

Wildlife Photography

From Snapshots to Great Shots



Get great detail
in your images!

Learn the best
ways to compose
your pictures!

Laurie Excell

Wildlife Photography:
From
Snapshots to
Great Shots

Laurie Excell



Peachpit
Press

Wildlife Photography: From Snapshots to Great Shots

Laurie Excell

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DEDICATION

To my friend and mentor Moose Peterson: Thanks for helping me take my wildlife photography to the next level.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

They say it takes a village to raise a child. It also takes a great editorial staff to help write a book! First off, thanks to my wonderful husband for all the two-minute warnings that dinner was ready while I was writing feverishly, for the late nights I stayed up working rather than snuggling next to you, and for telling me how proud you are of me when I was experiencing writer's block. This book would not have been written if not for my honey's support. Thanks to my editorial team at Peachpit: Thanks Nikki McDonald for the conversations and brainstorming we did that led to this book. Thanks to Anne Marie Walker for your expertise and patience in getting all my i's dotted and my t's crossed, not to mention the grammatical adjustments you did to help the book read clearly and for your gentle nudging to get that next chapter in. Thanks also to Valerie Witte for taking the book to the next step in this mysterious process where I put words on paper and upload a bunch of photos that somehow turn into a beautiful book. Thanks to the rest of the team at Peachpit that does things behind the scenes to get the book to press. Thanks to my beautiful, selfless mother who asked me every day how my book was coming and gave me unbiased (yes, unbiased) critiques when needed. A special thanks to my father for putting my first camera into my hands at a young age and for opening the door to the wonderful world of photography. Thanks to you, the reader, for spending your precious money on this book. I hope you are inspired to take your photography to the next level after reading this book.

Contents

INTRODUCTION	IX
CHAPTER 1: EQUIPMENT ESSENTIALS	1
Recommended Equipment and Accessories for the Wildlife Photographer	
Poring Over the Picture	2
Poring Over the Picture	4
Camera Selection	6
Lens Selection	10
To Flash or Not to Flash	17
Utilizing Tripods and Heads	20
Buying CompactFlash Cards	23
Backpacks and Fanny Packs	24
Creative Filters	27
Protective Coverings	30
Camera Cleaning Kit	31
Flashlight/Headlamp	32
Chapter Assignments	33
CHAPTER 2: CAMERA SETTINGS AND SHOOTING TECHNIQUES	35
Getting It Right in the Camera Is the First Step to Making Great Shots	
Poring Over the Picture	36
Poring Over the Picture	38
Camera Settings	40
Shooting Techniques	52
Chapter Assignments	55
CHAPTER 3: EXPOSURE SIMPLIFIED	57
Understanding ISO, Aperture, and Shutter Speed: Their Relationship to Each Other and to Light	
Poring Over the Picture	58
Poring Over the Picture	60

Exposure Defined	62
Exposure Triangle	63
Light	71
Putting It All Together	78
Chapter Assignments	81
CHAPTER 4: GET TO KNOW YOUR SUBJECT	83
A Better Understanding of Your Subject's Behavior Leads to Great Shots	
Poring Over the Picture	84
Researching Wildlife	86
Field Ethics	90
Types of Wildlife Photographs	93
Know Yourself	102
Chapter Assignments	105
CHAPTER 5: LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION	107
The Where and When of Successful Wildlife Photography	
Poring Over the Picture	108
Poring Over the Picture	110
Start in Your Own Backyard	112
A Year of Seasons and Locations	118
Chapter Assignments	132
CHAPTER 6: CLOSE ENCOUNTERS	135
Tips and Techniques for Safely Getting Closer to Your Subject	
Poring Over the Picture	136
Poring Over the Picture	138
Getting Closer Through Increased Magnification	140
Getting Closer Physically—Blinds	142
Getting Closer Physically—Slowly and Carefully	148
Chapter Assignments	151
CHAPTER 7: CREATIVE COMPOSITION	153
Basic Guidelines for Improving Your Photographic Composition	
Poring Over the Picture	154
Poring Over the Picture	156

Using Lines, Shapes, and Patterns	158
Framing Your Subject	162
Creating Perspective	162
Concealing to Draw Attention	164
Frame Filling vs. Environmental Shots	165
Incorporating Background	167
Applying the Rule of Thirds	169
Chapter Assignments	171
CHAPTER 8: BEYOND THE BASICS	173
Going Beyond the Basics for Creative Control over Your Images	
Poring Over the Picture	174
Poring Over the Picture	176
Creative Use of Exposure Compensation	178
When to Use Manual Exposure	180
Understanding the Histogram	184
Panning for Stop Action or Blur Motion	185
Chapter Assignments	193
CHAPTER 9: BEAR TALES	195
Take a Walk on the Wild Side: Photographing Coastal Brown Bears	
Poring Over the Picture	196
What, Where, When, and How	198
Chapter Assignments	215
CHAPTER 10: BIRDS OF A FEATHER	217
A Visit to One of My Favorite Bird Photography Hot Spots	
Poring Over the Picture	218
What (Equipment), When, and How	220
Chapter Assignments	225
INDEX	226

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Introduction

Anyone can take a snapshot of a wild animal or bird. It takes observing, patience, practice, perseverance, and most important, time behind the camera along with the right equipment to take your photography to greater heights and make great wildlife shots!

This book begins by illustrating the fact that you don't have to have the biggest and baddest, high-performance cameras and lenses to make great wildlife images. In Chapter 1, I cover equipment basics, from a nice, starter, wildlife kit to high-performance bodies and bazooka-like lenses that enable you to make the in-your-face wildlife images you dream of.

In Chapter 2, I explain the camera settings that I use when photographing wildlife and provide images to illustrate the result of those settings. I then touch on Exposure Triangle in Chapter 3, clarifying aperture, shutter speed, and ISO, and their relationship to each other and to the outcome of your images.

The more you know about your subject, the better you can anticipate its next move and be ready when it happens. Chapter 4 gives you ideas on how to learn more. Once you have the gear, have tweaked the buttons and dials to suit your style of shooting, and know your subject, it's time to get out and shoot.

In Chapter 5, I discuss some of my favorite locations and seasons that give me the best photographic opportunities to photograph my subject of choice.

Moving right along in the progression to becoming the best wildlife photographer you can be, in Chapter 6, I discuss options for safely getting closer to your subject, and in Chapter 7, I cover composing your photographs in a pleasing arrangement so that people pause for just a moment longer while they enjoy your images.

Once you have the basics of wildlife photography down, you are ready to move on to Chapter 8 and go beyond the basics, introducing your own style, likes, and dislikes into your image making.

I wrap up the book by taking you along on two wildlife photo shoots. Chapter 9 takes you on an actual adventure to photograph bears in Alaska, giving you a sense of real-world wildlife photography. Chapter 10 follows in the same vein, but I take you to South Texas to photograph the many species of birds that frequent the area.

So, just turn the page to begin your journey to become a better wildlife photographer.

4

ISO 400
1/350 sec.
f8
500mm lens



Get to Know Your Subject

A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF YOUR SUBJECT'S BEHAVIOR LEADS TO GREAT SHOTS

Understanding the buttons and dials, the menus, and the nuts and bolts of your camera, as well as becoming proficient with it, is a good start. Even though you are anxious to get out in the field, if you are patient (something you need to be when it comes to wildlife photography), you'll not only get there, but you'll return with some excellent images. Knowing your subject is as important as knowing your equipment. To be a successful wildlife photographer, you must become a wildlife observer. It takes patience, persistence, and practice to capture more than just snapshots. Knowing your subject thoroughly helps you to anticipate interesting behavior so that you'll be prepared with the right lens attached and the right settings dialed in, and be ready to fire when the action begins.

PORING OVER THE PICTURE

Causing an animal to alter its behavior could be the difference between life and death, as fleeing burns calories that are greatly needed to survive harsh climates. If your actions cause an animal to run, you are too close!



Spotting a wolf in Yellowstone is a rare treat—and getting photographs of one is even more special. With ethical behavior, slow movements, and minimal noise, you may have enough time to get your lens on a wolf long enough to make a few images.



ISO 200
1/750
f/6.7
600mm lens
with 1.7X
teleconverter

Be sure to observe the rules of safety in Yellowstone National Park by maintaining a distance of 25 yards or more from most subjects (100 yards for wolves and bears). This will normally keep you in the safe zone so you can enjoy photographing your subject without disturbing it.

RESEARCHING WILDLIFE

Long before you are face to face with your subject, you should have done your homework and learned as much as possible about your subject. Not only will this knowledge give you an edge when it comes to anticipating behavior, but you'll learn some fascinating information. For example, a grizzly bear cub is born in the dead of winter weighing mere ounces and nurses for several months while its mother hibernates before they both emerge from the den in the spring. The cubs are born with a light-colored necklace (natal ring), which gradually disappears over the course of a summer. If you are interested enough to photograph a subject, you ought to be interested in learning as much as you can about it. Knowledge of your subjects makes the time in the field much more enjoyable and helps to pass the slow times knowing that action can happen at a moment's notice.

BOOKS

There are many ways to learn about wildlife. Books are a great resource with tens of thousands of titles directed at wildlife in general, as well as those that are specific to an individual species. A good book on birds helps you to identify them and provides you with information on range, plumage during mating and nonmating seasons, size, shape, and so much more. Most libraries have a great wildlife section, but I prefer to build my own library of the subjects that I am most interested in to refer to at my convenience. I also enjoy coffee-table books filled with gorgeous photographs that give me ideas and motivation to go out and make my own beautiful images.

DVDS

DVDs (**Figure 4.1**) are also a great way to learn more about your subject. Not only will you learn behavior traits, but you'll get to witness that behavior in action as you watch bulls sparring with each other over harem rights or the mating dance of a prairie chicken. DVDs are informational and inspirational. *The Life of Birds* and *The Life of Mammals* narrated by Sir David Attenborough are filled with hours of great footage and information.



FIGURE 4.1
DVDs are a great way to observe wildlife behavior with narration explaining it at the same time.

INTERNET

We are so lucky to be living in the current technology age where information on any and all subjects is available at our fingertips. The Internet is full of sites that are dedicated to wildlife. Some sites provide a wealth of information about any subject you are interested in; others focus on what wildlife can be found in a specific location; and still others place an emphasis on protecting our wild heritage. Additionally, there are forums where members share wildlife sightings by area. You can join these forums to learn more and in the process make friends with those of similar interests. Some of the sites I frequent most are the Cornell Lab of Ornithology (<http://www.birds.cornell.edu/Page.aspx?pid=1478>) for in-depth information of birds; Wikipedia for a quick overview of any bird, mammal, reptile, and so on that I need to know about; and Birdbrains (<http://listserv.admin.usf.edu/archives/brdbrain.html>), which is an excellent forum for finding current hotspots to photograph birds in Florida. Numerous sites are available. Simply do a search to find information on the subject you are interested in.

NOTE

An Internet search for the word wildlife brought up 240,000,000 results.



FIGURE 4.2
iBird Pro is one of the apps that I have on my iPad for in-the-field reference.

MOBILE APPS

Nowadays, you can take your research a step further with apps for your portable devices that you can take with you in the field (**Figure 4.2**) for on-the-spot information. Not only do these apps tell you all about your subjects, but many provide audio of the calls and sounds they make.

LOCAL AND NATIONAL WILDLIFE ORGANIZATIONS

Check your local area for organizations that are dedicated to wildlife, such as the Audubon Society, which is a great resource for learning with all the classes and field trips they offer. Not only will you learn more about wildlife, you will also discover where to find wildlife in your area that you can revisit on your own time with your camera in hand. Chances are that you will even make friends with people who share the same interest and find photography companions to join you on wildlife

adventures. NANPA (National Association of Nature Photographers of America) is a great organization for learning about wildlife and wildlife photography, and for meeting other like-minded wildlife photographers. The association also promotes good field ethics to protect wildlife while you enjoy the opportunity to photograph it (see the section “Field Ethics” for more on NANPA). Wildlife conservation is another area where you can learn about wildlife and give back to the wildlife that gives you such photographing pleasure. Some conservation groups include National Wildlife Federation, World Wildlife Fund, and Defenders of Wildlife. An Internet search will help you find an organization in your location and area of interest.

EXPERTS IN THE FIELD

Once you begin your research, you will be surprised at where it leads you. Knowing that mid-July is the best time to visit Florida to photograph Skimmers with their young (**Figure 4.3**), I make the trip there every couple of years. On one visit, an early-morning encounter with a couple of rangers led to an invitation to join them as they excavated a hatched-out sea turtle nest (**Figure 4.4**). Not only did I get some new images



FIGURE 4.3
Using a wide aperture, especially with a longer lens, blurs distracting background details.

ISO 400
1/750 sec.
f9.5
600mm lens
with 1.4X

FIGURE 4.4

Working with experts provides excellent photo opportunities and learning experiences.



ISO 800
1/80 sec.
f2.8
170mm lens

for my files, but I also learned that the turtles come ashore beginning in May to lay their eggs. The female drags her massive body out of the surf to the dunes at night and then uses her rear flippers to dig a hole in which she lays approximately 100 eggs that are ping-pong ball size. She then covers the nest with sand and returns to the sea, never to return to that nest again. Approximately 60 days later, the hatchlings dig their way out of the nest and scurry to the sea (usually in the cool, dark of night) where they remain until it's their time to continue the reproduction process. I could go on and on, but I think you get my drift. Had I not met Ranger Mike, I wouldn't have had such an interesting and educational morning. In addition to rangers, biologists, wildlife researchers, volunteers at various refuges, and so on are all great resources for information.

FIELD ETHICS

As a wildlife photographer and observer you have a responsibility to enjoy your wildlife encounters safely and *ethically*. If you cause a subject to move away, you are too close. If your actions cause wildlife to flee, it could very well be the difference between life and death for your subject because the struggle to survive is great at certain times of the year. Keep in mind that you are not the only one your subject has encountered. Perhaps one small error on your part is no big deal in the overall scheme of things. But cumulative negative encounters by one person after another add up to learned

behavior, and a once-tolerant subject may flee at the mere sight of the next photographer who comes along. Or, even worse, it may act defensively and attack.

My friend Moose Peterson has a quote on his website that states: *“No photograph is worth sacrificing the welfare of a subject.”*

NANPA has published the following guidelines for practicing good field ethics:

PRINCIPLES OF ETHICAL FIELD PRACTICES

- NANPA believes that following these practices promotes the well-being of the location, subject, and photographer. Every place, plant, and animal, whether above or below water, is unique, and cumulative impacts occur over time. Therefore, one must always exercise good individual judgment. It is NANPA’s belief that these principles will encourage all who participate in the enjoyment of nature to do so in a way that best promotes good stewardship of the resource.

Environmental: knowledge of subject and place

- Learn patterns of animal behavior—know when not to interfere with animals’ life cycles.
- Respect the routine needs of animals—remember that others will attempt to photograph them, too.
- Use appropriate lenses to photograph wild animals—if an animal shows stress, move back and use a longer lens.
- Acquaint yourself with the fragility of the ecosystem—stay on trails that are intended to lessen impact.

Social: knowledge of rules and laws

- When appropriate, inform managers or other authorities of your presence and purpose—help minimize cumulative impacts and maintain safety.
- Learn the rules and laws of the location—if minimum distances exist for approaching wildlife, follow them.
- In the absence of management authority, use good judgment—treat the wildlife, plants, and places as if you were their guest.
- Prepare yourself and your equipment for unexpected events—avoid exposing yourself and others to preventable mishaps.

Individual: expertise and responsibilities

- Treat others courteously—ask before joining others already shooting in an area.
- Tactfully inform others if you observe them engaging in inappropriate or harmful behavior—many people unknowingly endanger themselves and animals.
- Report inappropriate behavior to proper authorities—don’t argue with those who don’t care; report them.
- Be a good role model, both as a photographer and a citizen—educate others by your actions; enhance their understanding.

Adopted February 3, 1996, by the NANPA board of directors.

FIGURE 4.5

Signs are put in place to warn of possible danger from wildlife. By paying careful attention to them, you can avoid unpleasant, if not dangerous, situations.



ISO 200
1/250 sec.
f11
24–120mm
lens

From a strictly selfish standpoint, if wildlife continues to have negative experiences with people, our photographic opportunities will become less frequent and making great shots will be an even harder challenge to overcome.

Laws and rules are put into place for your protection, as well as that of the wildlife you pursue. Be alert, obey the rules, and pay attention to signs that warn you of possible danger (Figure 4.5).

TYPES OF WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHS

There are many types of wildlife images to consider, from the more static environmental portraits to frame-filling, in-your-face portraits. Some images capture your subject's behavior and convey action. Over time, you will develop your own personal style of photography and seek out the type of wildlife opportunities that suit your style. The lens you use (see Chapter 2, "Camera Settings and Shooting Techniques") plays a big part in the types of wildlife photographs you make. How close you are able to legally and comfortably approach your subject also impacts the type of image you capture. The location and season (see Chapter 5, "Location, Location, Location") you choose contributes to the types of behavior you are able to photograph, as does your proficiency with your camera.

ENVIRONMENTAL PORTRAITS

Environmental portraits include your subject in its surroundings, adding a storytelling element to your photographs. Images that show habitat provide additional information about the life of your subject and its habitat to those who view them. Additionally, they add a sense of scale between the subject and its world. You may find that your preferred style of photography leans towards including more of the environment, or you might be constrained to capture the overall scene due to the lack of extreme focal length (400–600mm). The same elements that go into making a great landscape image also make great environmental portraits—from lens selection to composition to depth of field. While photographing a Harbor seal in Alaska, I used a mid-range aperture to increase the depth of field, showing more detail in the background yet still keeping it slightly out of focus so that it complements the seal rather than competing with it for your attention (**Figure 4.6**).

NOTE

Although professional photographers work to capture all of the different aspects of wildlife, including portraits, most beginning wildlife photographers tend to start with environmental portraits due to lack of proper equipment (long lenses), lack of photographic skill, and lack of skills in tracking their subject.

FIGURE 4.6

Including the background in this scene of a Harbor seal adds a sense of place to the image.



ISO 200
1/250 sec.
f11
24–120mm
lens



FIGURE 4.7
As you move in tighter to a full-body portrait, the environment becomes less prominent. The sense of place is not as strong.

FULL-BODY PORTRAITS

Whereas environmental portraits provide a sense of place, a full-body portrait doesn't include as much of the surroundings, drawing your total attention to the subject. A tight composition allows you to notice greater details of your subject, such as the shape and size of the flippers on this Harbor seal (**Figure 4.7**) or the sausage shape of its body and the unique, identifying pattern that adorns it, making it unique from any other seal. I tend to use a fairly shallow depth of field when making full-body portraits to minimize any background distractions.

FRAME-FILLING PORTRAITS

Moving in even tighter, cropping out most of the body, and focusing on your subject's face brings you closer to feeling that eye-to-eye, soul-to-soul connection (**Figure 4.8**) with your subject. You can make out the texture of the Harbor seal's fur, the length of its whiskers, the way its mouth turns up at the corners giving it an endearing expression, and the deep, liquid black of its eyes. Being able to move in tighter and see such up-close details brings you closer to your subject (literally and figuratively). There's something about a bold, frame-filling, in-your-face image that can't help but draw you in.

FIGURE 4.8

In a frame-filling portrait, little to no background is included in the frame.



ISO 200
1/250 sec.
f8
500mm lens

NOTE

In-your-face portraits can be made with short lenses by practicing a little patience and visiting locations where the wildlife is habituated to people.

GESTURE

A simple gesture brings your subject to life, making your portraits more dynamic. Gesture can convey curiosity, as in this image of a juvenile Roseate Spoonbill with its head tilted, leg raised, and poised to take that next step (**Figure 4.9**) as it pauses to look at me photographing it. Being prepared and on the alert while observing wild-life increases the odds of your capturing a fleeting moment.

Gesture is attitude; it can exhibit playful and loving behavior (**Figure 4.10**) or show aggression (**Figure 4.11**). There can be no question what certain gestures mean. Or, can there? The Mexican ground squirrel in **Figure 4.12** isn't really sticking its tongue out at me; it came to the water to drink and uses its tongue to lap up the water. Knowing animal behavior, I didn't quit shooting when it lifted its head from the pond. Most mammals will give you some tongue action when they're drinking water, and you are more likely to capture bathing birds at the same water source.



ISO 200
1/500 sec.
f6.7
600mm lens
with 1.7X
teleconverter

FIGURE 4.9
A juvenile Roseate Spoonbill keeps a watchful eye on me as it passes by.

FIGURE 4.10

Two coyotes nuzzling each other in a display of affection.



ISO 200
1/750 sec.
f8
200–400mm
lens with 1.4X
teleconverter

FIGURE 4.11

A coyote baring its teeth as another coyote approaches. The tail between the legs is a sign of submission.



ISO 200
1/350 sec.
f8
200–400mm
lens with 1.4X
teleconverter



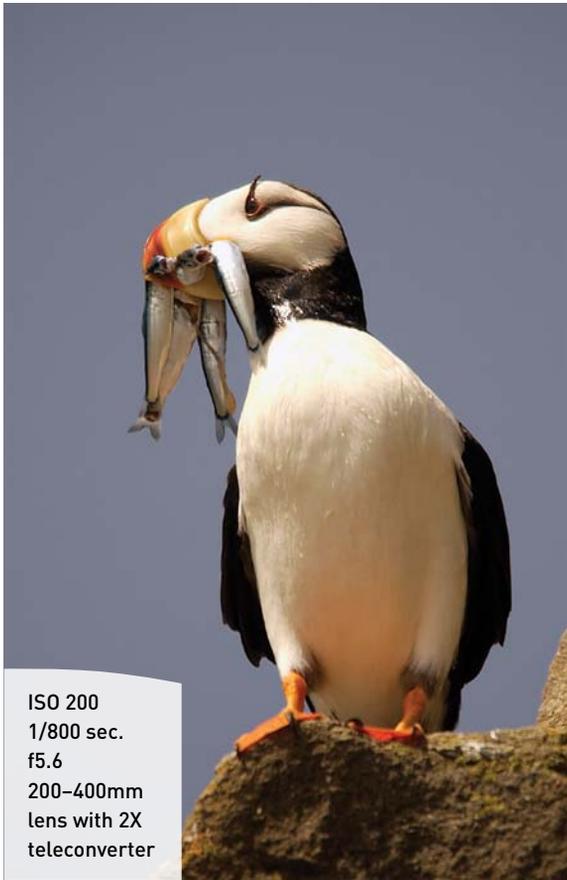
ISO 200
1/350 sec.
f5.6
600mm lens
with 1.4X
teleconverter

FIGURE 4.12
The tongue makes all the difference between a basic portrait and one with gesture.

CAPTURE BEHAVIOR

I like to photograph portraits as much as the next person, but to really get a sense of your subject, try to capture behavior shots that tell more about its personality and life. Behavior encompasses basically everything your subject does, from eating to sleeping, courting, mating, raising its young, and so on. The more you know your subject and its behavior, the greater the chances of success at capturing a decisive moment. I had mere seconds when a Horned Puffin landed on a rock ledge briefly with its beak filled with fish for its young before disappearing into a crevice in the rock where it nests (**Figure 4.13**).

Behavior is passed down from one generation to another. I spent an enjoyable afternoon with an American Oystercatcher and its chick one day in Florida photographing the parent teaching its young how to catch oysters. The parent would catch one, remove the shell, and then drop it back in the surf near its baby. The baby would then grab the oyster as if it had found it (**Figure 4.14**). Everything the adult oystercatcher did, the youngster would imitate. The experience provided hours of entertainment and great photographs. At one point the mom flapped her wings to rid herself of extra moisture; I aimed and fired, capturing the moment (**Figure 4.15**). And just as she finished, I turned to see the chick doing the same thing (**Figure 4.16**).



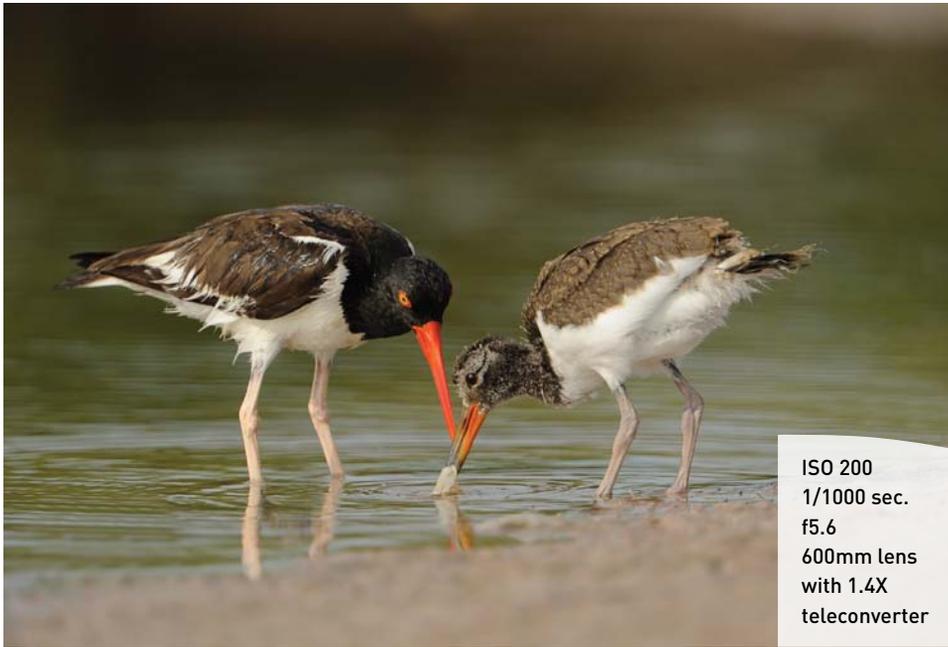
ISO 200
1/800 sec.
f5.6
200–400mm
lens with 2X
teleconverter

FIGURE 4.13

Anticipating that the puffin would land on the rock before disappearing into its nest, I was able to fire off six frames before it was gone.

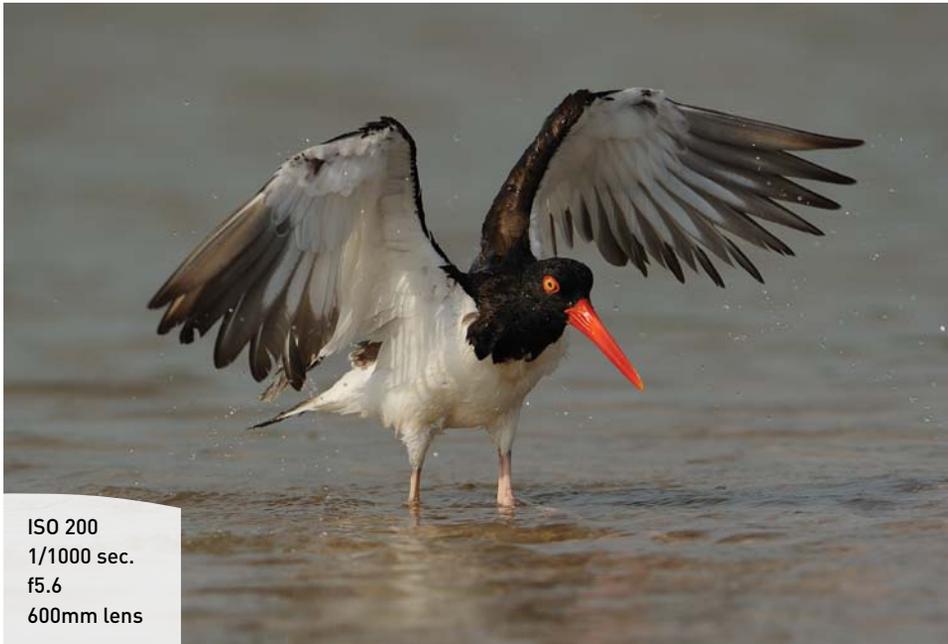
NOTE

The more time you spend in the field, the more you learn about your subject, and the greater the chances you have of capturing unique wildlife behavior.



ISO 200
1/1000 sec.
f5.6
600mm lens
with 1.4X
teleconverter

FIGURE 4.14
A mother oystercatcher teaching her chick to hunt for oysters in the surf in Florida.



ISO 200
1/1000 sec.
f5.6
600mm lens

FIGURE 4.15
A fast shutter speed stops the spray of water in midair as an oystercatcher does a wing flap.

FIGURE 4.16

Learning from its mother through imitation, a juvenile oystercatcher sees its mother do a wing flap and does the same.



KNOW YOURSELF

It may sound strange to say know yourself, but you really have to know your own limitations as well as your strong points to get the most out of your wildlife experience. If you can't tolerate extreme cold, even when bundled up from head to toe (**Figure 4.17**), heading to Yellowstone in winter to photograph frosty bison (**Figure 4.18**) might not be the best plan of action.

You also need to consider how much weight you are willing and able to carry into the field and how long you are able carry it. Understanding your strength capabilities as well as weather tolerance in cold and heat, dry or humid conditions will enable you to plan your wildlife photographic adventures to locations that will yield the best opportunities for you. Your mobility will determine how far afield you can go, if you can get down on your stomach or knees to photograph small shorebirds at eye level, or whether you have to use distance and a long lens to even out the height difference of towering over small subjects.



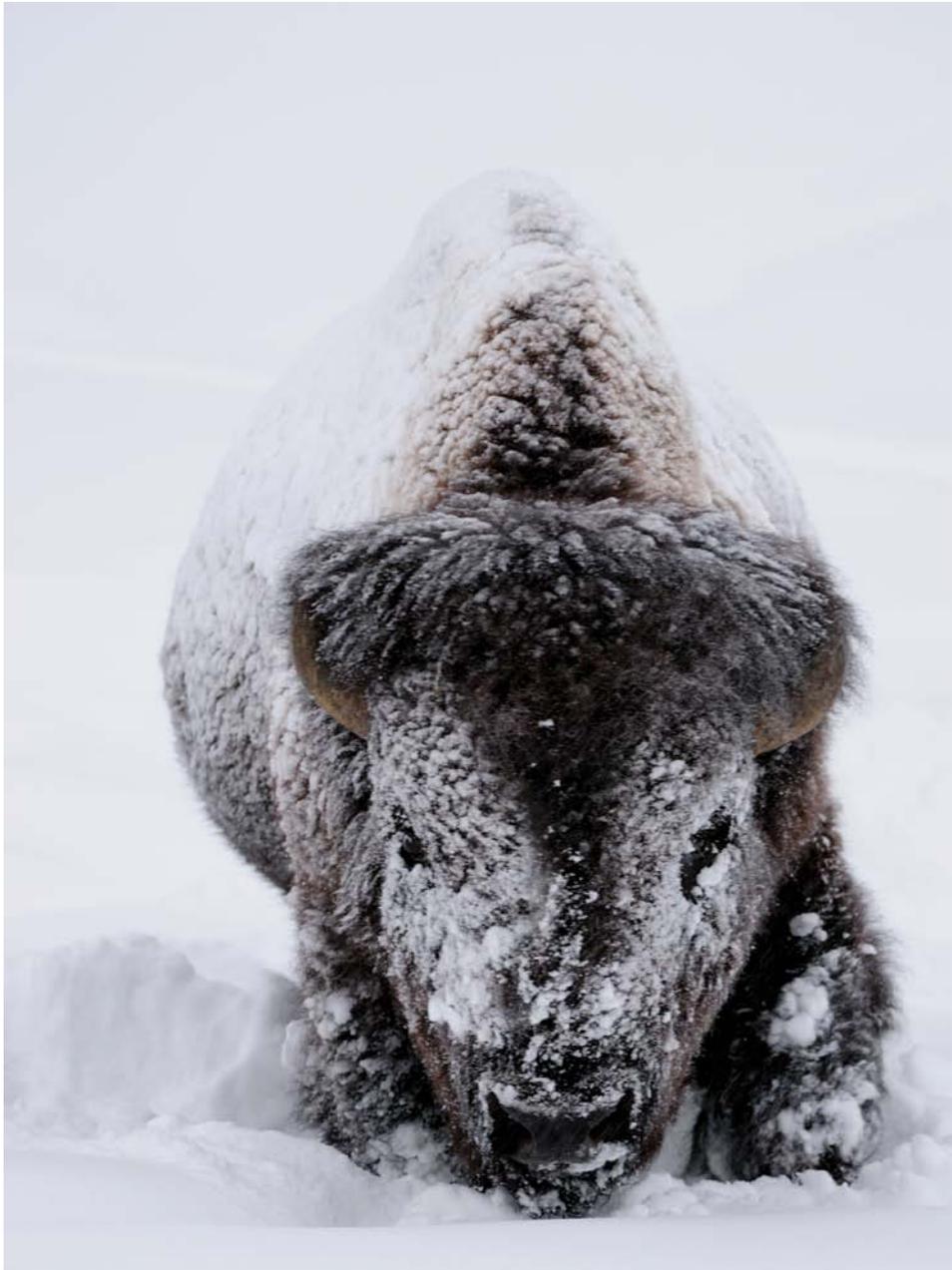
ISO 400
1/80 sec.
f2.8
28-300mm
lens

FIGURE 4.17
A down-filled jacket and Windbloc fleece pants protect me from sub-zero temps in Churchill, Canada. Photograph by Greg Cook.

Wildlife photography is an exercise in patience. You may have to walk great distances to find a subject, or you may have to wait for hours watching a sleeping subject before it actually does something that provides you with more than portraits. Are you prepared to put in the time required to find your subject and then wait until you get not just any shot but great shots filled with behavior and action? If so, you can get to locations that few people visit. If you aren't able to make long treks with heavy gear, plan your adventures around locations where wildlife is accessible from the roadside or a short distance away.

FIGURE 4.18

Its thick coat protects a bison from the sub-zero temperatures and blowing snow that cakes its fur.



ISO 400
1/90 sec.
f4
200–400mm
lens

Chapter Assignments

Take time to work through the assignments before you move on to best locations and seasons (Chapter 5) for finding the wildlife subjects that interest you.

Begin the Learning Process

Now is the time to begin to learn about the subjects that interest you. Start your wildlife library. Purchase your first book or DVD on a subject that is near and dear to you. Spend some time perusing the Internet in search of any and all information you can find. Become educated about one subject at a time.

Study Various Wildlife Images

Take time to look at many different wildlife images made by photographers whose work you like and respect. As you go through each photograph, try to figure out what you like or don't like about each image. Which images appeal to you the most? Do you prefer environmental or frame-filling portraits? Is action what gets you excited? Start to define your own personal wildlife photography style.

Self-assessment

Once you begin to understand the types of wildlife photography you want to pursue, take a good, hard, honest look at yourself and determine if you have the strength, the ability to handle the weather, and the patience to persevere until you get the shot.

Share your results with the book's Flickr group!

Join the group here: [flickr.com/groups/wildlifephotographyfromsnapshotstogreatshots](https://www.flickr.com/groups/wildlifephotographyfromsnapshotstogreatshots).

INDEX

3D Matrix metering, 45
100% viewfinder, 8

A

action
 blurring, 44, 70, 71, 186–191, 193
 stopping, 44, 70, 176, 185–186, 193
 See also motion
Adobe RGB color space, 51
AF-S lenses, 12
Alaska wildlife
 coastal brown bear photo shoot, 195–215
 summer photography, 122–124, 125
American Kestrel, 144
American Oystercatcher, 100, 101, 102
American Wigeon, 113
Amur Leopard, 114, 115
angles for taking photos, 215
Aperture Priority mode, 42–44, 66, 180
aperture settings
 depth of field and, 42, 43, 66, 68
 exposure and, 66–69
 shutter speed and, 68, 69
 teleconverters and, 17
approaching subjects, 148–150, 151
Attenborough, Sir David, 86

B

background composition, 167–168
backlighting, 77, 78, 79
backpacks, 24–25
backyard photography, 112, 132, 225
bald eagles, 45, 50, 111
ballheads, 21, 22
bears
 coastal brown bear, 123, 126, 195–215
 cub in tree photo, 180
 fishing photo, 176–177
 grizzly bear, 76, 79, 170
 polar bear, 129, 145, 161
 waterfall photo, 71, 187
behavior, capturing, 100–102
Better Beamer flash extender, 17, 18
Bighorn sheep, 73, 78, 127, 128, 150, 168
bird photo shoot (South Texas), 217–225
 annotated image from, 218–219
 assignments related to, 225

 blinds used for, 222, 223
 clothing required for, 220–221
 equipment chosen for, 220
 seasonal considerations for, 221–222
birds
 backyard photos of, 112, 132, 225
 blinds used for, 142–143, 144, 222, 223
 seasonal considerations, 120, 122, 221–222
 sources for researching, 86, 87
 See also specific species
bison, 74, 118, 138–139, 165, 166, 167
bit depth, 42
Black Skimmers, 69
Black-capped Chickadee, 112
Black-legged Kittiwakes, 13, 58–59, 178
blinds, 120, 121, 142–147
 assignment on, 151
 bird photos using, 222, 223, 225
 boats as, 146–147
 cars as, 143–144
 established, 142–143
 Tundra Buggy, 145
Blue Grosbeak, 62
Blue Grouse, 192
blur pans, 27, 29, 186–191, 193
blurring motion
 panning for, 27, 29, 186–191, 193
 shutter speed for, 44, 70, 71, 187, 190–191
boats, as blinds, 146–147
book resources, 86
Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, 116, 130
brown bear. *See* coastal brown bear
budget. *See* cost considerations
buffer, camera, 46
bull elk, 80, 127

C

camera settings, 40–52
 Aperture Priority mode, 42–44
 assignment on using, 55
 color space options, 51
 continuous advance, 46–47
 continuous focus, 46
 examples of using, 36–39
 File number sequence, 52
 Highlight warning, 48–49
 ISO setting, 49–50
 Matrix metering, 45
 RAW vs. JPEG formats, 40–42
cameras, 6–9
 cleaning kits for, 31–32
 features to consider in, 6, 8–9
 full-frame vs. cropped sensor, 6–8
 handholding technique, 52–53
 wildlife photography setups, 2–3
Canon wildlife setups, 2–3
capturing behavior, 100–102
Cara Cara, 224
carbon fiber tripods, 22
cars/trucks
 shooting from, 115, 143–144
 used as blinds, 143–145
cleaning kits, 31–32
climate. *See* seasonal considerations;
 weather
closeness to subjects, 135–151
 annotated examples of, 136–139
 assignments related to, 151
 blinds for gaining, 142–147
 extension tubes and, 191–192
 magnification techniques and, 140–141
 physical approach and, 148–150
close-up lens, 30
clothing
 determining for photo shoots, 200–201, 220–221
 problems with noisy, 150
coastal brown bear, 123, 126, 195–215
coastal brown bear photo shoot (Alaska), 195–215
 annotated image from, 195–196
 assignments related to, 215
 clothing required for, 200–201
 daily journal of, 207–214
 equipment chosen for, 199–200
 location determined for, 202–205
 seasonal considerations for, 203–205
 subject determined for, 198
 transportation options for, 205–206
cold weather tips, 119
color space options, 51
Common Grackle, 70
Common Moorhen, 158
CompactFlash (CF) cards, 23–24

composition, 153–171
annotated examples of, 154–157
assignments on, 171
backgrounds and, 167–168
concealment used in, 164, 165
environmental shots and, 165
framing and, 162, 166, 167
lines and, 158–160
patterns and, 161–162
perspective and, 162–164
rule of thirds and, 169–170
shapes and, 161

compression options, 42
concealment, 164, 165
continuous advance setting, 46–47
continuous focus setting, 46
converging lines, 159, 160
cost considerations
desired features vs., 9
equipment setups and, 2–3
older camera models and, 10
coyotes, 47, 98
cropped sensor (DX) cameras, 6–7,
10, 140

D

depth of field
aperture settings and, 42, 43, 66, 68
distance factors affecting, 68
diagonal lines, 158, 159
direction of light, 75–77
distance
depth of field and, 68
maintaining from wildlife, 85
minimum focus distance, 15
DVD resources, 86–87
DX (cropped sensor) cameras, 6–7, 10,
140
Dynamic AF setting, 46, 47

E

eagles, 45, 50, 111
ED lenses, 12
environmental portraits, 93–94, 165
equipment, 1–33
assignments on, 33
backpacks, 24–25
budgets for, 2–3
camera bodies, 6–10
choosing for photo shoots, 199–200,
220

cleaning kits, 31–32
CompactFlash cards, 23–24
example of using, 4–5
fanny packs, 25, 26
filters, 27–30
flash gear, 17–19
flashlight/headlamp, 32
lenses, 10–15
protective covers, 30
teleconverters, 15–17
tripods and heads, 20–23
established blinds, 142–143
ethical field practices, 90–92
evaluative metering, 45
experts, working with, 88–90
exposure, 57–81
aperture settings and, 66–69
assignments on, 81
definition of, 62
effects based on, 78–80
elements of, 62, 63–71
histograms used for, 184–185
ISO settings and, 63, 64, 65, 66
light and, 71–77
manual, 180–183
shutter speed and, 70–71
exposure compensation, 174, 178–180, 193
*Exposure: From Snapshots to Great
Shots* (Revell), 80
exposure triangle, 63, 64
extension tubes, 191–192

F

fall photography, 127–131, 205
fanny packs, 25, 26
field ethics, 90–92
File number sequence, 52
fill light, 17–19
filters, 27–30
graduated ND, 29
neutral density, 27, 28
polarizer, 29
UV, 29
fish, school of, 162
flash, fill light from, 17–19
flashlight/headlamp, 32
Flashpoint tripods and heads, 20
Flickr group, 33
floatplanes, 206
Florida wildlife, 120, 124

focus

continuous, 46
minimum focus distance, 15
teleconverters and, 17
forums, online, 87
Fossil Rim Wildlife Center, 114, 115
frame rate, 8
framing subjects
composition and, 162
frame-filling portraits, 95–96,
166, 167
front-lit subjects, 75
f-stops. *See* aperture settings
full-body portraits, 95
full-frame (FX) cameras, 6–7, 10

G

Galbraith, Rob, 23
game parks, 114–115
geese, 131, 156–157, 169
gestures, 97–99
gimbal heads, 22, 23
Golden-fronted Woodpecker, 223
graduated ND filter, 29
Great Blue Heron, 67
Great Egret, 120, 159, 163
Great Horned Owl, 17, 19
Great Kiskadee, 223
Green Jay, 224
grizzly bears, 76, 79, 170

H

habitat portraits, 93–94
handholding technique, 52–53
Harbor seals, 94–96, 146
Harris Hawk, 224
headlamp/flashlight, 32
heads. *See* tripods and heads
Highlight warning, 48–49, 184
histograms, 184–185
Hooded Mergansers, 69
Hooded Oriole, 143
Horned Puffin, 100

I

iBird Pro app, 88
Image Stabilization (IS) lenses, 12
insurance shots, 148, 149
Internet research, 87
in-your-face portraits, 97

ISO setting, 49–50
digital noise and, 66
exposure and, 63, 64, 65

J

JPEG format, 40–42

K

Kelby Training website, 32
knowing yourself, 102–103, 105

L

L lenses, 12
L-Bracket, 21, 22
lens shade, 188, 189
LensCoat covers, 30

lenses, 10–17
close-up, 30
DX vs. FX cameras and, 10
features to consider in, 12, 15
long lens technique, 53
prime vs. zoom, 11–12, 13, 14
protective covers for, 30
teleconverters for, 15–17

light, 71–77

direction of, 75–77
fill flash used as, 17–19
quality and quantity of, 72–75
techniques for using, 78–80

lines, compositional, 158–160, 171
L.L. Rue window mount, 143, 144
local parks, 113

locating wildlife, 107–132
assignments on, 132
backyard for, 112
local parks for, 113
seasonal considerations for, 118–131,
203–205
wildlife refuges for, 116
workshops used for, 117
zoos and game parks for, 114–115

long lenses

getting closer using, 140–141, 151
shooting technique using, 53

M

manual exposure, 180–183
Matrix metering, 45
memory cards, 23–24
metering, Matrix, 45

Mexican ground squirrel, 97, 99
midday sunlight, 74, 75
minimum focus distance (MFD), 15, 215
minus exposure compensation, 174, 178
mistakes, learning from, 183
mobile apps, 88
mobility considerations, 102
motion
blurring, 44, 70, 71, 186–191, 193
panning techniques, 27, 29, 185–191
shutter speed and, 44, 70–71, 187,
190–191
stopping, 44, 70, 176, 185–186, 193

N

NANPA (National Association of
Nature Photographers of America),
88, 91

national parks, 108
neutral density (ND) filter, 27, 28
Nikon wildlife setups, 2–3
noise

camera body and, 9
ISO setting and, 66
Northern Mockingbird, 222

O

organizations, wildlife, 88
outdoor gear, 200–201
overcast light, 72, 73
oystercatchers, 100, 101, 102

P

Painted Bunting, 220

panning
blurring motion by, 27, 29, 186–191,
193
stopping action by, 185–186, 193
techniques for, 54, 185–191

parks

game, 114–115
local, 113
national, 108
patience, 103, 215
patterns, 161–162, 171
pelican, 77
permanent blinds, 142–143
persistence, 215
perspective, 162–164
Peterson, Moose, 24, 91, 198

PhotoRescue software, 24
Pied-billed Grebe, 154–155
Pigeon Guillemots, 122
plus exposure compensation, 178,
179, 180
polar bears, 129, 145, 161
portraits of wildlife. *See* wildlife
portraits
power points, 169
practice, 215
prime lenses, 11–12, 13, 14
Pronghorn, 150
protective coverings, 30
proximity to subjects. *See* closeness to
subjects
Puffin Pad, 144
puffins, 68, 100, 203

Q

quality/quantity of light, 72–75

R

RAW format, 40–42
Really Right Stuff ballhead, 21, 22
red fox in snow, 119
red light, green light approach, 148
Reddish Egret, 178
refuges, wildlife, 116
researching wildlife, 86–90, 105
resolution, 8
resources, 86–90
book, 86
DVD, 86–87
field expert, 88–90
Internet, 87
mobile app, 88
organizational, 88

Revell, Jeff, 80
reviewing images, 210
Roseate Spoonbill, 97, 125, 180–183
Royal Terns, 121
rule of thirds, 169–170, 171

S

sandhill cranes, 28, 72, 131, 160,
174–175, 188
Says Phoebe, 158, 159
Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, 218–219
S-curves, 159
sea otters, 122

seasonal considerations, 118–131
birds of South Texas, 221–222
coastal brown bears of Alaska,
203–205
fall photography, 127–131
spring photography, 120–121
summer photography, 122–126
winter photography, 118–119
See also weather

Seattle, Chief, 4

self-assessment, 102–103, 105

sensors
cleaning kit for, 31–32
full-frame vs. cropped, 6–7

settings. *See* camera settings

shadows, sunlight and, 74, 75

shapes, compositional, 161, 171

sheep, Bighorn, 73, 78, 127, 128, 150, 168

shooting techniques, 52–54
assignments on, 55
handholding technique, 52–53
long lens technique, 53
panning technique, 54

shutter speed
exposure and, 70–71
motion and, 44, 70–71, 187, 190–191

sidelight, 76, 77

Silent Wave motors, 12

silhouettes, 77

Singh-Ray Vari-ND filter, 27

Skimmers, 69, 124, 125

Snail Kite, 164

snow goose, 169

snow scenes, 74, 80, 168

Snowy Plover, 162, 163

South Texas bird photography, 217–225

Spoonbill chicks, 125

spring photography, 120–121, 203, 221

squirrels, 97, 99, 113, 148

sRGB color space, 51

stopping action, 44, 70, 176, 185–186

stormy weather, 74

Streamlight flashlight, 32

strength capabilities, 102

subject of photos
approaching, 148–150, 151
determining, 198
framing, 162
lighting on, 71–77
proximity to, 135–151

summer photography, 122–126, 203

sunlight
early morning, 72
midday, 74, 75
overcast, 72, 73
See also light

sunrise photos, 72

T

teleconverters, 15–17, 141

telephoto lenses
extension tubes and, 191–192
getting closer using, 140–141, 151
prime vs. zoom, 11–12, 13, 14

Texas wildlife
bird photo shoot, 217–225
springtime photography, 120–121

transportation options, 205–206, 222

tripods and heads
features to consider in, 20–23
importance of using, 20

TTL metering, 18

Tundra Buggy, 145

U

USM lenses, 12

UV filter, 29

V

vehicles
shooting from, 115, 143–144
used as blinds, 143–145

vertical lines, 158

Vibration Reduction (VR) lenses, 12

video features, 9

viewfinders, 8

Visible Dust products, 31

W

weather
cold weather tips, 119
knowing your tolerance for, 102
shooting in stormy, 74
See also seasonal considerations

Web resources, 87

White Ibis, 14

wildlife
blinds used with, 142–147
field ethics related to, 84–85, 90–92
maintaining a safe distance from,
85, 92
physically approaching, 148–150
sources for researching, 86–90, 105

wildlife portraits, 93–102
assignment on studying, 105
capturing behavior in, 100–102
environmental portraits, 93–94, 165
frame-filling portraits, 95–96
full-body portraits, 95
gesture used in, 97–99

wildlife refuges, 116

Wildlife Safari, 114, 115

Wimberley gimbal head, 22, 23

winter photography, 74, 80, 118–119, 168

wolves, 84–85

workshops, 117

Y

Yellow-crowned Night Heron, 186

Yellowstone National Park, 85, 109, 118

Z

zig-zag approach, 148

zoom lenses, 11–12, 13, 14

zoos, 114–115, 132