



HOW TO CAPTURE THE DECISIVE MOMENT

BY MICHAEL SNEDIC

'The moment' in wildlife photography can come and go in a split second. Here's 11 tips to help you ensure you catch it with your camera.



What a thrill it was to be with my photography expedition group in Svalbard, in the Arctic, waiting for this curious polar bear to walk right up to our ship. I waited patiently until it started hopping over some ice patches, using Continuous Focus and Continuous Shot to capture the action. Nikon D810, Nikon 70-200mm f/2.8 lens. 1/3200s @ f5.6, ISO 800.



Most photographers who have tried to photograph wildlife behaviour or 'action shots' will agree that capturing THE shot can be quite difficult. It is easy to miss that pivotal split second moment when trying to achieve great shots of wildlife behavior. So in this article, I have compiled a list of wildlife photography tips and techniques that if followed will greatly improve your chances of getting stunning shots.

OBSERVE YOUR SUBJECT

1 One of the most important parts of getting decent shots of wildlife 'action' is to observe the subject you are about to photograph. If it's a bird, does it fly regularly in a certain direction? Does it bob its head before flying? Do you notice a certain 'pattern' of behaviour, that the bird repeats over and over? Once you get a bit of an idea as to what the subject might do, you have a far greater chance of being ready to press the shutter button at the precise moment required. Some observation beforehand will certainly improve your chances of 'nailing' that shot.

LENS CHOICE

2 Lens choice is quite important when photographing wildlife. Using a longer focal length (a lens that goes to 400, 500 or even 600mm) is recommended. This enables you to fill the frame of your camera, rather than getting a miniscule image. Sure, you can always crop images where the subject is tiny, but you end up using way too many pixels. This means that if you plan to print your image at a reasonable size, you won't have the quality due to the reduced pixels.

One thing to consider when looking to buy a large lens for wildlife photography, is the weight. You need to be able to hand-hold the lens comfortably for a set amount of time. Lenses with a wide minimum aperture (for example, f2.8) are perfect for capturing 'action' shots of wildlife, as they are regarded as 'fast' lenses. The wider the minimum aperture, the faster the shutter becomes. This is very important when trying to freeze movement for a fast-moving animal. The down-side of lenses with wide apertures is that they are usually quite heavy and also much more expensive than lenses with smaller minimum apertures (in size).

During my wildlife photography workshops and expeditions, I regularly mention to my participants to 'shoot wide open'. Quite simply, this means setting your aperture to the widest that your zoom or telephoto lens allows. This could be f2.8, f4, f5.6 or even f6.3 for some zooms with longer focal lengths. That way, you are letting in the most amount of light possible, as well as helping to blur out the background. If your subject is a fair distance away, and you own a lens that stops down to f2.8, this will be fine for getting the whole animal in focus. If your subject is much closer, then setting your aperture to f4 or f5.6 will allow great depth-of-field, otherwise only a part of the animal will be in focus.

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I managed to capture a shot of this osprey just after it had dived deep into the water to catch a fish. I had been observing this bird's behaviour for a long time, so was able to pre-empt the diving. I was ready with my camera as it started flying out of the water, finger on my shutter button in readiness! Nikon D200, Nikon 80-200mm f/2.8 lens. 1/800s @ f5, ISO 200.



This male Elephant Seal in South Georgia was flipping sand onto its back every five to ten seconds. I was able to wait for each time it did this and click away. I also made sure that I was at eye level and that there weren't too many close distractions behind the seal. Nikon D810, Nikon 70-200mm f/2.8 lens. 1/3200s @ f5.6, ISO 400.

3 FREEZING MOVEMENT BY USING A FAST SHUTTER SPEED

To try and freeze the exact moment an animal is displaying some sort of behaviour, a fast shutter speed is required. Depending on the lens you are using, a shutter speed of at least 1/1000th of a second is needed. If lighting conditions are good, going even higher is a better option, as you are giving yourself a much greater chance of getting the shot, especially if the animal is moving fast. One tip that I always suggest is to keep an eye on your LCD and check out the last lot of images you have just taken. If there are a series of blurry shots in a row, your shutter speed is too low. By increasing the camera's ISO, your shutter speed automatically increases.

4 THE IMPORTANCE OF USING CONTINUOUS FOCUS

Set your camera's auto-focus to Continuous (or AI Servo for Canon users), so that you can follow any movement with the focal point (or points) while keeping your finger half-depressed on the shutter button. By doing this, the focus will follow the subject you are tracking. Then, at the exact moment you feel the subject is in a good position to photograph, press the shutter button!

I always recommend using the camera's continuous shutter or 'burst' mode in conjunction with continuous focus. You will then be able to capture each variation in any behaviour displayed, giving you lot's of options to choose the best shot in the series of continuous images taken.

ONE MORE THING...

For the last 16 years, I have taught the following three points when shooting wildlife behaviour:

1. Use an ISO setting that is as low as you can get away with.
2. Choose the fastest shutter speed that the lighting conditions allow.
3. Use the lowest aperture that your particular lens allows.



5 BACK-BUTTON FOCUS

Cameras usually focus by pressing the shutter button half way, then the shot is taken when the shutter is fully depressed. Back-button focus is where the shutter button doesn't control the focus, but a button (that you have set as focus) on the back of your camera does.

A lot of photographers have never heard of back button focusing, and of those that have there are those that aren't sure how to utilize this feature to their advantage sure of its benefits. Personally, I wouldn't even dream of ever going back to the normal focus method (I.e. Shutter button). Back button focus really is a game-changer, especially when trying to photograph wildlife action shots! . Back button focusing enables you to separate the

focus from the shutter button. By pressing the AF-On button when you need to focus, it allows you to remain in AF-C/AI-Servo mode while still being able to focus and recompose your shots.

Recently, while on an expedition to Antarctica, South Georgia and the Falkland Islands I managed to photograph a Chinstrap Penguin porpoising in and out of the water, using back button focusing. I pointed my focal point (the centre point is usually the most accurate) at the penguin and pressed AF-On button. I held down the AF-On button to track the focus and pressed the shutter button at the same time.

With the former method, if my camera's focal point went off the penguin, I would have lost the shot. With back button focus, if the focal point had left the penguin, it would have stayed close to the penguin, especially since the bird was swimming parallel to me.

6 THE IMPORTANCE OF COMPOSITION

Composing a wildlife behaviour shot well can be the difference between an average shot and a stunning one. When an animal is moving in a particular direction (flying, running, swimming etc), it is imperative that you leave room in the direction it is going, rather than 'wasted space' behind the animal.

If your subject displays certain behavioral traits from time to time, wait until this behaviour happens and fire away! It is well worth the time spent waiting in order to capture that special moment with your camera.



7 PATIENCE, PATIENCE, PATIENCE

If you enjoy photographing wildlife and are looking to capture action shots, one of the most important things to remember is patience. After 22 years of wildlife photography, I have spent hours, days and even weeks (in a camouflaged) waiting for that perfect moment to press the shutter button. I have never looked back and thought 'that wasn't worth it'. Having a real passion for what I do certainly makes it much easier to wait for special moments to capture.

8 MOTION BLUR FOR AN ARTY EFFECT

When you want a crisp, clear shot of a moving animal, you need to use a fast shutter speed. You can also be creative, especially in low light, by using a slow shutter speed (i.e. 1/25th of a second). This results in motion blur. In the Russian Far East I was in a zodiac when we encountered thousands of Crested Auklets. The light conditions weren't favourable, so I set my shutter speed to a low speed, then panned as the birds flew. The end result was a different effect you can see below.



9 STABILISING LARGE LENSES

One of the most difficult parts of photographing wildlife for many photographers is being able to keep large lenses stable. Depending on your size, health and fitness it can be near-impossible to handhold heavy lenses for any length of time. To get closer images of wildlife behaviour, a larger focal length lens is recommended, so it's a matter of taking a few steps to make hand-holding much easier.

One way to keep a large lens steady is to use a sturdy monopod with a specific monopod head. This head fits onto the collar of the lens and allows you to swivel the camera/lens, as well as allow for back and forth movements. In between shooting, while you are waiting, the monopod also takes the strain off your arms as you can rest your camera and lens on it.

Using a gimbal is also a great way to use your larger lens smoothly without hand-holding or jerky movements. The gimbal can be fitted onto a monopod or a tripod. The only downside of using it with a tripod is that the combination of a heavy camera, lens, tripod and gimbal, is the overall weight. That said if you are photographing birds bathing or preening by the shore, you can set up in one spot and stay there for the shoot. Gimbals can be a bit tricky to get used to, but with a bit of practice, they are well worth it.

10 APPROACH YOUR SUBJECT WITH CARE

One thing that I learned 23 years ago when I started out is to approach your subject slowly, without making sudden jerking movements or noise. Often it's best to sit quietly and let the animal(s) get used to your presence, so that they end up feeling comfortable around you. They will then generally perform natural behaviour and won't run or fly away at the slightest movement you make.

Another tip is to walk very slowly from a distance and take a few shots. Observe the animal and if it seems relaxed, move a little closer and do the same. That way you have a much greater chance of getting at least some shots, rather than doing what many photographers do – walking towards their subject to get a closer shot, only to see it scampering away even before the camera's shutter button was pressed!!

ABOVE: Using back-button focus, I was able to keep focus on the penguin, without the focus point going off into the distant waves. Nikon D810, 70-200mm f/2.8 lens. 1/4000s @ f5.6, ISO 400.

LEFT: I set my camera to manual, slowed my shutter right down and panned as this flock of auklets flew past. This was the result! Nikon D810, 70-200mm f/2.8 lens w/ 2x converter, 1/25s @ f11, ISO 100.



“GETTING DOWN TO THE SUBJECT’S EYE LEVEL IS SOMETHING I ALWAYS DO AND HIGHLY RECOMMEND.”



ABOVE: While on safari in Kenya, a radio call went out that there was a Cheetah with her cub nearby. We approached the area carefully and she was behind a bush with the cub. After waiting around for a while, we noticed a male and female impala and calf walking straight towards the cheetahs, totally oblivious to their presence. Soon after, the female pounced on the young impala, grabbing it by the neck. She held onto it for 3-4 minutes and then let it go right in front of us. The cheetah cub immediately pounced on the calf. The cub was practising and the adult did this so that the cub can learn how to hunt. Nikon D850, Nikon 500mm f/4 lens. 1/3200s @ f4, ISO 400. -0.3exp, lens resting on a beanbag.

11

USING FAST MEMORY CARDS

Memory cards have faster and faster read and write speeds. This isn't referring to the camera's potential frame rate, but the speed at which it downloads your images onto your memory card.

Sometimes an action sequence can last quite a while and you don't know which of the shots will be the decisive moment. By using Continuous Focus in conjunction with Continuous Mode, and a fast card, say 250mb/s Read/Write (or faster), you can keep your finger on the shutter longer, taking shot after shot.

12

EYE LEVEL IS BEST

Whether you are photographing wildlife behaviour or wildlife portrait shots, getting down to the subject's eye-level (where possible) is something I always do and highly recommend. It makes for a much nicer image, rather than looking directly up at an animal or straight over the top of it.

I hope these photographic tips and techniques help you achieve better action shots of wildlife. I suggest you practise as much as you can and eventually many of the techniques will become second nature to you. Above all, enjoy the process! 🌟