

WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY

15 TIPS for BETTER PHOTOS



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DO SOME RESEARCH

Do you want to photograph a particular type of animal? Or a certain animal behavior? Or the splendor of a bird's plumage during mating season?

Then it's important that you do some research beforehand.

Find out where the habitats of the animals are. In the forest? At the brook? On a meadow? Often it is the areas where two or three different landscapes meet that are interesting. At what time of day does the animal go where? Where does it feed, where does it seek shelter? On which paths does it move? When is the mating season and when do the chicks hatch?

As a basis for research, I can highly recommend the online portal [Naturgucker](#).



BE READY!

Have your camera ready for a quick action. Remove the lens cap, turn it on, check the battery charge, and set your camera settings to cover a wide range of uses. Sometimes you need to move pretty darn fast. You might have only one chance to take THE photo.

When I shoot with my Sony Alpha using the 100-400 mm telephoto lens, I set the aperture priority to F 8 as the default and ISO auto. From there I fine tune the settings, varying the aperture or shutter speed depending on the situation.

If it's still a bit dark in the morning, you might have to shorten the shutter speed a bit or increase the aperture by making f-stop number smaller.

WHICH FOCUS MODE?

For wildlife photography, you should always choose the continuous autofocus. This is especially important for continuous shooting in burst mode. For Nikon and Sony, this autofocus is called AF-C, while for Canon it is known as AI Servo AF.

Depending on the shooting situation, tracking autofocus or animal eye detection also might make sense. For the latter function, the focus remains on the animal's eye, no matter how it moves. It is best to try out both in different situations with your camera. This way you will get a feeling for what works well and what does not. This varies from camera to camera and depends on the subject.



BURST MODE

The burst mode for continuous shooting of several images in a row (as long as you keep the shutter button pressed) is certainly one of the best inventions for wildlife photography. Some cameras offer up to 30 frames per second without blackout. Chances are high that you can get the desired movement or facial expression with these multiple shots.

But there's another advantage. Because it's easy to get shaky when you press the shutter button, some images can lose sharpness. However, if you hold down the button and take at least three pictures of the same subject in quick succession, the second and third pictures are likely to be sharper than the first.

Tip: You do not need to hold your breath with this shooting function.



INCREASE THE SHUTTER SPEED

When you photograph animals, you usually use a telephoto lens. However, these lenses are particularly sensitive to camera shake. To get sharp images, you need a fast shutter speed. The rule of thumb says that the shutter speed should be faster than the reciprocal of the focal length. That is, if you are shooting at 400mm focal length, then you should choose a shutter speed faster than 1/400 of a second.

You want to photograph birds in flight? Then you need an even higher shutter speed of 1/2500 second or faster.

Many modern lenses already have good image stabilizers built in to reduce camera shake. However, if you're shooting from a tripod with such a lens, you'll need to turn off the image stabilizer.





SHARP EYES ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT

If the eye is the only thing in focus, then we perceive the image as being sharp. Therefore, you should make every effort to get the animal's eye crisp. Some cameras offer an animal eye detection function for this purpose. The camera automatically searches for the eye and focuses. However, this only works if the eye forms a good contrast to the animal's face.

The autofocus usually focuses on what is closest to the camera within the AF area. So if both the eye and the beak are captured in the focus field, the camera might focus on the beak. You can compensate for this by increasing the depth of field (higher f-number) or by manual focusing. If the two eyes are not at the same distance from the camera, often only one will be in focus. Then you should either focus on the closer eye or increase the depth of field so that both eyes are in focus.

THE LIGHT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

Good photo light brings out the best in your subject and makes the image unique. Unfortunately, good light is not available on order. But you can at least increase the probability of good photo light if you go on a photo hunt in the morning and evening hours. These are the so-called "golden hours", the times with especially warm and soft light.

In addition, the low sun offers good opportunities for exciting backlight shots.

The early or late photo walk offers you even another advantage: The animals are usually more active in the morning and evening hours.





PAY ATTENTION TO THE BACKGROUND

In the rush of the moment, it's easy to overlook the background. But it's almost as important to a good photo as the subject. A blurred, uniform background is ideal. How do you get that?

First, make sure that there are no distracting elements in the background. This can be, for example, branches, trees, people, colors and lighter or darker areas.

The best way to get a blurred background and thus an isolated motif is to use an open aperture (small f-stop number).

The longer the focal length and the closer the animal, the blurrier the background.

You can best isolate the animal from the background when it is far away from the animal. If the animal is small and on the ground bring the perspective as far down as possible.



COMPOSITION

Consider the rule of thirds when composing the image. In doing so, you divide the image into nine equal parts with two horizontal and two vertical lines. To make your photos more interesting, do not place the subject in the middle, but at one of the lines, preferably at one of the intersections.

When positioning your animal in the picture, you should also make sure that it is moving or looking towards the center of the picture. In addition, it should have some free space in the direction of movement/view and not be trapped in your photo.

Most cameras allow you to display an auxiliary grid in the viewfinder or on the display. You can also turn on the grid later when editing the image.

EYE LEVEL

Appealing animal photos are rarely pictures that look down on the animals from above. On the contrary, the most beautiful pictures show the animal at eye level. And if you want to make the animal look a little more imposing, go even a little lower than eye level.

Besides the psychological effect, this “frog” perspective has another advantage. It takes the focus off the background and allows you to isolate the animal better from the background. In this way, the viewer's focus is drawn more strongly to the subject and the animal comes into its own.



RULE OF ODD NUMBERS

If you're photographing a group of animals, try to picture an odd number of them. For example, a picture with three giraffes looks more dynamic and interesting than a picture with two or four giraffes.



USE THE FOREGROUND

Your animal is hiding behind leaves? Congratulations!

This is the perfect setting for an interesting image that shows the animal in its habitat. Blur the foreground by using an open aperture (small f-stop number) and focus on the hidden animal.

This takes a bit of patience and practice, but with a small autofocus area selected, you'll get it right quickly. The farther the foreground is from the animal, the better it will blur and give your image more depth.



SHOW THE ANIMALS IN THEIR HABITAT

Format-filling animal shots are impressive and, for some species, certainly like winning the lottery.

But sometimes these images also lack something, because they take the animal out of context. So make sure you also take shots that show the animal in its habitat.

A good opportunity for this is when the animal is so far away that your telephoto lens reaches the limits of its range.





SHOW THE ANIMALS BEHAVIOR

A pretty bird sitting on a branch is nice. But a pretty bird feeding its chicks or flying away from the nest is more exciting. Isn't it? (This rule also applies to elephant seals.)

Try to capture the behavior of animals in your shots. I especially like pictures that show interaction between several animals – feeding, courtship, grooming, territorial fights, or hunting. You might even be able to capture emotions in your images and trigger them in the viewer.

What do you need for this? A lot of patience, a good observation spot and maybe some cookies for motivation. Good preparation also helps. The more you know about the animals you want to photograph, the easier it will be.

SHOOT IN RAW FORMAT

Most cameras allow you to set the file format. You have the choice between JPEG, RAW and JPEG + RAW. In contrast to the RAW format, JPEG provides a slightly processed image. However, image information is lost in the process. With the RAW format, the detailed information in the highlights and shadows is preserved. So if the exposure is not perfect, you can simply darken or lighten your photo afterwards on the computer. To do this, you will need image editing software such as Photoshop or Lightroom. Of course, you can also lighten or darken your JPEG photo afterwards, but it works much better with the RAW photo.

TIP: Use the exposure compensation and underexpose your photos a bit ($1/3$ to $2/3$ EV stops). The detail information in the highlights is lost faster than in the shadows. Therefore, it is always easier to brighten an image a bit afterwards, because the detail information in the shadows is preserved better than in the highlights.

Important: Do not rely on the camera display when you want to check the exposure. The ambient light and the brightness setting on the display itself can quickly lead you astray. Instead, turn on the histogram on your display. If the bars in the histogram pile up on the far right or far left, you should adjust your exposure settings.



RULES FOR WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY

I saved the most important for the end. Something that is even more important than the Golden Ratio and the Golden Light. That is the animal itself. What good is the best light and the most beautiful background if we have driven the animal away with reckless behavior? Or if it even gives up its young because it feels permanently disturbed?

- Out of respect and for the good of the animals, please keep to the following rules:
- Do not chase the animals when they flee.
- Move quietly and slowly so as not to frighten the animals.
- Keep your distance from nests and young animals.
- Do not block access to nests and clutches and thus interrupt feeding.
- Do not touch wildlife or their eggs.
- Do not alter nests.
- Do not attract wildlife with treats, i.e., no bread or highly processed or salted products.
- Do not harass wildlife, throw anything at them, or yell at them to elicit any response.
- Don't use flash on nocturnal animals because their sensitive eyes would be severely blinded. A less intense continuous video light is better here.



ALL THE TIPS AT ONE GLANCE

- Do some Research about the animal that you want to picture (habitat, behavior during the day or season)
- Be ready! Prepare and check your camera settings.
- Focus Mode: AF-C, tracking or eye detection AF
- Burst mode for continuous shooting
- Increase the shutter speed for moving animals or when you use tele lenses
- Sharp eyes are the most important
- Light – use the "Golden Hours" in the morning and evening (backlight shots)
- Blurry Background – open aperture, long focal length, close to subject
- Composition – Rule of Thirds
- Eye level with the animal
- Rule of odd numbers
- Use the foreground
- Show the animals in their habitat
- Photograph the behavior of animals
- Shoot in RAW format

This list could be extended with many more points. But with the tips listed here, you already have some important starting points to develop your wildlife photography. But the most important things to remember are: have fun while photographing and be respectful to the animals. You don't have to implement all the tips at once. Print out this page as a cheat sheet and put it in your camera bag. On your next photo tour, you can try out the tips step by step.

Now it's your turn! I wish you good progress and would be happy if you tell me how it went.



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