A FREE FIELD GUIDE by FOCUSED ON WILDLIFE

Composition in Wildlife Photography

How to see, frame and tell stories with the animals you photograph

Backgrounds • Perspective • Light • Habitat • Behaviour • Storytelling

Welcome

Most wildlife photographers eventually reach the same realisation. Their images are sharp, well exposed and technically sound, yet something is missing. The animal is there, but the picture does not quite say anything. The difference is almost always composition.

Composition is the art of deciding what goes into the frame, where it sits and how everything relates. It is what turns a record of an animal into an image that holds attention and conveys feeling. Unlike camera settings, it cannot be automated. It depends on how you see, and seeing is a skill that improves with attention, practice and time.

This guide is written for wildlife photographers who want to improve that skill. Across eight chapters, we look at foundations such as balance and space, the crucial role of backgrounds, the effect of perspective and focal length, the creative use of light and colour, the power of habitat and environment, the importance of behaviour and moment and finally the more creative approaches that help you develop a personal style.

Each chapter closes with key points and practical exercises. Guidelines are useful, but they are not rules. The aim is not to follow them blindly but to understand why they work, so that you can use them, bend them or break them with purpose.

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CHAPTER 1

Seeing Like a Photographer

There is a gap between what you experience in the field and what the camera records. In person, you see a living animal in a living place, with sounds, smells, movement and atmosphere. The camera sees a flat, silent rectangle. Composition is the craft of bridging that gap, so that the viewer feels something of what you felt.

To do that, you have to learn to see the way a photograph sees. That means looking at edges as well as centres, at backgrounds as well as subjects, and at light and shape as well as species. It is a different mode of looking from the one we use in everyday life, and it takes **deliberate** practice.

Looking versus seeing

Our brains are very good at ignoring irrelevant detail. When you watch an animal, you naturally focus on it and filter out the branch behind its head, the bright patch of sky at the edge or the fence post that seems to grow from its back. The camera records all of it. Many disappointing images are not caused by a lack of skill but by details that the photographer simply did not notice at the time.

The cure is a habit: before you press the shutter, scan the entire frame, edge to edge. Check the corners. Look at what is behind the subject, what is in front of it and what touches its outline. This takes only a second once it becomes routine, and it will save more images than any piece of equipment.

The frame is a decision

A photograph is defined as much by what it leaves out as by what it includes. The edges of the frame are a series of decisions: this belongs, that does not. Every time you lift the camera you are choosing how much of the world to show, and each choice changes the meaning of the picture.

A tight portrait says: look at this face. A wide frame with a small animal says: look at the place and the scale. A cropped, partial view says: pay attention to this detail. None is right or wrong, but each tells a different story. The first step in better composition is simply to become aware that you are choosing.

Decide what the picture is about

Strong images usually have a clear subject and a clear intention. Before shooting, ask yourself a simple question: what is this picture about? The answer might be an animal's expression, a moment of behaviour, the contrast between a creature and its environment, a mood created by light or the relationship between two individuals.

Once you know, you can arrange everything else to support it. Elements that help the idea can stay. Elements that compete with it should be removed, minimised or moved out of the frame. This single question is the quickest way to simplify and strengthen your work.

How the eye moves through an image

Viewers do not take in a photograph all at once. Their eyes move around it, drawn to certain things before others. Understanding what attracts attention helps you control the path the eye takes.

- **Brightness:** the eye goes to the brightest part of the frame first, which is why bright backgrounds are so distracting.
- **Contrast:** areas of strong tonal or colour contrast attract attention.
- **Sharpness:** in-focus areas draw the eye, while blur recedes.
- **Faces and eyes:** we are programmed to look at eyes, and an animal's eye is almost always the focal point of a portrait.
- **Colour:** saturated or unusual colours stand out, especially against a muted palette.
- **Lines and edges:** diagonals, curves and edges lead the eye through the frame.

If the brightest, sharpest, most contrasty part of your image is not your subject, the picture is working against you. Adjusting your position, waiting for different light or editing the image afterwards can all help realign attention.

Slow down

One of the most valuable habits in composition is slowing down. It is tempting to fire off bursts the moment an animal appears, but the photographers who produce the strongest images often shoot less and think more. They watch, assess and adjust before the key moment arrives, so that when it does, the composition is already in place.

That does not mean being slow in reacting. It means doing the thinking early. Choose your position, check the background and the light, set your framing and then wait for the animal to step into the picture you have built.

Previsualise

Experienced photographers often have an image in mind before they take it. They see where an animal is heading and imagine the frame that will result: the animal on the left third, walking into warm light, against a dark, out-of-focus slope. They then position themselves to make it happen.

You can practise this by describing the shot you want in a sentence before pressing the shutter. Over time, previsualising becomes a natural part of how you work, and your hit rate for strong compositions rises.

> **Exercise:** Choose a subject, even a bird on a garden feeder. Before taking any pictures, write down in one sentence what the image will be about. Then take ten frames that support that sentence, and ten that deliberately ignore it. Compare them.

Key points to remember

- The camera sees everything in the frame, so check the edges and background before you shoot.

- Every composition is a series of decisions about what to include and what to leave out.
- Decide what the picture is about, and let everything support that idea.
- Understand how the eye moves, and make sure the subject attracts it.
- Slow down, think early and previsualise the image you want.

CHAPTER 2

Foundations: Subject, Frame and Balance

Before exploring more creative ideas, it helps to understand the building blocks of composition. These are the basic relationships between your subject, the edges of the frame and the space around it. They are not rules to obey, but principles that explain why some images feel balanced and natural while others feel awkward.

Placing the subject: the rule of thirds

Imagine the frame divided into a grid of three columns and three rows. The rule of thirds suggests placing the main subject on or near one of the lines, or at one of the points where they cross. This tends to create a more dynamic and balanced image than placing the subject in the middle.

In wildlife photography, the intersections are often a natural home for the eye. An animal's eye placed near an upper third intersection, with the body flowing into the rest of the frame, creates an image with energy and a sense of purpose.

The rule is useful as a starting point and a quick check, but it is not a law. Many outstanding wildlife images break it deliberately.

When the centre works

A centred subject can be very powerful. A direct, symmetrical portrait of an animal looking straight into the lens, a reflection with the subject at the centre or a bird on a branch in a clean, open space can all work beautifully with a central placement. The key is that the choice is deliberate and the rest of the frame supports it, with a balanced, uncluttered background.

Centred compositions tend to feel calm, formal and confrontational, while off-centre compositions feel more dynamic and natural. Choose according to the mood you want.

Space to move into

One of the most useful habits in wildlife composition is leaving space in the direction an animal is facing or travelling. If a deer walks to the right, place it left of centre and leave room on the right. The space gives the animal somewhere to go and the viewer a sense of anticipation.

Putting a subject too close to the edge it is facing creates visual tension, and in most cases it looks cramped. There are exceptions. A deliberately tight frame can add urgency to a chase, or a lone animal can be pushed to the edge to emphasise vulnerability. But as a default, give animals room.

Looking space and eye lines

Animals that look in a particular direction create an invisible line that the viewer follows. Leave space in the frame along that line, whether or not the body is moving. A bird perched and looking left should

usually have more space on its left than on its right. When a subject looks directly at the camera, the connection is immediate and personal, and symmetry often serves it well.

Negative space

Empty areas of a frame are not wasted. Negative space, such as snow, sky, water or a smooth, out-of-focus background, gives the subject room to breathe and emphasises its shape. A small animal in a large, quiet frame can convey isolation, scale or calm in a way that a tight crop cannot.

Use negative space intentionally. It should feel like part of the composition, not like leftover room. A good test is to ask whether the empty space adds something, such as mood, context or a sense of movement, or whether the subject would be stronger if it filled more of the frame.

Balance

A balanced composition feels stable and comfortable, with visual weight distributed so that the frame does not seem to tip to one side. A large dark subject on one side can be balanced by a smaller bright element or open space on the other. Balance does not require symmetry. It requires that the elements of the frame feel in harmony with each other.

Deliberate imbalance can also be effective. An off-balance frame creates tension and unease, which suits dramatic or uncertain moments. The skill is knowing which you want.

Watching the edges

Some of the most common composition mistakes happen at the edges of the frame. Tips of ears, tails, wings or feet are clipped awkwardly. Branches or bright patches intrude from the corners. A foreground blade of grass cuts across the face.

- Avoid cutting through joints, such as ankles, wrists or the tops of legs. If you crop, cut through the middle of a limb, or leave the whole animal in.
- Leave enough room above the head and in front of the nose to avoid a cramped feel, unless you have decided on a tight crop.
- Check the corners for bright or distracting elements, which tend to pull the eye away from the subject.
- If you crop in tightly, make sure it is bold and obviously deliberate, not a near miss.

Scale and proportion

How big the subject appears in the frame affects the feeling of the image. A tightly filled frame conveys intimacy and detail. A medium frame shows posture and behaviour. A small subject in a large scene conveys environment and scale. Choosing the right proportion is part of the story you are telling, so avoid defaulting to the same framing every time.

Orientation: portrait or landscape

Many photographers shoot almost everything in landscape orientation out of habit. But an upright animal, such as a standing bear, a heron or a giraffe, may suit a vertical frame better. Vertical orientation also works well for social media and magazine covers. When time allows, take both, and remember that you can usually crop to a different format later if you have left enough space.

> **Exercise:** Photograph a single subject five ways: centred, left of centre, right of centre, tightly cropped and with lots of negative space. Compare them later and note which feels strongest and why.

Key points to remember

- The rule of thirds is a helpful starting point, but a centred composition can also be powerful.
- Leave space in the direction an animal is facing or moving.
- Negative space adds mood, scale and calm when used on purpose.
- Watch the edges and corners for clipped limbs and intruding distractions.
- Vary scale and orientation to match the story you want to tell.

CHAPTER 3

Backgrounds and Separation

If you could improve one thing about your wildlife composition, make it the background. A strong subject against a distracting backdrop will rarely work, while an ordinary subject against a clean, harmonious one often looks striking. Experienced wildlife photographers spend as much time thinking about what is behind the animal as about the animal itself.

Why backgrounds matter

The background provides the setting, the colour and the mood. It also determines how clearly your subject stands out. A good background separates the animal, supports its shape and colour and adds atmosphere without competing. A poor one confuses the outline, draws the eye away or introduces clutter.

Three ways to improve a background

You have three main tools for controlling the background: moving, blurring and waiting.

- **Move:** a small shift left, right, up or down changes what lines up behind the subject. Even a step or two can turn a cluttered scene into a clean one.
- **Blur:** use a wide aperture, a long focal length and distance between the subject and the background to render it as soft, smooth colour.
- **Wait:** animals move. A cluttered background may become clear if you stay patient, and a better perch, path or pose may appear.

The role of distance

The most effective way to blur a background is to increase the distance between your subject and what lies behind it. A bird on a branch with a hedge a metre behind it will have a busy, textured background even at a wide aperture. The same bird with a distant slope far behind will have a smooth, creamy one.

Look for situations where the subject is well separated from its surroundings, such as an animal on a ridge with open space behind it, a bird perched at the edge of a clearing or a mammal at the water's edge with distant hills beyond.

Aperture, focal length and subject distance

Three factors work together to determine how blurred a background appears: aperture, focal length and the distance to your subject. A wider aperture, a longer lens and a closer subject all increase blur. When you cannot get closer or change aperture, you can sometimes get a smoother background simply by repositioning so that it is further from the subject.

Remember the trade-off. A very wide aperture and a close subject give a razor-thin plane of focus, so make sure the eye is sharp and enough of the head is rendered clearly.

Tone and colour separation

Separation is not only about blur. Contrast in brightness or colour between the subject and background can do much of the work. A pale animal against a dark background, or a dark one against a bright background, stands out clearly even if the background is relatively sharp. A warm-coloured subject against cool tones, such as an orange fox on green grass or a brown animal against blue-grey snow, also pops.

The opposite situation, where an animal's colour and tone match its surroundings, is a camouflage problem. Birds in foliage, deer in autumn bracken or mammals on rocky ground can be hard to separate. In those situations, look for a position where light, shadow or blur helps the outline emerge.

Common background problems

- **Mergers:** branches, poles or lines that appear to grow out of the animal's head or body. Move slightly to separate them.
- **Bright spots:** small patches of sky or sunlit leaves that attract the eye. Reposition, or darken them in editing.
- **Hard edges:** fence posts, rocks and tree trunks with strong vertical lines running through the image.
- **Busy texture:** reeds, grass and branches in sharp focus that compete with the animal.
- **Distracting colours:** brightly coloured objects, such as litter, clothing or vehicles, in the periphery.
- **Horizon tangents:** a horizon line that cuts through the subject's neck or head.

Foreground: friend or foe

Foreground elements can add depth and atmosphere, but they can also obstruct. Out-of-focus grass, snow or flowers in front of a subject can create a soft, dreamy frame that makes the viewer feel they are peeking in on a private moment. This works best when the foreground is far enough from the lens to melt into blur and does not cover the animal's eyes.

When foreground is sharp, distracting or blocking the subject, change your position or angle. A lower position often turns a distracting foreground into a pleasing blur.

Backgrounds and light

Light changes how backgrounds behave. In soft light, backgrounds tend to be even and quiet. In harsh sun, dappled light creates bright and dark patches that distract. Backlit backgrounds can glow with warm tones. Look for places where the background is evenly lit, in shade or darker than the subject. A darker background in particular makes bright subjects stand out.

Use the environment on purpose

A clean background is not always the best background. Sometimes the setting is part of the story, such as a mountain range behind a musk ox or a cliff face around a nesting seabird. In those cases, think of the background as a supporting character. Make sure it is simple enough not to overwhelm the animal, and that its lines, colours and shapes enhance the picture.

> **Exercise:** Take a stationary subject and shoot ten frames, moving a step each time to change the background. At the end, ask which backgrounds give the cleanest separation, the best colour harmony and the strongest mood.

Key points to remember

- Check the background before every shot. It matters as much as the subject.
- Move, blur or wait to improve the background.
- Increase the distance between subject and background for a smoother blur.
- Use tone and colour contrast to help the subject stand out.
- Watch for mergers, bright spots and hard edges, and treat foreground with care.

CHAPTER 4

Perspective, Angle and Focal Length

Where you stand, how high you hold the camera and which lens you choose all shape the look and feel of an image. Two photographers standing a few metres apart can produce completely different pictures of the same animal. Understanding perspective gives you control over intimacy, scale, drama and background, often without changing anything about the subject itself.

Eye level and intimacy

Photographing an animal from its own eye level is one of the most reliable ways to make a picture feel connected. The viewer sees the world from the animal's point of view, and the eye contact feels direct. It also tends to separate the animal from the ground, turning foreground and background into smooth blur.

Getting down to eye level takes effort. You may need to lie on your front, kneel in snow or sit on wet ground. A beanbag, a ground pod, a low tripod or a small waterproof mat makes it more comfortable and more stable. The reward is images that feel intimate rather than observational.

Shooting from above

A high angle, looking down on an animal, makes it appear smaller, more vulnerable or more exposed. It reveals patterns on the ground, shows the animal in context and can be useful for photographing animals in grass or water where a low angle would be blocked. It tends to flatten the subject against the ground and can feel detached, so use it deliberately.

Shooting from below

A low camera angle looking up makes a subject look larger, stronger and more imposing. It can emphasise the power of an elephant, the height of a giraffe or the grandeur of a bird of prey on a perch. It also places the subject against the sky, which can give a clean background but may need careful exposure.

Angle to the subject

Your angle relative to the animal matters as much as your height. A head-on view is confrontational, immediate and often striking. A profile shows the animal's shape and silhouette clearly. A three-quarter view is generally flattering, giving a sense of form and depth. A rear view can feel mysterious or suggest departure.

Wait for the animal to turn, or reposition yourself, to find the angle that works. Pay particular attention to the head. A photograph where the head is turned slightly towards the camera and the eye is visible almost always works better than one where the animal faces away.

Focal length and its effects

Lenses do more than bring subjects closer. They change the relationship between subject and background, and they change how space appears in the frame.

- **Long telephoto (400mm and above):** compresses distance, so the background appears closer and larger relative to the subject. Backgrounds blur strongly, and distant mountains or trees can look massive behind the animal.
- **Mid telephoto (200mm to 400mm):** a versatile range that isolates subjects while keeping some sense of place.
- **Standard and wide-angle:** show more of the environment and exaggerate depth, making foreground elements appear larger and the background smaller.

Choose the focal length not only for reach but for the look you want. A tight telephoto portrait and a wide-angle environmental image tell very different stories.

Compression and layering

Telephoto lenses stack distant elements together, which can create beautiful layered images. A line of animals, several ridges or successive bands of mist can be compressed into a dense, graphic arrangement. This works especially well with warm, low light, when each layer takes on a slightly different tone.

Wide-angle wildlife

Using a wide-angle lens close to a subject can produce dramatic, immersive images that show animal and environment together with a sense of depth. This approach is only appropriate with very tolerant animals, and with remote cameras or in controlled situations, never by approaching a wild animal closely or disturbing it. When done responsibly, it can yield unusual perspectives that stand out from conventional long-lens portraits.

Distance and the working relationship

The distance at which you photograph also affects the behaviour of the animal. Working from further away, with a long lens, tends to produce more natural behaviour and allows you to build compositions around the animal's movement. Do not feel that you must get closer. Distance can be a creative choice.

Change your height and position often

A common mistake is staying in one spot and one height for the whole session. Move deliberately. Shift left and right to alter the background. Go lower to separate the animal from the ground. Move back to include more habitat. Each change can reveal an image you would otherwise have missed, provided it does not disturb the animal.

> **Exercise:** Photograph the same subject from standing height, kneeling height and ground level, with a long lens and with a wider lens if you can. Compare the results for intimacy, background and drama.

Key points to remember

- Eye-level views create intimacy and connection.
- High angles feel observational, and low angles feel powerful.
- Three-quarter views with a visible eye are usually the most flattering.
- Focal length controls compression, background size and the feeling of space.
- Move your position often, always without disturbing the animal.

CHAPTER 5

Light, Colour and Tone

Light is the paint of photography, and how you use it shapes the mood of every composition. Rather than thinking of light only as something to expose for, treat it as a compositional element, one that creates shape, directs the eye and sets the emotional tone of the image.

Light as a compositional element

The pattern of light and shadow across an image is as important as the position of the subject. A pool of warm light on an animal surrounded by darker tones naturally draws the eye. A sliver of rim light along a silhouette traces its shape. Shafts of light through trees or mist create lines and structure.

Instead of simply capturing the subject as it appears, ask how the light is arranged and whether you can use it. Often a small change of position or a few moments of patience brings the light and subject into alignment.

Directional light and shape

Side and angled light reveals form and texture. Fur, feathers and skin gain dimension, and the animal looks solid rather than flat. The low, warm light of early morning and late afternoon is especially valuable. Pay attention to where shadows fall, and avoid light that casts hard, unflattering shadows across the eyes.

Backlight, rim light and glow

Light coming from behind an animal creates glowing outlines, particularly around fur and feathers. This rim light separates the subject from the background and gives a sense of depth. In cold weather, backlit breath, snow flurries and dust can turn into luminous atmosphere.

Exposure is the challenge. A bright background can trick the camera into underexposing the subject, so use exposure compensation, and look for a darker background behind the subject to make the rim light stand out. Shield your lens from flare with a hood or by using your hand as a shade.

Silhouettes

When the subject is much darker than the background, it becomes a silhouette: a shape without detail. Silhouettes work when the outline is distinctive and clean, so wait for a pose that is recognisable and uncluttered. Exposing for the bright sky rather than the animal gives you a bold, graphic result. They are particularly effective at sunrise and sunset, when the sky offers colour.

Soft light and gentle mood

Overcast skies, fog and shade produce gentle light with low contrast. It suits quiet, intimate compositions where texture, colour and expression matter more than drama. Subtle tones and delicate

detail come through, and animals with rich, patterned coats look wonderful. Keep bright, featureless sky out of the frame, because it can become a distracting white patch.

Colour and harmony

Colour affects mood strongly. Warm tones of orange, red and yellow feel inviting and energetic. Cool tones of blue and grey feel calm, distant or cold. Combining them creates contrast, such as a warm-lit animal against a cool shadowed background, which is one of the most pleasing colour relationships in wildlife photography.

- **Complementary colours:** opposite colours, such as orange and blue, create vibrant contrast.
- **Analogous colours:** neighbouring colours, such as greens and yellows, create harmony and calm.
- **Limited palette:** a scene with only two or three dominant colours often feels strong and cohesive.
- **Accent colour:** a small touch of bright colour in a muted scene, such as a red beak against grey rock, becomes the focus.

Tone, contrast and mood

Tone refers to the range from light to dark in your image. High-key images are bright and airy, dominated by light tones, such as a white bird in a snowy scene. Low-key images are dark and dramatic, with deep shadows and small areas of light. The tonal range you choose shapes the mood: light tones suggest calm and purity, dark tones suggest mystery and weight.

Contrast, the difference between light and dark, adds drama and energy. A scene with strong contrast feels punchy and bold, while low contrast feels soft and gentle. Think about which suits your subject and your intention.

Seasons and palettes

Each season offers a different colour palette. Autumn brings warm golds and russets. Winter offers soft whites, blues and greys, often with warm light at the edges of the day. Spring has fresh greens and bright accents. Summer can be vivid but harsh. Understanding the palette of a place and time helps you anticipate the mood and choose compositions that bring out its character.

Exposure choices as creative choices

How you expose an image changes its composition. Underexposing slightly can deepen backgrounds and make a subject glow. Overexposing can create a delicate, airy feel. Rather than aiming for a technically neutral exposure every time, consider what exposure best serves the idea behind the picture.

> **Exercise:** On a day with good low light, photograph the same subject in three ways: lit from the side, backlit with rim light and as a silhouette. Pay attention to how the mood changes with each.

Key points to remember

- Treat light as a compositional element, not just an exposure problem.
- Side light shows form, backlight creates glow and silhouettes give bold shapes.
- Soft light suits quiet, detailed portraits.
- Use colour relationships, such as warm against cool, to create contrast and harmony.
- Choose your exposure and tonal range to match the mood you want.

CHAPTER 6

Habitat and Environmental Portraits

Tight portraits have their place, but many of the most memorable wildlife images show an animal as part of its world. Environmental portraits include enough of the habitat to tell the viewer where the animal lives and how it relates to its surroundings. They add context, scale and atmosphere, and they often carry more story than a close-up ever could.

Why include the environment

An animal is a product of its place. A fox surrounded by snow tells a story about winter and survival. An elephant under a vast sky says something about scale and openness. A seabird on a cliff face shows the drama of its colony. When you include the habitat, you give viewers a richer sense of the creature and encourage them to care about the place.

Balancing subject and scene

The challenge in environmental portraits is keeping the subject clear while including enough of the setting. The animal should still be the main subject, not lost in a sprawling landscape. Several techniques help.

- **Size and position:** place the animal at a strong point in the frame, large enough to read clearly but small enough to show the setting.
- **Contrast:** use tone, colour or light to make the animal stand out, such as a dark animal on pale snow or a lit animal against shadow.
- **Simplicity:** choose a scene with a clear, uncluttered structure so the viewer can read it quickly.
- **Lines and shapes:** use the landscape to lead the eye towards the animal.

Scale and space

A small animal in a big landscape conveys isolation, vulnerability or the immensity of nature. A large subject in a modest setting conveys presence and power. Think about the emotional effect of scale and choose it purposefully. A wide frame with plenty of space can feel calm or lonely. A tighter frame with more of the animal feels more intimate.

Layers: foreground, middle ground and background

Images with depth often have distinct layers. A foreground element, such as grasses, snow or rocks, adds a sense of place. The middle ground holds the subject. The background provides context and atmosphere, whether a mountain range, a bank of mist or a distant treeline. Together they give the image a three-dimensional feel.

Be careful that the layers do not compete. Foreground elements are best when soft or simple, and backgrounds should support rather than distract.

Leading lines

Natural lines in the landscape, such as a river, a track, a ridge, a fence line or a shoreline, can lead the eye towards your subject. Diagonal lines add energy, curves add grace and converging lines create depth. Look for ways to position yourself so these lines point towards the animal rather than away from it or across it.

Natural frames

Overhanging branches, gaps in rocks, an arch of reeds or a doorway can frame an animal within the larger scene. A natural frame focuses attention, adds depth and gives a sense of discovery. It works best when the frame is darker than the subject and simple in shape.

Weather and atmosphere

Mist, fog, rain, snow and dramatic skies add mood and drama to environmental portraits. A lone animal emerging from fog, a herd silhouetted against a storm or a bird crossing a stormy sky can create powerful images. These conditions are often seen as obstacles, but they are opportunities. Dress well, protect your gear and be ready for them.

Time of day and sense of place

Light shapes how a place feels. Soft pink light at dawn, bright midday blue, golden evening and the deep blue of twilight each give the same landscape a very different character. When photographing in a landscape, choose the time of day that expresses the mood you want, and learn how light reaches the place at different times.

Show the story of the place

Think about what makes the habitat distinctive. Is it the remote wilderness of a mountain plateau, the tangled richness of a floodplain, the harsh beauty of an Arctic coast or the open sweep of a savannah? Include the elements that convey that identity: distinctive trees, rock formations, vegetation or weather. The result is an image that could only have been made in that place.

> **Exercise:** On your next outing, make a point of taking at least three environmental portraits of every subject, at different scales. Then compare them to your tight portraits and decide which tell the fuller story.

Key points to remember

- Environmental portraits add context, scale and atmosphere.
- Keep the animal clearly the subject, using contrast, size and position.
- Build depth with foreground, middle ground and background layers.
- Use leading lines, natural frames and weather to add structure and mood.
- Choose the time of day that expresses the character of the place.

CHAPTER 7

Behaviour, Moment and Story

A beautiful composition of a motionless animal is a portrait. A beautiful composition of an animal doing something is a story. Behaviour gives life, emotion and meaning to a photograph, and combining it with strong composition is what separates memorable wildlife images from merely competent ones.

Know the behaviour to anticipate it

The best behaviour images are rarely accidents. Photographers who understand their subjects see moments coming. They know that a bird crouching is about to fly, that a mammal stretching is about to move off or that a fox sniffing the air is about to pounce. This knowledge lets them position, compose and focus in advance.

Spend time observing before you shoot. Learn the sequence of actions that lead to a behaviour, and be ready for the peak. Composition has to be done in advance, because the moment itself leaves no time to think.

The decisive moment

Within any action there is usually a peak: the instant when gesture, expression, light and framing all align. A bird's wings at their highest point, a mother's tender look at her young, a predator's pause before a chase. Capturing that moment depends on anticipation, a fast reaction and a burst of frames around the peak.

Do not stop shooting once you think you have it. The best frame is often a fraction later than expected. Keep going through the action and select the strongest afterwards.

Gesture and expression

Animals communicate through posture, movement and expression. A yawn, a stretch, a head tilt, a shake of fur, a call or a long look can transform a portrait. Look for gestures that reveal character, and wait for moments when the animal's attention, eyes and posture combine in an engaging way.

Eye contact and connection

Eye contact creates an immediate connection. When an animal looks at or near the camera, viewers feel noticed and engaged. But not every image needs it. An animal looking away at something out of frame creates curiosity and implies a story beyond the picture. Choose whether you want connection or mystery.

Interaction

Images of two or more animals interacting are among the most compelling in wildlife photography. Parent and young, courting pairs, playing siblings and rivals in conflict all add emotion and narrative. In

these scenes, composition becomes more complex, because you must balance multiple subjects, relationships and directions of attention.

- Look for the relationship between subjects. What is passing between them?
- Keep the key faces and eyes visible and uncluttered.
- Consider overlap: avoid awkward merging of bodies unless it is purposeful.
- Choose an angle that shows the interaction clearly.
- Use a slightly smaller aperture if you need both animals sharp.

Motion: freezing and blurring

Motion can be treated in two creative ways. A fast shutter speed freezes the action, showing details the eye cannot normally see, such as a wing frozen at its peak or water droplets in the air. A slow shutter speed, often combined with panning, blurs motion to convey speed and energy.

Panning with a slow shutter speed, say between 1/30 and 1/125 of a second, keeps the animal relatively sharp while blurring the background into streaks of colour. It takes practice and many failed attempts, but the results can be striking and artistic. Choose a clean, colourful background for the best effect.

Composing for movement

Moving animals need space in front of them, as discussed earlier, and a composition that takes account of their direction. Track their movement smoothly, and consider where the animal will be when the frame is taken. Frame slightly ahead so the animal enters the picture rather than leaving it.

From single images to sequences

Rather than looking for a single perfect frame, think about telling a story across several images. A sequence might show an approach, a moment of contact, a peak of action and a quiet aftermath. Shooting this way changes your behaviour in the field: you stay with an event longer, vary your framing as it develops and keep an eye out for a beginning, middle and end.

When you edit, a sequence lets you choose the strongest individual image and also build a series that conveys a more complete narrative. This is valuable for portfolios, presentations, articles and books.

Building a visual story

- **Establishing shot:** a wide image that sets the scene and shows the place.
- **Subject portrait:** a closer image that introduces the animal.
- **Behaviour:** a frame that shows what the animal is doing.
- **Detail:** a close-up of an eye, a paw, a feather or a texture.
- **Interaction or climax:** the most dramatic or emotional moment.
- **Closure:** a calm, reflective image that ends the story.

> **Exercise:** Choose a subject and spend an hour trying to capture the full set: establishing shot, portrait, behaviour, detail, interaction and closure. Review them as a series and see which are missing.

Key points to remember

- Learn behaviour so you can anticipate it and compose in advance.
- Look for gesture, expression and the decisive moment, and keep shooting through it.
- Interaction between animals adds emotion and narrative.
- Use both frozen and blurred motion creatively, and leave space for movement.
- Think in sequences to tell a fuller story.

CHAPTER 8

Creative Approaches and Developing Your Eye

Once you are comfortable with the foundations, composition becomes a playground. Creative approaches help you break away from conventional portraits and build a personal style. Equally important is training your eye, so that good compositions come to you with less effort and more consistency.

Minimalism

Minimal compositions strip an image back to its essentials: a single subject, a very simple background and plenty of space. A lone bird on a bare branch against a pale sky, an animal on a vast stretch of snow or a single silhouette on a horizon can be powerful because nothing distracts from the idea. Look for simple settings, use negative space and resist the urge to fill the frame.

Abstract and detail

Not every picture needs a whole animal. Details, such as the pattern of feathers, the texture of fur, a tusk, a paw or an eye, can become abstract, graphic compositions. Use a long lens to isolate patterns, and look for repeating shapes, strong lines and interesting textures. These images work particularly well in series or as a complement to wider shots.

Intentional blur

Deliberate blur can turn a conventional scene into something painterly. Slow shutter speeds with panning, slow shutter speeds with a stationary subject and a moving background, or even gentle camera movement during an exposure can produce impressionistic images that convey energy and emotion. Many will not work, but the ones that do can be remarkable.

Pattern and repetition

Flocks, herds and colonies provide natural patterns. Rows of birds on a wire, a line of animals walking across a ridge or a mass of seabirds on a cliff all create rhythm. Look for a break in the pattern, such as one animal facing the opposite way, which adds a focal point and a story.

Reflections and water

Still water offers reflections that double a subject and add symmetry. Moving water adds texture and movement. Low angles near the water help capture reflections clearly. Dawn is often the best time, when the water is calm and the light is soft. Be careful with exposure, since reflections can be darker or brighter than the main subject.

Breaking the rules on purpose

Once you understand the guidelines, test their limits. Put the subject dead centre. Crop in so tightly that part of the animal is cut off. Place the animal tiny in a vast frame. Tilt the camera for a dynamic feel. Let the horizon sit high or low. The key word is purpose. A rule broken for a reason can make an image memorable, while a rule broken by accident usually looks like a mistake.

Developing your own style

Style emerges from repeated choices over time: the kinds of light you prefer, the way you frame, the colours you favour, the moments you wait for and the way you edit. You cannot force it. But you can encourage it by noticing patterns in your best work and leaning into them.

- Review your favourite images from the past year. What do they have in common?
- Notice which subjects, places and conditions excite you most.
- Experiment with different approaches, then keep what feels like you.
- Study photographers you admire, ask why their images work, and then find your own variation.

Analysing your own images

The fastest way to improve is to analyse your work honestly. When reviewing an image, ask a series of questions.

- What is the picture about, and is that clear?
- Where does my eye go first, and is that the subject?
- Are there distractions in the background, foreground or corners?
- Is there enough space for the animal to breathe and move?
- Does the light support the mood?
- If I could change one thing, what would it be?

Learning from others

Look at a lot of great wildlife photography, in books, exhibitions, competitions and online. Do not simply admire. Study. Where is the photographer standing? What is the light doing? How is the background handled? What makes the image feel alive? Try to reproduce the techniques, not the images, and apply them in your own way.

Projects

Working on a project gives your photography direction. It might be a single species through a year, a local patch through the seasons, a theme such as winter light or a technique such as panning. Projects encourage you to look more deeply, return repeatedly and develop a body of work rather than a collection of single images.

Practice exercises

- **Background week:** for one week, pay attention only to backgrounds before pressing the shutter.
- **Low-angle challenge:** photograph every subject from eye level for a month.
- **One-frame limit:** on a short outing, allow yourself only twenty frames, and make each count.
- **Minimalism day:** photograph only simple, uncluttered compositions with plenty of negative space.
- **Story set:** produce a six-image sequence of a single subject or event.
- **Image review:** every month, choose your best three images and write down why they work.

Key points to remember

- Creative approaches such as minimalism, abstracts and intentional blur extend your range.
- Break the rules on purpose, not by accident.
- Style emerges from repeated choices over time.
- Analyse your own work honestly, and learn from the work of others.
- Use projects and exercises to build deliberate, consistent skill.

Final Thoughts

Strong composition is not a formula. It is a habit of attention: noticing the background before you press the shutter, choosing your height and angle deliberately, waiting for the gesture that brings the frame to life and asking yourself what you want the viewer to feel.

Start by choosing one idea from this guide each time you go out. Spend a morning thinking only about backgrounds, or only about eye level, or only about space around the subject. Review the results honestly. Over time these deliberate choices become instinct, and your images will begin to carry your own voice.

If you would like to practise these skills in the field with expert guidance, join us on one of our small-group photography tours, where every day is built around light, behaviour and making images you are proud of.

Thank you for reading, and happy shooting.