

SO, YOU WANT TO BE A WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER? (Part 2)

© Lynda Richardson Wildlife Exposed

In last month's column, we discussed learning all you can about your wildlife subjects and slowly collecting an assortment of gear. After you've picked out your camera, what types of lenses might you be interested in? If you enjoy shooting close-ups of flowers or insects, I'd consider a 100mm or 200 mm macro lens. (Around \$200 - \$400, used.) Be sure to ask if the lens comes with extension tubes. They usually do and you want these for closer focusing capabilities.

If you want to shoot larger critters, select the biggest and brightest telephoto you can afford. I suggest starting with a good 300mm f4.5, or f2.8 if you can afford it, in the \$500 - \$2500 range. If possible, locate a 1.4X teleconverter to fit that particular lens. It will turn a 300mm into a 420mm lens with minimal loss of sharpness. A 2X teleconverter will give you a 600mm lens but the loss of sharpness is too great for my taste.

After purchasing a dependable camera and lenses, invest in a good, sturdy tripod. Do not purchase a lightweight tripod or you will have trouble with wind vibration and camera movement. It's the one purchase you can use with any camera you end up with and it should last a lifetime! I use a Gitzo tripod and an Arca Swiss ball head with quick release plates. The Arca-Swiss head is the smoothest maneuvering head I've found and the quick release plates attached to different cameras or lenses allow for fast, easy changes. Again, it all boils down to what you're going to photograph. Moving subjects can best be photographed with smooth moving ball heads whereas stationary subjects might lend themselves to tripod heads with more precise control adjustment levers. (Though I use my ball heads for everything.)

Since film is the cheapest part of photography, don't be afraid to shoot a lot of it. I shoot slide film because it's what my clients prefer but also, it is much sharper than print film. (Regarding film, publications normally use only slide film as it is best for color separations required for printing.) If you were just learning how to use your camera I'd recommend shooting with slide film because it gives you a "what you see is what you get" results. When you make an exposure on slide film, it is processed and what you look get is the result of the exposures you selected. If it is too bright, (over exposed) or too dark (under exposed), then you made the wrong exposure. When you shoot print film, what you see is the results of whoever printed your film. Printers correct bad exposures so you almost never know that you made a bad exposure unless you look at the negatives. If you want to learn to make proper exposures, slide film is the way to go! But if you just want some nice prints, then print film will do just fine.

Now that you're learning about your subject, you've got the camera equipment to photograph it, and you're shooting with the film you need, you'll want to take a look at the artistic elements involved in composing a photograph. Study wildlife images you see in books and magazines. Which ones do you like best and why? Learn rules of composition like the "Rules of Thirds." Study the use of color, how some colors make your eye move into or out of the photograph. Understand the psychology of keeping an animal's eyes in focus. There are numerous books on the market, which address these techniques and more.

Lastly, patience is the key! You will need patience for the actual process of photography and you will need patience in working with wild subjects. A wildlife photographer is not made over night. Unsuccessful days in the blind and hundreds of missed shots are all part of the process. Don't let it discourage you!

Wildlife photography is a fulfilling, lifelong, learning experience. As you become familiar with your equipment, your photo expertise will improve. And as you learn about wildlife, you will be able to capture its beauty in images that can be shared with family and friends, and possibly, even readers of magazines and books. And isn't that what it's all about; sharing your appreciation of the natural world? Enjoy and good luck!