is often fleeting.
- Pay attention to how quickly the light changes. In the first few minutes of sunrise the colour and intensity can shift dramatically.
- Do not leave the moment the sun drops below the horizon. The soft glow afterwards, known as the blue hour, can produce beautiful, moody images.

Direction of light

The direction from which light falls on your subject is just as important as its quality. The same animal can look completely different depending on where the sun is relative to you.

Front light

When the sun is behind you and shines directly onto your subject, you get even illumination, strong colour and bright catchlights in the eyes. It is the easiest light to expose and works well for clean portraits, but it can look flat because it reduces shadow and texture.

Side light

When the light comes from one side, it picks out the texture of fur, feathers and skin and gives the subject a three-dimensional appearance. Side light is often the most flattering for wildlife, and the low sun at the start and end of the day gives you plenty of opportunities to use it.

Backlight

When the sun is behind your subject, you can create glowing rim light around fur or feathers, dramatic silhouettes and atmospheric scenes lit by dust, mist, breath or water spray. Backlight is more challenging to expose, because the camera may be fooled by the bright background, but the results can be among the most striking of all. Use a lens hood, watch for flare and consider adding exposure compensation to keep detail in the subject.

> **Try this:** Find a subject, even a garden bird or a pet, and photograph it with the light coming from the front, the side and behind. Compare the results. Understanding how light direction changes the mood of an image is easier when you see it side by side.

Overcast days

Many photographers dislike cloudy weather, but overcast skies produce a soft, even light that can be very flattering. Clouds work like a giant diffuser, removing harsh shadows and bringing out rich, saturated colours. This kind of light suits animals with fine detail or subtle colouring, such as owls, deer and big cats, and it is excellent in forests where bright patches of sunlight create confusing contrast.

The main drawback is the sky. A bright, featureless grey or white sky can easily overexpose or distract from your subject, so it is usually best to keep it out of the frame or minimise it. Shoot at a lower angle or fill the frame with the animal and its surroundings.

Harsh midday sun

High, bright sun produces strong contrast, dark shadows under the brows and chins of animals, and highlights that burn out easily. It is generally the least rewarding time for wildlife photography, and it is also when many animals rest. This is your opportunity to take a break, review and back up your images, eat, hydrate and rest before the afternoon.

That said, midday light is not useless. Subjects in open shade can look lovely, reflections on water are often at their brightest and animals that wade or swim can produce dramatic images with sparkling highlights. Learn to work with the conditions rather than against them.

Working with weather

Weather transforms light, and difficult conditions often produce the most memorable images. Mist and fog soften backgrounds and create mood. Rain adds texture and reflection. Storm light, when sun breaks through dark clouds, can be dramatic and glowing. Snow reflects light from below, filling shadows and brightening the whole scene.

- **Mist and fog:** simplify busy backgrounds and add atmosphere. Expose carefully, because it can fool the meter.
- **Rain and drizzle:** create texture and mood, and animals often remain active. Protect your gear.
- **Storm light:** brief and unpredictable, so be ready and have your settings prepared.
- **Frost and low cloud:** soften colours and produce a quiet, graphic look.
- **Snow:** reflects light everywhere and requires careful exposure to keep whites clean without losing detail.

The quality of winter light

At high latitudes, winter brings a low sun that barely climbs above the horizon. This produces extended periods of warm, angled light that can last for hours rather than minutes. Combined with snow and ice, which reflect and amplify the light, the conditions can be extraordinary. The trade-off is limited daylight and cold, so planning and preparation are important.

Reading and planning for light

Good wildlife photographers plan around light as much as around animals. Before you go out, check the sunrise and sunset times, the direction of the sun and the weather forecast. Free apps and websites show exactly where the sun will rise and set at your location and when the golden hours begin and end.

Think about where the light will fall on the places you intend to photograph. A west-facing slope might glow beautifully in the evening but sit in shadow in the morning. A hide that looks across a lake might have the sun behind you at dawn and in your lens at dusk. Understanding this in advance lets you choose the right location for the right time of day.

Exposure and light

Light and exposure are closely linked. In bright or high-contrast conditions, your camera can struggle to hold detail in both highlights and shadows. Use your histogram to check that you are not clipping important areas, and consider shooting slightly underexposed to protect highlights, since you can lift shadows more cleanly in editing than you can recover blown whites.

- Check the histogram, not just the screen preview, because the screen can look different in bright sunlight.
- Use exposure compensation to adjust for very bright or very dark subjects.
- Shoot RAW, which keeps far more information in highlights and shadows.
- Consider using spot or centre-weighted metering when the subject is much brighter or darker than its surroundings.

Key points to remember

- The golden hours give warm, directional light and often the most active animals.
- Side light and backlight add depth and drama, while front light is simple and clean.

- Overcast skies provide soft, even light that is excellent for detail and colour.
- Use midday to rest and review, or look for shade and reflections.
- Plan around the sun, check the forecast and be in position before the light arrives.

CHAPTER 3

Camera Settings That Work in the Field

Wildlife rarely waits for you to adjust your camera. An animal can appear, perform and disappear in seconds, so the settings you start with matter enormously. The aim of this chapter is to give you a reliable foundation: a set of starting points you can apply quickly in most situations, along with an understanding of why they work, so that you can adapt them intelligently when conditions change.

There is no single perfect setup. Cameras, lenses and subjects vary. Treat the suggestions here as a starting point, then practise until adjusting them becomes second nature.

Shoot RAW

If you take only one piece of advice from this chapter, make it this: shoot RAW. A RAW file records far more information than a JPEG, giving you much greater flexibility to recover highlights, lift shadows, correct white balance and reduce noise. For wildlife photography, where light is rarely perfect and you cannot ask the subject to repeat the moment, that flexibility is invaluable.

RAW files are larger, so you will need fast, high-capacity memory cards and more storage space. Both are worthwhile investments. If your camera offers it, you can record RAW and JPEG together, which gives you quick-to-share files alongside your high-quality originals.

Choosing a shooting mode

The right mode is the one you can control quickly and consistently. Many wildlife photographers settle on one of three approaches.

- **Aperture priority with auto ISO.** You choose the aperture and a minimum shutter speed, and the camera adjusts ISO to keep the exposure right. This is a reliable and forgiving approach that works well for beginners and experts alike.
- **Manual with auto ISO.** You set both aperture and shutter speed, and the camera varies ISO to balance the exposure. You keep full control of motion and depth of field while the camera handles changing light.
- **Shutter priority.** You choose the shutter speed and the camera selects the aperture. It is useful when freezing or blurring motion is your main concern, although you give up control of depth of field.

Whichever you choose, use exposure compensation to fine-tune the result. Check your histogram regularly and adjust as the light changes.

Shutter speed: freezing or conveying motion

Shutter speed determines how motion is rendered. It is also the single most common reason wildlife images are soft. Two things can blur a picture: movement of the subject and movement of the camera. A fast enough shutter speed handles both.

As a general guide when handholding a lens, your shutter speed should be at least one over the focal length, so a 400mm lens needs about 1/400 s. Image stabilisation helps with camera movement but does nothing to freeze a moving subject, so you must still choose a shutter speed that suits the action.

- **Resting or slow-moving animals:** around 1/500 s, or faster if you are handholding a long lens.
- **Walking or feeding mammals:** 1/800 to 1/1250 s.
- **Running animals and birds taking off:** 1/1600 to 1/3200 s.
- **Birds in flight:** 1/2000 s or faster, and faster still for small, quick species.
- **Creative motion blur and panning:** 1/30 to 1/250 s, depending on the speed of the subject.

When in doubt, choose a faster shutter speed. A slightly higher ISO is far preferable to a blurred picture.

Aperture: controlling depth of field

Aperture controls how much of the scene is in focus. A wide aperture, such as f/4 or f/5.6, creates a shallow depth of field that separates the subject from the background and produces a soft, creamy blur. A narrower aperture, such as f/8 or f/11, brings more of the scene into focus.

- **Wide apertures (f/2.8 to f/5.6):** best for isolating a single animal, working in low light and creating smooth backgrounds.
- **Middle apertures (f/6.3 to f/8):** useful when you need a little more depth of field, for example with several animals at different distances or when you want sharper edge-to-edge performance.
- **Narrow apertures (f/9 to f/16):** best for landscapes and habitat images where you want detail throughout the frame, although you will need light or a higher ISO.

Many lenses are sharpest one or two stops down from wide open, so f/5.6 or f/6.3 can be a sweet spot. Remember that with a long telephoto lens, depth of field is already shallow, even at modest apertures, so be careful that the whole eye and head are in focus.

ISO: do not be afraid of it

ISO controls the sensitivity of your sensor, and higher values introduce more noise. In the past, photographers avoided high ISO settings at all costs. Today's cameras handle noise far better, and modern software can clean up what remains. A sharp image with some grain is always better than a clean, blurry one.

Use auto ISO with a sensible upper limit, perhaps 6400 or higher depending on your camera, and let it rise as the light falls. Take test shots at different ISO values in your own conditions so you know how much noise you can accept.

Exposure compensation and metering

Cameras aim to render the average scene as a middle tone. When your subject is much brighter or darker than that, the camera can misjudge the exposure. A white swan on a dark lake may look

underexposed, and a dark animal against a bright sky may be too dark. Exposure compensation lets you nudge the result in the right direction.

- Add positive compensation (+0.7 to +1.7) for bright scenes, such as snow, white birds and pale sand.
- Add negative compensation (-0.7 to -1.3) for very dark subjects or bright backgrounds that you do not want to burn out.
- Use evaluative or matrix metering for general work, and spot or centre-weighted metering when the subject and background differ greatly.
- Check your histogram. A graph pushed hard to the right has clipped highlights, and a graph pushed to the left has lost shadow detail.

White balance

If you shoot RAW, you can set the white balance later, but getting it close in camera makes review easier. Auto white balance is generally reliable. In unusual conditions, such as snow, blue-hour light or heavily tinted forest light, you can adjust it in editing. Avoid changing it constantly in the field, as consistency makes your later workflow faster.

Drive mode and burst shooting

Set your camera to continuous high-speed shooting for most wildlife work. Animal behaviour unfolds in fractions of a second, and the difference between a good frame and a great one can be a subtle change in head position or wing angle. Burst shooting gives you a sequence from which to choose.

Be selective, though. Holding the shutter down for long periods fills your cards, drains your batteries and creates a huge editing workload. Fire in short bursts timed to the action and learn to anticipate peak moments.

Silent and electronic shutter

Many modern mirrorless cameras offer a silent shutter. It is excellent for shy subjects and for working in hides, where mechanical noise can disturb animals. Be aware that electronic shutters can introduce distortion with very fast movement and banding under certain artificial lights, so test it before relying on it in critical situations.

Custom settings and saving time

Most cameras allow you to store favourite configurations that you can recall instantly. Consider setting up custom modes for different scenarios, for example one for birds in flight with a fast shutter speed and tracking autofocus, one for general mammals at moderate speeds and one for low-light work. Being able to switch between them in a moment saves precious seconds when something unexpected happens.

> **Starting point:** Aperture priority or manual mode, auto ISO with a maximum around 6400, aperture around f/5.6 to f/8, a minimum shutter speed of 1/1000 s, continuous autofocus and high-speed burst. Adjust from there depending on the subject and light.

Key points to remember

- Shoot RAW for maximum flexibility.
- Prioritise shutter speed to freeze the action, and accept higher ISO when needed.
- Use wide apertures to isolate subjects and narrower ones for more depth.
- Use exposure compensation and the histogram to deal with bright or dark subjects.
- Set up custom modes so you can react quickly when the unexpected happens.

CHAPTER 4

Focus: Keeping Animals Sharp

Even a perfectly composed image fails if the eye is soft. Modern autofocus systems are remarkable, but they still need to be configured to suit the subject and the situation, and they still depend on your technique. This chapter explains how autofocus works, how to set it up for different kinds of wildlife and how to build habits that keep more of your pictures sharp.

Continuous autofocus

Single-shot autofocus locks onto a subject and stays there. That is fine for a perched bird that is not going anywhere, but wildlife rarely stays still for long. Continuous autofocus, called AF-C on many cameras and AI Servo on others, tracks a subject as it moves, constantly updating focus as the distance changes.

For almost all wildlife photography, continuous autofocus should be your default. Even with seemingly static subjects, animals often shift slightly, and continuous focus ensures you are sharp when they do. The small cost in battery life is well worth it.

Back-button focus

By default, most cameras focus when you half-press the shutter button. Back-button focus moves that function to a button on the rear of the camera, usually operated with the thumb. The shutter button then only takes the picture.

This separation brings real advantages. You can track a moving animal continuously with your thumb and press the shutter only when the moment arrives. You can stop tracking at any time, hold focus on a position and wait for the subject to enter it, and recompose without refocusing. Many professionals consider it essential, and although it feels strange for the first few days, it quickly becomes natural.

Choosing the focus area

Your camera lets you decide how much of the frame it uses to find focus. The best choice depends on the subject and the background.

- **Single point:** precise, and ideal for a stationary subject on a clean background, such as a bird perched on a branch. It requires you to place the point exactly on the eye.
- **Small zone or expanded point:** forgiving, with a small group of points that help hold focus if you drift off the subject slightly. A good all-round choice for moving subjects.
- **Wide zone or large area:** useful for fast, unpredictable subjects, such as birds in flight, especially against a clear sky.
- **Tracking or full-area modes:** the camera chooses and follows a subject using colour, pattern and movement. These work best when the subject stands out clearly from its surroundings.

Cluttered backgrounds can cause the system to lock on the wrong thing, such as reeds in front of an animal or branches around a bird. In these cases, a smaller focus area gives you more control.

Animal and eye detection

One of the biggest advances in recent years is subject detection. Many cameras can now recognise animals, birds and even specific parts of them, such as the eye, and lock onto them automatically. When it works well, it dramatically improves the proportion of sharp images, especially with erratic or fast-moving subjects.

It is not perfect. Detection can struggle with unusual species, animals partly hidden by vegetation, subjects in low contrast and situations where several animals overlap. Learn how your camera behaves in different conditions and be prepared to switch to a more manual approach when needed.

Focus on the eye

The eye is the emotional centre of a wildlife portrait. If it is sharp, viewers will forgive imperfections elsewhere. If it is soft, even a beautiful image rarely works. Aim your focus point at the eye closest to the camera, and remember that with a shallow depth of field, the head and body may fall away from sharpness if the animal is at an angle.

With a large animal facing you directly, both eyes may be in the plane of focus. As the animal turns, you may need to close the aperture a little to keep more of the face sharp.

Tracking moving subjects

Following a moving animal requires smooth technique as well as good settings. The goal is to keep the focus point on the subject while it moves, anticipating its path.

- Pick up the subject early, while it is still far away, so the autofocus has time to lock on.
- Keep your body relaxed and use your whole upper body to pan, rather than just your arms.
- Move your lens smoothly, matching the subject's speed. Jerky movements break tracking.
- Keep both eyes open if you can, so you can see the animal approaching and anticipate its direction.
- Fire in short bursts as the subject reaches the best position, and keep following through after the shot.

Birds in flight

Few subjects test your technique as much as birds in flight. They are small, fast and unpredictable. Success comes from preparation and practice.

- Use a fast shutter speed, ideally 1/2000 s or above.
- Choose a tracking mode or wide zone with subject detection if available.
- Try to start tracking while the bird is against a clean background, such as the sky.

- Practise with common, slower birds such as gulls, swans and herons before moving on to faster species.
- Anticipate take-off by watching posture. A bird that leans forward and crouches is about to go.

Focusing through obstructions

Reeds, branches and grass can easily draw focus away from your subject. A few approaches can help. Move to a position where the line of sight is clear, if it is possible without disturbing the animal. Use a wide aperture to blur foreground elements so they disappear. Switch to manual focus for a moment when the autofocus keeps hunting. Or simply wait. Animals move, and a clear view often appears.

Low light and low contrast

Autofocus relies on contrast, so it works less well in dim light, in fog or against featureless backgrounds. Open the aperture as wide as possible, raise the ISO to allow a faster shutter speed and choose a focus point on a high-contrast edge, such as the border of an eye. If the system still struggles, switch to manual focus and use focus magnification.

Manual focus and focus peaking

There are times when manual focus is best. When photographing through vegetation, when an animal is stationary in low light or when you want to pre-focus on a spot where you expect an animal to appear, manual focus offers control. Focus peaking, which highlights the sharpest edges on your screen, and focus magnification make it much easier in mirrorless cameras.

Common causes of soft images

- **Shutter speed too slow** for the movement of the subject or the camera.
- **Focus on the wrong point,** often the body or background instead of the eye.
- **Shallow depth of field,** where the eye is sharp but the rest of the head is soft.
- **Atmospheric haze or heat shimmer,** which can soften distant subjects regardless of equipment.
- **Camera shake,** from poor support or a heavy lens that you are not stabilising well.
- **Missed autofocus** because of low contrast, obstructions or poorly chosen settings.

> **Try this:** Practise tracking with everyday subjects: cars on a distant road, birds in a park or a dog running across a field. A hundred repetitions on easy subjects will give you the smooth technique you need when a rare moment arrives.

Key points to remember

- Use continuous autofocus as your default for wildlife.
- Consider back-button focus for greater control and flexibility.
- Match the focus area to the subject and background, and use subject detection when it helps.
- Prioritise the eye, and be aware of depth of field.

- Practise tracking on easy subjects so the movement becomes automatic.

CHAPTER 5

Composition and Storytelling

A technically perfect image of an animal is a record. A well-composed one is a story. Composition is how you arrange the elements within the frame to guide the viewer's eye, convey emotion and show something about the animal and its world. It is the difference between a photograph that documents what you saw and one that makes people feel what it was like to be there.

Good composition is not about following rules. It is about making deliberate choices. The ideas in this chapter are tools you can use, break or combine as the situation and your creative vision demand.

Start with the background

Beginners tend to focus entirely on the subject, but experienced photographers spend just as much time thinking about what is behind it. A distracting background, such as bright patches, branches growing out of an animal's head or clutter that competes for attention, can ruin an otherwise good image.

- Move a few steps left or right, or change your height, to alter what lines up behind the subject.
- Use a wide aperture and a long lens, and keep the subject well away from the background, to blur it into soft colour.
- Look for clean, even backgrounds such as water, sky, snow or out-of-focus foliage.
- Be aware of bright spots and hard edges, which draw the eye more strongly than the subject.
- Wait for the animal to move into a better position, rather than settling for a cluttered one.

Shoot at eye level

Photographing an animal from its own height creates intimacy and connection. Instead of looking down on the animal, the viewer sees the world from its perspective, and the eye contact feels more direct. Getting low also separates the subject from ground clutter and turns the foreground and background into smooth blur.

This often means lying on the ground, kneeling in the snow or sitting in a boat at water level. It is not always comfortable, but the improvement in your images can be dramatic. A beanbag, ground pod or low tripod makes it easier and steadier.

The rule of thirds and beyond

The rule of thirds, which divides the frame into a three-by-three grid and suggests placing key elements on the intersections or lines, is a good starting point. It gives you an easy way to avoid centring everything and often produces a more dynamic balance.

But do not treat it as law. A centred, symmetrical composition can be powerful, especially for a direct portrait or a reflection. A subject placed very small in a large, empty frame can convey isolation or scale. What matters is that your choice is deliberate and supports the mood you want.

Give the subject space

Leave room for an animal to move into. If it faces or walks to the right, place it left of centre and leave space on the right. This feels natural because it gives the animal somewhere to go. A subject placed too close to the edge it is facing creates tension and often looks cramped, though in the right situation that tension can be used deliberately.

Frame the wider scene

A tight portrait showing every feather or whisker has its place, but not every frame needs to be tight. Wider images that show an animal in its habitat, such as a fox crossing a snowfield, an elephant at a waterhole or a bird on a cliff, tell viewers where it lives and how it behaves. These environmental portraits are often the images people remember.

Try to capture a range of shots on every outing: close portraits, medium frames showing behaviour and wide scenes that put the animal in context. Together they form a complete visual story.

> **Try this:** Next time you have a cooperative subject, take a deliberate series: a tight portrait, a half-body image, a full-body shot and a wide environmental frame. Compare them later and notice which feels strongest and why.

Use leading lines and natural frames

Lines in the landscape, such as a river, a ridge, a track or a shoreline, can lead the viewer's eye towards your subject. Natural frames, such as overhanging branches, a gap in rocks or an arch of reeds, add depth and focus attention. Look for these elements as you work, and adjust your position to take advantage of them.

Foreground and depth

Images with layers of foreground, middle ground and background feel more three-dimensional. A blurred foreground of grass or snow can add atmosphere and make the viewer feel they are peering into a hidden world. Be careful that foreground elements do not hide the subject or distract from it.

Light, colour and mood

Composition is not only about shapes. Colour and light shape the emotional tone of an image. Warm golden light creates comfort and richness. Cool blue tones feel quiet and cold. Contrast between a dark animal and a bright background feels dramatic. A limited palette often gives a more harmonious and powerful picture than a busy mix of colours.

Notice how the colours of your subject interact with its surroundings. Brown fur against fresh snow, an orange fox against a green hillside or a white bird against dark water all create natural contrast that draws attention to the animal.

Think in sequences

The best wildlife photographers rarely look for a single perfect frame. They work a scene, building a series of images that tell a story. A sequence might show an animal approaching, a moment of interaction, a gesture or expression and then the aftermath.

Thinking in sequences changes how you shoot. You stay with an opportunity for longer, you vary your framing as the scene develops and you look for the beginning, middle and end of a moment. When you review your work, you can choose the strongest single image and also assemble a set that conveys a fuller narrative, which is especially valuable for portfolios, talks and publications.

Capture behaviour and emotion

Behaviour turns an animal portrait into a story. A yawn, a leap, a shake of the coat, a tender moment between parent and young or a stand-off between rivals all add life and meaning. These moments are rarely random. They follow patterns that you can learn, which is why observation, covered in the first chapter, is so closely tied to composition.

- Look for interaction between animals, which adds emotion and narrative.
- Watch for gestures and expressions such as stretching, calling and grooming.
- Be ready for transitions, such as an animal waking, taking off or turning to face you.
- Anticipate and keep shooting through the moment, because the best frame is often just after you expect it.

Simplify

Strong images are usually simple. Ask yourself what the picture is about and remove anything that does not support it. That might mean changing your position, using a longer lens, waiting for a cleaner moment or cropping later. A single clear subject with a clean background almost always beats a busy scene.

Break the rules on purpose

Once you understand the guidelines, experiment. Try silhouettes against a bright sky, slow shutter pans that turn a running animal into a streak of colour, high-key images in snow, low-key images in shadow and tight abstract crops of fur or feather patterns. Creative risks produce unusual images, and even failed experiments teach you something.

Key points to remember

- Pay as much attention to the background as to the subject.

- Shoot at eye level and give animals space to move into.
- Mix tight portraits with wide environmental images.
- Look for lines, frames, layers and colour relationships.
- Think in sequences and wait for behaviour and emotion.

CHAPTER 6

Working from a Hide

A well-placed hide is one of the most effective tools in wildlife photography. It lets you work close to shy or sensitive species without disturbing them, and it allows you to spend long periods in one place while animals go about their lives. Done properly, hide photography produces natural, intimate images of behaviour that would be almost impossible to capture otherwise.

It also demands a particular approach. Hides require preparation, patience and discipline, and the habits you build while using them will improve your photography everywhere else.

What a hide is for

A hide, sometimes called a blind, is a structure that conceals you from the animals you are watching. It may be a simple fabric tent, a wooden shed, a converted building or a purpose-built facility with windows and seating. Whatever its form, it serves the same purposes: it hides your shape and movement, it reduces your scent and noise and it gives you a stable, comfortable base from which to work.

Because animals do not see you as a threat, they behave naturally. That is the great value of a hide. You are not chasing or approaching. You are simply there, quietly watching, while the animals carry on.

Arrive early, leave late

The most important principle is to enter the hide before the animals are active, and to leave only after they have gone. Many species are most active at dawn and dusk, so this often means entering in darkness and leaving after nightfall. This way the animals never see you arriving or departing, and they associate the hide with nothing but safety.

It also means long days. Be prepared for hours of waiting, and bring everything you need in advance, because once you are in the hide you should not be going in and out.

- Food and plenty of water
- Warm layers, since you will be sitting still for long periods
- A comfortable cushion or seat pad
- Spare batteries and memory cards
- A flask of something hot in cold weather
- A small notebook or book to pass the time
- Discreet snacks that do not rustle

Silence and stillness

Animals are acutely sensitive to sound and movement. Keep conversation to a minimum and use a whisper when you must speak. Avoid rustling bags, clicking zips and noisy packaging. Silence your phone, and if possible turn off any beeps on your camera.

Move slowly and smoothly inside the hide. Avoid sudden gestures at the windows, and keep your lens withdrawn from openings until you need it. In a hide shared with others, agree on signals before you begin, so that you can communicate without noise.

Be ready before anything happens

Because hide sessions involve long waits followed by sudden action, preparation is everything. Before the session begins, check your batteries, format your memory cards, clean your lens and set up your camera so that you can start shooting immediately when an animal appears.

- Mount your camera and lens on a stable support, ready to use.
- Pre-set your exposure for the expected light, and check it regularly as conditions change.
- Choose an autofocus mode and area suited to the likely subjects.
- Have a second camera or lens ready if you want a wider perspective.
- Keep spare batteries and cards within easy reach.

Supporting your equipment

Long lenses are heavy, and you may hold them for hours. A good support improves sharpness and reduces fatigue. Many hides have window ledges that suit a beanbag, which is simple, quiet and stable. A gimbal head on a tripod lets you swing a large lens smoothly and hold it without effort, and a clamp or plate attached to a hide wall can work well in some situations.

Whatever you use, make sure it operates quietly and smoothly. Practise before you go, so that you are not fumbling with clamps and knobs when an animal arrives.

Position and angle

Where you sit in the hide affects the light, the background and the angle at which you photograph the animals. Think about where the sun will be at different times of day, and which window offers the best view. If there are several hides or windows, ask the host which works best in which conditions.

Eye-level views often come from low windows or a hide set at ground level. Ask your host or guide about the options, because the best hides are built with the photographer's perspective in mind.

Understanding behaviour in a hide

Animals that visit a hide regularly tend to follow patterns. They may arrive at similar times, use similar routes and favour particular perches. By observing these patterns, you can anticipate where and when they will appear, and pre-compose your images.

- Watch for what the animals do when they arrive. Do they pause, scan, then approach?
- Notice favourite perches and approach routes, and pre-focus or compose accordingly.
- Observe interactions between individuals, including dominance and tolerance.
- Be patient with shy species, which may take time to relax.

Working with other photographers

Hides are often shared, and good etiquette makes the experience better for everyone. Be considerate of others' space and views. Keep your gear organised, avoid blocking windows and refrain from sudden movements that might disturb the animals or your neighbours. Share information about what you see, and be generous with encouragement.

If the hide is crowded, agree on a rotation so that everyone gets a turn at the best positions. Small groups make this much easier, which is one of the reasons limited group sizes lead to better photography.

Dealing with long periods of waiting

Much of hide photography is waiting. Rather than becoming restless, use the time constructively. Watch how the light changes and think about how you would like to use it. Practise your framing on the scene in front of you. Review earlier images and think about improvements. Take notes. Often the quietest periods give you the most valuable insights.

And stay alert. Animals often appear without warning, and the moment you relax completely is often the moment something happens.

Ethical considerations

Hides should be used responsibly. Choose providers who do not bait or feed in a way that harms animals or changes their behaviour, and who maintain good standards for the welfare of the wildlife. Be honest about how an image was made when you share it, particularly if it involved supplementary food or a habituated animal. Respect the rules of the site and the guidance of the host.

> **Try this:** Spend a morning in a simple hide or even a parked car near a local water body or feeding area. Notice how much more natural the animals behave when they are not aware of you, and how much easier it is to anticipate their movements after a few hours.

Key points to remember

- Enter before dawn and stay until after dusk, so animals never see you arrive or leave.
- Stay quiet, still and prepared, with everything ready before the action starts.
- Use stable, quiet supports for long lenses.
- Observe patterns and anticipate behaviour.
- Behave considerately with other photographers, and support ethical operators.

CHAPTER 7

Photographing in Cold and Snow

Winter can deliver some of the most beautiful and atmospheric wildlife photography of the year. Snow simplifies backgrounds, low sun creates long golden light and animals stand out dramatically against a pale landscape. But the same conditions that make winter so special also challenge both you and your equipment. With the right preparation, cold-weather photography becomes not only manageable but deeply rewarding.

Protecting your batteries

Cold is hard on batteries. Chemical reactions slow down in low temperatures, so a battery that would last all day at home may be drained in a fraction of the time. The cells are not truly empty, though, and a battery that appears to have died in the cold will often recover once it is warmed.

- Carry spare batteries in an inside pocket close to your body, where they stay warm.
- Rotate batteries during the day, putting the cold one in a warm pocket and using a warm one.
- Keep your camera switched off when you are not shooting, and avoid reviewing images unnecessarily.
- Turn off Wi-Fi, Bluetooth and unneeded features to save power.
- Carry more spares than you think you need, and consider a power bank for emergencies.

Exposing for snow

Snow is one of the trickiest subjects to expose. Your camera's meter aims for a middle tone, so it tends to render bright white snow as grey, giving an underexposed image that looks dull and dim. The solution is to add positive exposure compensation.

- Start with +0.7 to +1.7 stops of exposure compensation in bright, snowy conditions.
- Check the histogram and aim to push the graph towards the right without clipping the highlights.
- Look for detail in the snow, such as texture and ripples, as a sign you have not overexposed.
- For a white animal on snow, protect the highlights carefully and keep detail in the fur.
- For a dark animal on snow, you may need less compensation so the subject is not underexposed.

Shooting RAW makes snow photography far more forgiving, since you can adjust exposure and recover highlight detail in editing. Tracking the histogram as the light changes helps you stay consistent.

Managing contrast

Snow scenes can have a huge range of brightness, from bright snow to a dark animal in shadow. This creates high contrast that cameras may struggle to capture in a single frame. Look for softer light, such

as overcast skies or the low light of early morning and late afternoon. If you must shoot in strong sun, consider the direction of light and how it affects the balance between the bright snow and the darker subject.

Dealing with condensation

One of the greatest risks to your gear is condensation. When you move from a cold outdoor environment into a warm room, moisture in the warm air condenses on cold surfaces, including the inside and outside of your camera and lens. This can fog optics, cause electrical problems and even lead to mould.

- Before going indoors, place your camera and lens in a sealed plastic bag or your camera bag and zip it closed.
- Leave everything sealed until it has reached room temperature, which can take an hour or more.
- Remove memory cards and batteries only once the gear has warmed up.
- Silica gel packs in your bag help absorb moisture.
- If you have a warm place such as a car, a gradual transition helps too.

Going the other way, from warm to cold, can also fog the lens, so let your gear acclimatise gradually where possible.

Protecting gear from snow and moisture

Snow melts on warm cameras and gets into places you would rather it did not. Using a rain cover or snow cover on your camera and lens helps keep moisture out. Wipe off snow before it melts, and avoid putting your camera on the ground. Keep a lens cloth and a soft brush or blower handy to deal with flakes and droplets, and consider a lens hood to keep snow off the front element.

Working with gloves

Operating a camera with gloves is a skill in itself. Thick gloves protect your hands but make it hard to press small buttons. Thin liner gloves allow better dexterity but offer less warmth. Many photographers wear thin gloves under a pair of warm mitts that can be pulled back when needed. Learn your camera's controls well enough to operate them by feel, and consider customising buttons so the most important ones are easy to find.

Keeping yourself warm

You make better pictures when you are comfortable. Cold hands and feet quickly sap concentration and enjoyment, and in extreme conditions they can become dangerous. Dress in layers so you can adjust as you work, and pay particular attention to your hands, feet, head and neck.

- **Base layer:** thermal and moisture-wicking, to keep sweat away from your skin.
- **Mid layer:** insulating fleece or down for warmth.

- **Outer layer:** windproof and waterproof, and large enough to fit over the others.
- **Hands:** liner gloves and warm mitts, plus spares in case they get wet.
- **Feet:** warm, waterproof boots and wool socks, with spare pairs.
- **Head and neck:** a warm hat, a neck gaiter and sunglasses to protect from snow glare.
- **Extras:** heat packs, a thermos with a hot drink and high-energy snacks.

Staying safe

Winter conditions can change quickly. Weather, ice, limited daylight and remote locations all bring risks. Follow the advice of your guides and local authorities, tell someone where you are going and when you expect to return, and carry the safety gear appropriate to your location. Be honest about your own limits, and do not push on in conditions that feel unsafe for the sake of a photograph.

Shooting in low sun and long shadows

The low winter sun that stays close to the horizon produces long, warm light that lasts for hours at high latitudes. This is a gift for photographers. Use it to add depth and texture, to rim-light animals with backlight and to create warm tones against the cool blues of snow and shade. Because the sun is always low, watch your lens for flare and use a hood.

Subjects and behaviour in winter

Animals behave differently in winter. Many conserve energy by moving less, feeding in concentrated periods and seeking shelter. Others become more visible, drawn to scarce food. Winter coats, such as the white fur of Arctic foxes and mountain hares, offer unique photographic opportunities, and tracks in the snow can reveal where animals have been and where they might go.

Breath that condenses in cold air can add atmosphere and drama to portraits, especially in backlight. The simplicity of a snowy background helps animals stand out cleanly.

Northern lights

At high latitudes, the long winter nights offer a chance to photograph the aurora. It requires a stable tripod, a wide-angle lens with a wide aperture, a long exposure of a few seconds to perhaps twenty, a high ISO and manual focus set to infinity. Check aurora forecasts and cloud cover, find a dark location away from artificial light and be ready to wait. A headlamp with a red light preserves your night vision.

> **Try this:** On your next cold day, practise your gear routine at home first. Put your camera in a bag, take it outside, shoot for twenty minutes, then return and let it warm up while sealed. Knowing the sequence makes it automatic when you are in the field.

Key points to remember

- Keep spare batteries warm and carry more than you think you need.
- Add positive exposure compensation for snow, and check the histogram.

- Seal your gear in a bag before moving into warmth to avoid condensation.
- Dress in layers, protect your extremities and stay safe.
- Use the low winter sun and the clean backgrounds that snow provides.

CHAPTER 8

Ethics and Fieldcraft

Wildlife photography is a privilege. We enter the lives of wild animals, often at moments when they are vulnerable, and ask them to carry on as though we were not there. That privilege carries a responsibility. The welfare of the animal and its habitat must always come before the photograph, however rare or valuable the shot might seem.

Ethical practice is not about restricting your photography. In fact it tends to improve it. Animals that feel safe behave naturally, and natural behaviour produces the most compelling images. This chapter outlines the principles that responsible wildlife photographers follow.

The guiding principle

The simplest ethical guide is this: put the animal first. If the shot you want would cause stress, disturb breeding, change feeding behaviour or put the animal or yourself at risk, do not take it. No photograph is worth harming a wild creature or its home.

Respect distance

Every species and every individual has its own comfort zone. The right distance varies with the animal, the season, the habitat and whether young are present. Your job is to recognise when you are approaching the limit and to stop before you cross it.

- Watch for signs of stress: alert postures, repeated glances at you, alarm calls, changes in feeding or resting, or moving away.
- If the animal changes its behaviour because of you, you are too close. Back off slowly and quietly.
- Use a longer lens rather than moving closer. It protects the animal and often improves the composition.
- Be extra cautious with young, nesting birds, den sites and animals in cold or exhausted conditions, when disturbance can have serious consequences.
- Follow any distance guidelines set by local authorities, reserves or tour operators.

Do not bait or feed

Baiting or feeding wild animals to attract them might seem harmless, but it can have serious effects. It can alter natural behaviour, create dependency on people, concentrate animals in unnatural numbers, spread disease, increase conflict with humans and put animals in danger from traffic or other threats. The images you create are also less authentic, because the behaviour you capture is shaped by human intervention.

Natural food sources and established feeding sites managed responsibly by conservation organisations are a different matter, and there is a spectrum of practice in the field. The key questions are whether

the practice harms the animal, changes its natural behaviour in a damaging way or misleads viewers about what they are seeing. If in doubt, choose operators who are transparent and follow high welfare standards.

Never chase or harass

Chasing an animal, flushing birds to make them fly, imitating calls excessively or using playback of recordings can all cause stress and wasted energy. In a cold winter, forcing a bird or mammal to burn precious calories can be the difference between survival and death. Instead of forcing a moment, let it happen. Position yourself well, stay patient and accept that sometimes the animal will not perform.

Take extra care with sensitive situations

- **Nests and breeding sites:** keep well away, never move vegetation to improve a view and avoid lingering near nests. Parents may abandon eggs or chicks if they feel threatened.
- **Dens and young animals:** approach only with expert guidance, and use a long lens from a distance.
- **Rare or endangered species:** do not publicise exact locations, which can lead to disturbance or persecution.
- **Animals in poor condition:** leave them alone. If you believe an animal is injured or in distress, contact a local wildlife rescue organisation or ranger.
- **Flash and artificial light:** avoid using flash on wild animals, especially nocturnal species and birds, unless you are experienced and it is part of an approved, careful approach.

Use drones and other technology responsibly

Drones can cause serious disturbance, particularly to birds and marine mammals, and are restricted or banned in many protected areas. Camera traps and remote cameras can be less intrusive but still need care in their placement. Always check local laws and guidance, and consider whether the impact is justified.

Respect habitat and land

- Stay on established paths and tracks wherever possible.
- Take all litter home with you, including food waste.
- Close gates, and respect private land, farm animals and the people who live and work in the area.
- Avoid trampling vegetation, particularly in fragile habitats such as dunes, wetlands and tundra.
- Observe seasonal closures and restrictions, which exist to protect wildlife at sensitive times.

Be honest about your images

Honesty builds trust in wildlife photography. When you share images, be clear about how they were made. If an animal was captive, baited, habituated or lured, say so. If you have composited elements,

removed distracting objects or significantly altered an image, make that clear too. Many competitions and publications have specific rules on these matters, and the community as a whole benefits when photographers are open about their methods.

Share locations responsibly

Sharing exact locations of rare or sensitive subjects online can lead to crowds that overwhelm a site. Think carefully before posting precise coordinates, particularly for nesting birds, rare mammals and fragile places. Where appropriate, give a general area instead, and encourage others to learn from local experts and visit responsibly.

Choose ethical operators and guides

When you travel for photography, your choices influence how wildlife is treated. Look for operators who put animal welfare first, keep group sizes small, work with local communities and conservation efforts, are transparent about their practices and follow local regulations. Ask questions before you book. A good operator will welcome them.

Support conservation

Photography can be a powerful tool for conservation. Images can inspire people, raise awareness and generate funds for the protection of species and habitats. Consider supporting conservation organisations, sharing your images with them and learning about the issues facing the animals you photograph.

> **A simple test:** Before taking a shot, ask yourself: would the animal be behaving the same way if I were not here? If the honest answer is no, step back.

Key points to remember

- The welfare of the animal comes before the photograph, always.
- Respect distance, and use longer lenses rather than closer approaches.
- Do not bait, chase or harass wildlife, and take extra care at nests and dens.
- Leave no trace, and respect habitat, rules and local communities.
- Be honest about your images and responsible with locations.

CHAPTER 9

Gear: What You Actually Need

Wildlife photography has a reputation for being expensive, and it can be. But great images do not depend on having the most expensive equipment. Skill, fieldcraft and light matter far more than any lens or camera body. This chapter explains which pieces of equipment make the biggest difference, where it is worth investing and where you can save.

The camera body

For wildlife photography, the features that matter most in a camera body are reliable autofocus, a fast burst rate, good high-ISO performance and sturdy weather sealing. Modern mirrorless and DSLR cameras both do the job well, and almost any recent camera from a major manufacturer is capable of excellent results.

- **Autofocus performance:** the ability to track moving subjects and recognise animals and eyes is the single most important feature.
- **Burst rate:** a faster frame rate gives you more chances to capture peak moments in fast action.
- **Buffer size:** a larger buffer lets you keep shooting in long bursts before the camera slows to write to the card.
- **High-ISO quality:** valuable for low light and fast shutter speeds.
- **Weather sealing:** protects against dust, moisture and cold.
- **Battery life:** important for long days, particularly in the cold.

Cropped-sensor cameras have an advantage for wildlife because they effectively extend the reach of a lens, while full-frame cameras generally perform better in low light. Neither is better in every situation, so choose based on your budget and priorities.

The telephoto lens

The lens is where most wildlife photographers should put the largest share of their budget. Reach matters, because many animals will not allow you to get close, and a long focal length fills the frame with a distant subject while keeping you at a respectful distance.

- **300mm:** a sensible minimum for most wildlife work, and well suited to larger or more approachable animals.
- **400mm to 600mm:** ideal for birds, shy mammals and situations where you cannot approach, although these lenses are heavier and more expensive.
- **Zoom lenses (such as 100-400mm, 150-600mm or 200-600mm):** offer flexibility to adjust framing without moving.
- **Prime lenses (such as 300mm, 400mm, 500mm or 600mm):** usually offer wider apertures and sharper results but less flexibility.

- **Teleconverters:** extend your reach by 1.4 or 2 times at the cost of some light and sharpness, and a useful way to add reach to an existing lens.

Look at maximum aperture, weight, image stabilisation and autofocus speed. A lens you can carry and hold comfortably will be used far more than one that stays at home because it is too heavy.

A wide-angle lens

A wide-angle lens, such as a 16-35mm or 24-70mm, gives you the ability to capture landscapes, habitat shots and environmental portraits of animals that allow a close approach. It is also valuable for photographing the aurora, hides and scenery on your trips. It does not need to be expensive to be useful.

Supports: tripods, monopods, beanbags and gimbal heads

Supporting a long lens reduces camera shake and prevents fatigue. The right support depends on how and where you work.

- **Tripod with a gimbal head:** excellent for long lenses in a fixed position, such as from a hide or vehicle. A gimbal head allows smooth, balanced movement.
- **Monopod:** lighter and more mobile than a tripod, a good compromise when walking.
- **Beanbag:** simple, quiet and great for window ledges, vehicle doors and the ground.
- **Ground pod or low tripod:** helps you shoot at eye level with small animals.
- **Handholding:** often necessary for tracking birds in flight or fast action, and good technique and image stabilisation make it possible.

Batteries, memory cards and storage

- Carry more batteries than you expect to need, especially in cold weather.
- Use fast, reliable memory cards with enough capacity for a full day of RAW burst shooting.
- Carry several smaller cards rather than one giant one to reduce the risk of losing everything.
- Back up your images daily to at least two locations, such as a laptop and an external drive.

Camera bags and carrying

A bag that fits your lens, protects it and is comfortable to carry for hours is worth its weight. For long treks, a backpack designed for photography spreads the load. For vehicle-based photography, a padded bag or case may be enough. Think about weather protection, quick access and security.

Protection and cleaning

- A rain cover for camera and lens
- A blower, soft brush and lens cloth to remove dust and moisture
- Lens filters or hoods for protection, and a lens hood to reduce flare

- Sensor cleaning supplies if you change lenses often in dusty places
- Silica gel packs and sealable bags to guard against moisture and condensation

Binoculars

Binoculars are often overlooked, but they are one of the most useful tools in wildlife photography. They let you find animals, watch behaviour and judge a situation without lifting a heavy lens. A decent pair of 8x42 or 10x42 binoculars improves your observation and fieldcraft significantly.

Clothing and comfort

The best camera in the world is no use if you are too cold, wet or uncomfortable to use it. Invest in appropriate clothing for the conditions, including waterproofs, warm layers and sturdy footwear. Muted colours help you blend in, and quiet fabrics reduce noise.

Where to spend and where to save

- **Spend on:** lenses and optics, support, and clothing that keeps you comfortable.
- **Spend moderately on:** a camera body with good autofocus, which matters more than the latest model.
- **Save on:** accessories that do not affect image quality, and avoid buying everything at once.
- **Consider:** buying used or refurbished lenses and bodies, renting for special trips and borrowing before buying.

Learn your equipment

Knowing your camera deeply is worth more than owning the latest model. Spend time learning its menus, customising buttons and practising until you can change settings without looking. The faster you can respond when something happens, the more images you will capture.

> **Before you buy:** Rent the lens or camera you are considering for a weekend or a trip. Using it in real conditions is the best way to find out if it suits you, and it often costs far less than a mistake.

Key points to remember

- Skill and fieldcraft matter more than expensive equipment.
- Invest first in a good telephoto lens, a sturdy support and suitable clothing.
- Prioritise autofocus performance and reliability in a camera body.
- Carry spare batteries and cards, and back up your images daily.
- Learn your equipment thoroughly so you can operate it instinctively.

CHAPTER 10

Editing Your Wildlife Images

Editing is where a good capture becomes a finished photograph. It is not about rescuing poor pictures or creating something that was never there. It is about bringing out the best in what you captured: refining the exposure, balancing the colour, directing the viewer's eye and preparing the image for its final use. Done thoughtfully, editing is an extension of the creative process that began in the field.

Build an organised workflow

A consistent workflow saves time and prevents mistakes. Wildlife photographers can come home with thousands of images, and without a system it quickly becomes overwhelming.

1. **Import and back up:** copy your files to at least two locations before doing anything else.
2. **Organise:** use a clear folder structure, such as year, date and location, and add keywords where helpful.
3. **Cull:** go through your images and pick the best, rejecting the rest.
4. **Edit:** adjust the selected images.
5. **Export and share:** save versions suited to your intended use.
6. **Archive:** keep your RAW originals and your edit files safe for the long term.

Culling: the most important skill

Choosing the right images is as important as editing them. Be ruthless. Wildlife photographers often shoot long bursts, which produce many near-identical frames. Pick the strongest from each sequence, looking for sharp focus on the eye, good timing, clean backgrounds and strong composition.

- Zoom in to 100 percent to check the eye is sharp.
- Look for the best moment in a sequence, such as an expressive pose or a wing at the perfect angle.
- Reject images with distracting backgrounds, awkward crops or missed focus.
- Use star ratings or colour labels to narrow your selection in stages.
- Take a break before the final selection. Fresh eyes make better decisions.

Cropping and straightening

Cropping lets you refine composition after the fact. It is especially useful in wildlife photography, where you may have been unable to get close enough or compose perfectly as an animal moved. Crop to strengthen the image by removing distractions, tightening the frame and improving balance.

Avoid heavy cropping that reduces quality, particularly if you plan to print. Straighten horizons, which are among the most common and noticeable flaws. Consider the final format, whether landscape, portrait, square or a social media crop, and compose with it in mind.

Exposure and contrast

Start by setting the overall exposure. Then refine highlights, shadows, whites and blacks to produce a natural, balanced result.

- Adjust the overall exposure so the main subject looks right.
- Recover highlights where bright areas such as snow or sky have lost detail.
- Lift shadows to reveal details in dark fur or feathers, without making the image flat.
- Set a white and black point to give the image a full tonal range.
- Add contrast and clarity or texture carefully, since overdoing them creates a harsh, artificial look.

Colour and white balance

Check that the colours look natural. Snow and water can cast a blue tint, golden light can push everything towards yellow and forest light often leans green. Adjust white balance to keep the colour of your subject accurate, but retain the mood of the light. A warm sunset glow should still look like a warm sunset.

Use saturation and vibrance gently. A small boost can bring life to a flat image, but too much produces unrealistic, garish results. Consider adjusting individual colours when needed, for example to tone down a distracting bright patch in the background.

Sharpening and noise reduction

Sharpening restores detail lost during capture, while noise reduction cleans up the grain that appears at high ISO. The two work against each other, so find a balance.

- Apply sharpening selectively, concentrating on the eyes and key details instead of the whole frame.
- Use noise reduction in moderation, especially in smooth areas such as backgrounds, and avoid washing out fur and feather detail.
- Modern AI-based denoising tools can produce excellent results at high ISO, but check for an overly smooth, plastic appearance.
- Zoom in to 100 percent to judge the effect.

Local adjustments

Global edits affect the whole image. Local adjustments let you target specific areas to guide the viewer's eye. Masks, brushes, gradients and radial filters allow you to refine light and colour precisely.

- Brighten the subject slightly, and especially the eye, to draw attention.
- Darken bright distractions at the edges of the frame.
- Add a gentle vignette to focus the eye on the centre.
- Enhance catchlights subtly to bring life to the eye.

- Balance the exposure between foreground and background.

Dealing with snow and high-contrast scenes

Snow images need special care. Make sure whites are clean but still hold detail. Check for colour casts in the shadows, which are often blue. If the exposure was set for a dark subject, snow may be too bright, so recover highlights carefully. A graduated filter or a brush can help balance a bright sky against a darker foreground.

Removing distractions

Cloning or healing small distractions, such as a stray twig, a bright dot of dust on the sensor or a faint power line, is usually accepted. But there is a line between tidying an image and changing what was there. Stay on the honest side of it. Do not add, remove or move major elements, and be transparent if you do any significant manipulation.

Develop a consistent style

Over time, your editing choices will form a recognisable style. That consistency makes your portfolio more cohesive. Create presets for starting points, but adjust every image individually, since no preset suits every photograph. Aim for a natural, true-to-life look that respects the animal and the scene.

Exporting for different uses

- **Web and social media:** reduce to a suitable size, such as 2000 pixels on the long edge, in sRGB colour space.
- **Print:** keep full resolution and use a colour profile suited to your printer or lab.
- **Competitions and publications:** follow the specific rules on size, format and permitted editing.
- **Archive:** keep your RAW files and, if you wish, a high-quality TIFF or full-resolution JPEG of your best work.

Storing and protecting your work

Your images are irreplaceable, because you cannot go back to recreate a moment. Follow the 3-2-1 rule: keep at least three copies of your important files, on two different types of storage, with one stored off-site or in the cloud. Check your backups occasionally to make sure they work.

> **Try this:** Pick one of your favourite images and edit it in three different ways: a natural look, a warm and moody look and a high-contrast look. Compare them. You will learn quickly what suits your taste and what serves the subject.

Key points to remember

- Build a clear workflow, and back up before you start editing.
- Cull ruthlessly, and choose the best moment in each sequence.

- Edit for a natural result: balance exposure, colour and contrast with a light touch.
- Sharpen and denoise selectively, and use local adjustments to guide the eye.
- Be honest about manipulation, and keep your originals safe.

CHAPTER 11

Planning a Photography Trip

A well-planned photography trip can be the most productive and rewarding experience of your year. It can also be disappointing if you choose the wrong season, spend too little time in one place or arrive unprepared. This chapter helps you plan a trip that gives you the best chance of excellent images and a memorable experience.

Decide what you want to photograph

Start with a clear idea of your subject and your goals. Do you want to photograph a particular species, such as Arctic foxes, tigers or pelicans? Are you more interested in landscapes and wildlife together? Do you want to learn new skills or simply spend time in beautiful places? The answers will guide where and when you go, and what kind of trip suits you.

Be realistic about what is achievable. Wildlife is wild, and no responsible operator can guarantee particular encounters. The best trips are built to maximise opportunities and give you time to make the most of them, rather than promising specific results.

Choose the right season

Timing can make or break a wildlife trip. Many species are best photographed at particular times of year, and the same location can offer entirely different experiences from one season to the next.

- **Breeding season:** often the most active and dramatic time, with courtship, nesting and young animals.
- **Migration:** concentrations of birds and mammals at key stopover points, sometimes in huge numbers.
- **Winter:** thick coats, snow and low light for Arctic and mountain species, and large gatherings of waterbirds in some regions.
- **Dry season:** in many parts of Africa and Asia, animals concentrate around water, making them easier to find and photograph.
- **Shoulder seasons:** can offer fewer crowds, softer light and good opportunities, with more variable weather.

Allow enough time

Time in the field is one of the most valuable things you can invest in. Weather changes, animals move and conditions that are perfect on one day may be poor the next. A longer trip gives you more chances, and more importantly lets you progress from simply recording a subject to understanding and anticipating it.

Beware of very short trips that involve long travel and a limited number of sessions. If a single poor-weather day can ruin the experience, the itinerary does not allow enough margin. Look for trips that build in flexibility and several days at each location.

Choose small groups

Group size has a huge influence on the quality of your photography. Smaller groups mean less disturbance to the animals, more space for each photographer, more personal guidance and greater flexibility to stay with an opportunity. In vehicles, fewer guests may mean a window seat or a row to yourself. In hides, there is room to work without jostling for position.

Ask operators about maximum group size, the number of guides and hosts and how seating is arranged. These details tell you a lot about how photography-focused a trip really is.

Look for photography-led itineraries

Not all wildlife trips are designed with photographers in mind. A photography-led itinerary builds each day around light and behaviour rather than ticking off species or covering distance. You might expect long sessions at the best times of day, rest during harsh midday light, guides who position you for the best angles and time to review and discuss your work.

- Is there a photography host as well as a local guide?
- Are sessions timed around the best light?
- Is there time to stay with a good scene rather than rushing on?
- Is there instruction or feedback if you want it?
- Are the supports and viewpoints suited to photography?

Check the ethics and practices

Before booking, ask how the operator treats wildlife. Find out whether they use bait, how close they approach, how they manage disturbance and whether they follow local regulations. Look for operators who are open about their practices, support conservation and employ local people.

Understand the physical demands

Trips vary enormously in physical difficulty. Some involve a few steps from a vehicle or a hide, while others involve hours of hiking in snow or heat while carrying heavy equipment. Read the itinerary carefully, ask about daily walking distances, terrain and climate and be honest about your fitness. A trip that matches your abilities is far more enjoyable than one that leaves you exhausted.

Think about accommodation and logistics

Comfort affects your photography. A good night's sleep, a hot meal and a place to review and back up your images make a difference. Find out what kind of accommodation to expect, such as lodges, cabins,

tented camps or houses, and what is included in the price, such as meals, transfers, permits and park fees. Consider whether you need to arrange your own transport, flights and insurance.

Prepare your equipment

Check the recommended kit well before you travel. Find out what focal lengths are useful, whether you will need a support and what clothing is required. Make sure your gear is in good working order, your lenses and sensor are clean, your batteries are healthy and your memory cards are formatted. Pack spares, and consider insurance for your equipment.

- Confirm lens recommendations with the trip leader.
- Pack extra batteries, cards and a charger, plus a travel adaptor.
- Bring a laptop or storage drive for backing up images each day.
- Protect your gear with a rain cover, a dry bag and silica gel.
- Check airline rules for carry-on weight, lithium batteries and lenses.

Practise before you go

The best preparation for a big trip is practice at home. Photograph garden birds, local wildlife or even moving subjects like cyclists and dogs to sharpen your tracking and settings. Practise in similar conditions if you can, for example in the cold or from a low position. Rehearse changing settings quickly, and know your camera well enough to operate it without thinking.

Do your homework on the destination

Read about the species, habitats and conditions you will encounter. Learn about local customs and regulations. Look at images from previous trips to get a sense of what is possible, but avoid trying to copy them. Decide what you want to do differently and think about the stories you want to tell.

Set realistic expectations

Even on the best trips, some days will be slow, and weather and animal behaviour will not always cooperate. Be flexible, stay positive and look for the unexpected. Some of the best images come from moments you did not plan, and some of the best memories come from the time between the pictures.

Make the most of your time on the trip

- Get up early and be ready before first light.
- Stay with good scenes and work them thoroughly.
- Review your images each evening, and learn from what worked and what did not.
- Ask your guides and hosts questions. They are there to help.
- Spend time simply watching, without a camera.
- Back up your images every day.

> **Questions to ask before booking:** How many guests are on the trip? How many hours do we spend in the field each day? What is the guide-to-guest ratio? How do you treat the wildlife and what are your policies on baiting and distance? What happens if the weather is poor? What is included in the price?

Key points to remember

- Choose your destination and season around your subject.
- Allow enough time and choose small groups with a photography-led approach.
- Check the ethics, the physical demands and what is included.
- Prepare and practise before you go.
- Stay flexible, enjoy the process and back up every day.

CHAPTER 12

Field Checklists and Practice Exercises

Knowledge becomes skill only through practice. This final chapter brings together the key points of the guide in practical checklists you can print or keep on your phone, along with a series of exercises to help you develop your skills close to home. You do not need exotic locations to improve. Local parks, gardens, ponds and woodland offer everything you need.

Before you leave: preparation checklist

- Batteries fully charged, and spares packed
- Memory cards formatted and spares packed
- Lenses, filters and sensor clean
- Weather and light conditions checked, including sunrise and sunset times
- Clothing suited to the coldest and wettest conditions you may face
- Water, food and any medication
- Rain cover, lens cloth, blower and a sealable bag for condensation
- Support, such as a beanbag, monopod or tripod with gimbal head
- Binoculars and a notebook
- Someone told where you are going and when you will be back

In the field: working checklist

- Observe the animal and the scene before lifting the camera
- Check wind, light direction and background
- Set a shutter speed that matches the action
- Use continuous autofocus and choose a sensible focus area
- Focus on the eye
- Check exposure and the histogram, and adjust for bright or dark subjects
- Shoot in short bursts timed to the action
- Look for sequences, behaviour and interaction
- Capture a range: portraits, behaviour and environmental frames
- Keep a respectful distance, and back away if the animal shows stress

After you return: review checklist

- Back up your files to at least two locations
- Cull your images and select the best
- Edit with a light, natural touch

- Keep notes on what worked and what did not
- Clean your equipment and dry it thoroughly
- Charge batteries and reformat cards, ready for next time
- Share your best images with honest captions

Practice exercises

Each exercise below focuses on a specific skill from this guide. You can do them in a garden, a local park or anywhere you find wildlife. Aim to complete one or two a week.

Exercise 1: Observe without a camera

Choose a local species and spend an hour watching it without a camera. Note down five repeated behaviours, the time of day when it is most active and the places it uses most often. Return with your camera and photograph the behaviours you identified.

Exercise 2: Light in three directions

Photograph a single subject with the light coming from the front, from the side and from behind. Compare the results. Notice how texture, colour, depth and mood change. Repeat at different times of day.

Exercise 3: Shutter speed ladder

Photograph a moving subject, such as a bird, a dog or a cyclist, at a range of shutter speeds, from 1/250 s up to 1/3200 s. Review the images at full size to find the point at which motion blur disappears. This tells you the minimum shutter speed you need for different kinds of subjects.

Exercise 4: Tracking practice

Spend thirty minutes tracking moving subjects with continuous autofocus. Use cars on a distant road, birds in a park or gulls over water. Focus on keeping the focus point on the subject smoothly. Count how many frames are sharp, and try again. Your hit rate will improve noticeably over a few sessions.

Exercise 5: Background hunt

Choose a subject that stays in one place, such as a bird on a feeder or a statue. Take ten images, changing your position each time to alter the background. Which backgrounds are cleanest? Which add atmosphere? Learn to see backgrounds first.

Exercise 6: Eye-level challenge

Photograph an animal first from standing height, then from its own eye level. Compare. Notice the difference in intimacy, background and separation. Make getting low a habit.

Exercise 7: Tell a story in five frames

Choose a scene and capture a sequence of five images that tell a story: a wide establishing shot, a medium shot, a close portrait, a moment of behaviour and a final frame that gives closure. Edit them as a set.

Exercise 8: Expose for white and black

Find a very bright subject, such as a white bird, and a very dark one, such as a black animal. Photograph each, using exposure compensation to keep detail. Check your histograms and see how much compensation you needed.

Exercise 9: One-lens, one-location

Spend a whole morning at one location with only one lens. Rather than moving on, work the location thoroughly. You will be surprised how many different images you can make once you stop looking for something new.

Exercise 10: Edit and compare

Choose a favourite image and edit it three ways: a natural look, a warm and moody look and a high-contrast look. Compare them and decide which best serves the subject. Share the results with a friend and ask for their opinion.

Building a long-term practice

- Set aside regular time for photography, even if it is only an hour a week.
- Keep a project going, such as photographing one species through the seasons.
- Review your work regularly, and be honest about strengths and weaknesses.
- Seek feedback from other photographers, in person or online.
- Learn from the work of photographers you admire, and ask why their images work.
- Take trips with experienced hosts to accelerate your learning.

Key points to remember

- Checklists reduce mistakes and help you stay ready.
- Skills develop through regular, focused practice.
- You can improve anywhere. Start with what is close to home.
- Review, reflect and keep learning.

Final Thoughts

Great wildlife photography is a blend of fieldcraft, technical skill and patience, and all three improve with practice. Start close to home, learn your subjects and treat every outing as a chance to understand animals a little better. The images will follow.

If you would like to take your photography further, join us on one of our small-group photography tours, where every day is built around light, behaviour and creating memorable images, with expert guidance every step of the way.

Thank you for reading, and happy shooting.