

An interview with Laurie Excell, author of *Wildlife Photography: From Snapshots to Great Shots*

Q: Photographing wildlife requires a lot of knowledge—about the animals, landscape, seasons, etc. How did you learn everything you know and how can a new photographer get started?

There are so many resources out there today to help learn about your subject. Watching TV specials on subjects you are interested in is a good way to learn more about a subject's behavior. The internet can fill in many blanks as well, and a good book on a subject you are interested in is a good resource for intensive data. And, of course, nothing beats being in the field with a subject and learning firsthand. Going to a local park or zoo also gives you some "practice" time with wildlife before heading out into the field. I was fortunate to meet Moose Peterson in my early years of wildlife photography, and he mentored me and then hired me as his assistant, which gave me front row seats to many a wildlife experience.

Q: In the book you describe a bear safari you went on with Moose. Can you tell us a little about the adventure and how it informed your love of brown bears?

My first wildlife adventure with Moose was to photograph coast brown bears in Alaska. I had never been close to grizzly bears before, and at first I thought, "Big and hairy, pretty scary." But after spending a week observing their behavior and making some amazing photographs as they went about their life pretty much ignoring us, I came to the realization that while they could kill me with one good swipe of their paw, they don't do this unless they have a very good reason. And it's my job to make sure that I don't give them that reason by getting too close, by preventing them from getting to a food source, by causing their young to become distressed, and so on. With careful attention to your subject's well-being as well as your own, you can spend many an hour in the field making wonderful images and having life-changing experiences with wildlife.

Q: What is your favorite type of wildlife to photograph?

I love all creatures both great and small and find beauty in each and every one of them, but if I had to pick just one subject, I'd have to say that grizzly bears top my list. I have spent a week or more in Alaska for the last dozen years photographing these great creatures, and they do have a special place in my heart.

Q: What are some tips on how to approach wild animals? How do you get in close to a subject, say, a grizzly bear?

Know your subject! Unless you understand your subject's behavior and signals, it is not wise to get too close. Visiting locations where the subjects are more tolerant of people helps, and using a slower approach is best. I stop and get the insurance shot first. Then I observe my subject and if it continues about its business without paying me any attention, I move in closer. If the subject begins to exhibit behavior in response to my presence, I stay back. Using the proper equipment (long lenses) is also a good way to bring the subject closer without disturbing them. There are some very good lenses out there that don't break the bank, but for the really serious wildlife photographer, investing in big glass is a must. To me the greatest compliment I can get is when a wildlife subject knows I am there and continues about its daily business, paying little attention to my presence and even moving closer to me on its own.

Q: What's your favorite time of year to shoot and why?

My favorite time of year to shoot is based on the best time of year for specific subjects. I love photographing wildlife in Yellowstone in winter. The snow gives the scene a pristine look, the wildlife have thick coats to keep them warm in the cold, and they are in prime condition. Spring is great for photographing bears with new cubs and mating behavior in many mammals; also birds are in full breeding plumage in spring. Fall is great for the rich colors of turning trees for a beautiful background, and the wildlife is usually in its very best condition as it fattens up to get through the winter months. So I select a place and season based on the types of photography I want to do.

Q: You talk about Alaska being a great place to photograph wildlife. Why do you think so?

Alaska is one of the few places left in the U.S. that has totally pristine areas where I believe man has not yet trod. The wildlife is abundant, the scenery is spectacular, and visitation is not as busy as many locations in the lower 48. It is still a wild place where the animals have not been over-habituated in most areas.

Q: How do you handle photographing in extreme conditions, such as below-freezing temperatures?

I call it dressing for success. In order to photograph wildlife in sub-zero temperatures, I need to be comfortable and my equipment needs to function properly. I dress according to the weather and protect my equipment with its own rain gear in inclement weather. It's important to keep both my fingers and my camera from freezing up. I wear good gloves and use hand and toe warmers in the coldest of weather. I also protect my gear from the elements as much as possible. I use the high-end bodies that Nikon offers, which are protected against moisture and the elements to some degree. I always cover my equipment before entering a hot room on cold days so that condensation does not get inside my lenses or bodies.

Q: Have you ever had any close calls while photographing wild animals? What are some tips for avoiding dangerous situations while still getting the shot you want?

I try to avoid close calls for both my own safety as well as that of the wildlife subject. A bad encounter can end up with me either harmed or dead, and the subject will often pay the price with its life if it kills a person. That said, I have been witness to some pretty exciting stuff . . . bears charging directly toward me as they chase a salmon or a boar chasing a sow in hopes of mating, or a sow confronting a boar and warding him off twice to protect her cubs. One spring we witnessed a cow moose driving a grizzly bear off to protect her newborn baby. She actually kicked the bear twice before it decided to move on.

Q: What are some ethical considerations to keep in mind while photographing wildlife?

I cherish the subjects I photograph, and I never want my behavior to impact their well-being. For wildlife each day is about survival. For us—even for those of us who make a living at this—it's merely about making photographs. I don't believe in doing things that alter my subject's behavior in order to make a photograph. The group North America Nature Photography Association (NANPA, www.nanpa.org/) has some very good guidelines to follow when photographing wildlife. My rule of thumb is to make as little impact on the land and my subject as possible, to allow them to go on about their life naturally so they may stay wild and alive and so that the people I travel with and I will also stay safe and live to share our adventures.

Q: You talk about the importance of “gesture” in your wildlife photographs. How does capturing an animal’s gestures help enhance a photograph?

I have been told that my subjects show emotion. I try to capture the essence of my subjects rather than simply make photographs of wild subjects. I try to know as much as possible about their behavior so that I may anticipate certain actions. This allows me to make images that capture gesture . . . a slight tilt of the head, an inquisitive look, a nurturing moment between a sow and her cubs. The more you know your subject, the better the images you will begin to make.

Q: You talk about different types of wildlife photographs—environmental portraits, gesture, capture behavior, etc. Is there a particular type you find most compelling as a photographer?

I tend to like the in-your-face, frame-filling images. I find them to be dramatic. But including the environment is equally important, to give the viewer a sense of where a particular animal lives. Whichever type of image that I see, I love the ones that evoke an emotional response in me. And you can capture gesture in both tight as well as environmental images.

Q: When people think about wildlife photography, they may overlook the potential of a nearby park or even their own backyard. What are the advantages of those locations for shooting?

Working in a local park or your own backyard offers easy access so you can spend more time watching, learning, and photographing your subject. It is also free so you don’t outlay a lot of cash to learn. Many people overlook the more common wildlife that we see in our backyards, but I have had hours of enjoyment working with the subjects in my own back yard and in local parks. It also provides much-needed practice before heading out on a distant and expensive adventure. You want to be on top of your game before you go to maximize your quality photography experience, and working locally is a great way to stay in practice.