

## **Approaching Birds and Other Wildlife (for Photographers)**

Birds and most mammals have excellent eyesight. Birds see details better than we do; the visual acuity of hawks and eagles is phenomenal. With mammals, visual acuity varies greatly and is sometimes considerably poorer than ours. Nonetheless, they don't rely solely on eyesight, but compensate with their other senses, so you need to practice a good technique for approaching wildlife.

Birds have excellent color vision; many mammals only have two of the three types of cone cells (receptors for color) in their eyes, so they don't see the full RGB color spectrum that we do. When photographing wildlife, it's best to wear drab colors that will blend into your surroundings. Definitely don't wear bright colors.

Wildlife is particularly wary of movement. Approach slowly and with your camera already at eye level. Take some shots as you approach; you want the animal to get used to hearing the sound of your camera's shutter. Also, if the animal leaves, you may still have a few good shots.

Don't wear clothes that will blow in the wind. If you have long hair, consider tucking it under a drab-colored hat. If you're using a tripod, remove the camera strap or somehow wrap it around the tripod head to keep it from moving about.

Don't walk directly toward your subject, but instead, slowly approach it at an angle, so it doesn't perceive you to be a threat. Use bushes, grass, trees, or other cover that will disrupt your outline as you approach.

If the animal appears nervous or has stopped its normal behavior, especially if it's looking at you, freeze and don't look at it. Direct eye contact lets it know you're aware it's there, and you want it to think you don't see it and are just passing by. Once it seems more relaxed, wait a bit longer, and then take a couple shots and watch its behavior before continuing your approach.

Very few birds have any sense of smell. Mammals, however, have a superb sense of smell. To approach mammals, you have to approach from downwind or with the wind to your side. Don't expect to be able to approach a large mammal from upwind. Many mammals probably move away without us even knowing they were there. For approaching birds, wind direction doesn't matter, but since they take off and land into the wind, approaching upwind of them might help you get a flight shot.

Wildlife has an acute sense of hearing, so try to avoid stepping on dry leaves or twigs. If you make a noise that alerts the animal, wait until it seems more relaxed, wait a bit longer, and then take a couple shots and watch its behavior before continuing your approach.

If you can avoid stalking an animal, that's even better. If you know the behavior pattern of the species, try to position yourself where you'll be at a good vantage point. Try to use what's available to break up your outline. The wildlife in a particular location has often developed behavior patterns that suit that particular habitat. Visiting the same location regularly will help you know which species are likely to be in what area at what time of day. This local knowledge

can allow you to better position yourself, or know where you need to be particularly quiet and alert.

Birds and other animals prefer specific habitats. If you find a particular marsh, pond, field, or woodland to be a good place to see wildlife, try to find a place where you can approach without being seen or heard. Marshes and ponds are generally great places to see wildlife. If you can't approach unnoticed, stand in one place awhile and the wildlife may become accustomed to your presence.

Bird feeding stations are also great spots for photographing perched birds. Watch for a while to see if there's a branch where birds often perch before going to a feeder, and try to find a spot with a good view of the branch. They'll flush when you first arrive, but if you stand still and wait quietly, they'll slowly return if given enough space. Don't make sudden movements.

Wildlife is wary of the human form, but may allow a closer approach if you're in a vehicle or use other structures to break up your outline. Many wildlife refuges have a system of dikes to allow water levels to be manipulated, and there are usually roads on these dikes. Driving slowly along these roads and using a bean bag to shoot out your window can often get you closer shots.

Some locations have blinds for observing wildlife. Some photographers use one-person blinds or ghillie suits. Expect strange looks from people, or even a visit from the police, if you're in a preserve wearing a ghillie suit.

It's also important to know what not to do, so you don't unduly stress the wildlife. Follow the rules in preserves you visit. If you've scared birds off a nest or are keeping parents from a nest or their young, you need to back off! Attracting birds with the use of recorded bird songs disrupts their behavior, especially during the breeding season. Don't repeatedly approach wildlife until it moves to avoid you. Bird photographer Art Morris suggests that if your actions have caused a bird to move three times, you should find another subject.

Tripods are both a help and a hindrance for photographing birds and other wildlife. Wildlife is wary of our actions, so we need to try to blend into their surroundings. Tripods make your approach considerably more difficult, although the added stability of a tripod often outweighs the difficulty it causes in approaching wildlife. Realize that there's a trade-off between getting sharp images with a tripod and not getting some shots because you couldn't make your approach with one. Some wildlife photographers always use tripods, some rarely do, and both get excellent photographs!