

## HOW TO PHOTOGRAPH WILDLIFE ETHICALLY

Photographers have unprecedented tools, opportunities, and reach to find their animal subjects. At the same time, wild animals are facing unprecedented threats to their survival. Habitat loss, climate change, the illegal wildlife trade, overfishing, and pollution have caused the catastrophic decline of birds, insects, mammals, reptiles, and amphibians over the last few decades. A recent United Nations report found that one in four species faces extinction. In addition, modern society's disconnect from nature presents its own threat, one of a culture of indifference. We lead virtual lives, plugged into devices instead of the outdoors.

Wildlife photography has the power to turn people on to the wonder of nature. It's an essential tool to inspire the desire to protect wildlife and spark real change. Photos can go viral on social media in mere minutes, bringing much-needed attention to wildlife in the throes of crisis.

At the same time, social media throws together those who seek to visually capture nature in honest, careful ways with those who take shortcuts at the expense of the subject, intent only on more likes and followers. Viewers can't tell the difference.

What does it mean to be an ethical wildlife photographer? Though there is no guidebook, there are a few basic principles that can help make the way clearer.

### 1. Do no harm

- Do not destroy or alter habitat for a better view or scene.
- Let animals go about their business. Do not seek their attention or interaction.
- Take special care at breeding season.
- Know the signs of stress of your subject species.

There's no question we have an impact when we venture into wildlife's territory. We seek or stumble onto their roosts and dens, their feeding and gathering places. Does that mean we shouldn't ever get out there and raise our cameras? Absolutely not. Nature needs our stories, now more than ever. But nature also needs us to come in with a heightened level of awareness of our effects.

The first principle must be "do no harm." On a basic level, it means not destroying habitat to make for a more picturesque scene. It means not causing wildlife to stop hunting, eating, and resting, or to threaten or charge you.

Breeding season requires special care. Avoid actions that might result in driving parents away from the young, which leaves them open to predators and the elements. Never alter vegetation around nests or dens, as it provides critical camouflage as well as protection from sun, wind, and rain.

We must continuously observe animal behavior and realize when we need to back off or walk away. Reading up in advance and being educated about wildlife behavior is the best means we have to recognize alarm or avoidance in a particular species.

## **2. Keep it wild**

- Be cautious about feeding wildlife.
- Avoid habituating wild animals to humans' presence.

The kindest thing we can do for wild animals is to honor their wildness. The quickest way to compromise that wildness is to offer food so we can get a photo.

## **3. Follow the laws**

- Laws vary by location and species.
- Laws vary depending on the purpose and method of photography.

It's crucial to learn and heed laws and regulations in local, state, and national parks, such as how much distance to keep between us and particular species. These exist to keep us and the wildlife safe.

In any park or other protected area, if we plan on making commercial photography, guiding workshops, or deploying camera traps, we're required to obtain the necessary permits. This includes marine protected areas.

Use of drones around wildlife is a controversial topic, and laws vary widely. They're not allowed in national parks, wilderness areas, and nature preserves. And for those places where they are allowed, we must still consider their effects on the wildlife.

## **4. Consider the captive**

- Scrutinize opportunities to photograph wild animals in captivity.
- Know what makes a legitimate sanctuary or zoo and avoid places where wild animals are exploited for profit.

Captive wildlife photography is a popular pursuit, especially for people who may not be able or willing to travel to far-flung places to see wildlife in its element. A wide range of facilities offer opportunities to photograph exotic animals, including zoos, sanctuaries, rescues, reserves, game farms, wildlife centers, refuges, adventure parks, and safari parks. Living conditions for captive wildlife run the gamut from sordid to exemplary, just as the reasons for their captivity run the gamut from greed to compassion.

## **5. Caption with honesty**

- Be transparent about how a photograph was made.

Ethical practice in wildlife photography doesn't end when we return to the comforts of home. How we represent the truth of an animal's life when we share our photos matters.

Transparency in captioning is also a useful way to check in with ourselves. If we're not comfortable sharing how we got the shot, maybe that's a clue that we might not have made the best choice in getting it.

### **Reputation is everything**

Word travels fast in the wildlife photography community, and fakery or harmful field practices can be readily exposed. These days, it's not just editors and other photographers that are on the lookout; increasingly, viewers on social media are too, speaking up when things appear suspect.

These basic principles provide a starting point. It's up to each of us to build common sense and compassion into our practice. We may not have all the answers, and we may make mistakes, but we can continuously strive to be empathic and aware. It's up to each of us to use the power we have as wildlife photographers to act with great care for the animals that gift us with their presence. These are just about photos to us; but to a wild animal, every single moment is about survival.

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