

## **SO, YOU WANT TO BE A WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER? (Part 1)**

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The life of a wildlife photographer might seem a glamorous profession but the truth of the matter is, it's a hard road to travel. Rarely are there staff positions in such a field so that means taking the route of a self-employed person starting your own business. Self-employment means marketing, bookkeeping, quarterly tax payments, individual health insurance, and, heaven forbid, making enough money to keep food on the table and pay the rent. It's A LOT more than just taking pretty animal pictures.

But let's say you don't care about making a living at it. You just want to be outdoors capturing images of colorful songbirds in your backyard or the elk you saw on vacation last year in Yellowstone. Maybe you want to get a picture published here or there. Either way, let's start at the beginning with four basic things you will need to know to get started.

First, you need to understand everything you can about your wildlife subjects. Second, you need the proper camera equipment, and the knowledge of how to use it. Third, you need to understand the artistic elements involved in photography such as the rules of composition and lighting. And finally, you will have to develop an enormous amount of patience.

To begin with, when I want to photograph a specific animal, I start by learning everything I can about it. I read pertinent material in magazines and books at home or at the local library. I try to observe an animal's behavior in the wild or on videos and movies. I tag along with biologists and researchers because their field work gives them first-hand animal knowledge, which they can pass on to me. This collective information is invaluable because without it a lot of time and energy may be spent looking in the wrong place at the wrong time. The more you know about your subjects, the better chance you have of successfully photographing it.

An important resource to have is a collection of identification books. I take these with me everywhere for on-the-spot identification of animals or plants. The Audubon Society and Peterson Field Guide series are very good, and when photographing in a foreign country, I always try to pick up local ID books.

As you learn about your animal subjects, begin to collect the camera equipment you'll need to photograph them. If you're just beginning in wildlife photography, start slow when choosing equipment. I suggest starting with a sturdy 35mm SLR (single lens reflex) camera with full manual capabilities but make sure the camera you choose has the lenses available you'll eventually want to purchase.

Don't be afraid to start with an older, used camera. Something like a Canon AE1-Program camera is a good beginner's camera and can be purchased used (they don't make them anymore) for around \$125 for the body only. I would recommend just buying a body and then picking up only the lenses you really need. By purchasing an older model camera you'll have access to all those old FD lenses that everyone is getting rid of so they can buy all the new auto focus equipment. Starting with older, less technical equipment gives you a chance to get into wildlife photography at minimal cost (relative to buying new auto focus equipment) and gives you the

opportunity to later decide if you want to stick with it and buy the more advanced gear later. Also, older gear is easier to learn on since there are less “bells and whistles.” You’ve got to start by learning the basics.