



MUENCH WORKSHOPS

Think Like a Naturalist

Improve Your Wildlife Images

by Lisa LaPointe



Have you ever wondered how great wildlife photographers get that “lucky” shot, the one showing a dramatic behavior or an animal against a perfect backdrop? Most likely, they’ve learned to think like a naturalist, improving their odds. So what exactly does it mean to think like a naturalist? Simply put, a naturalist (not to be confused with a naturist!) is a student of the natural world. You don’t need a fancy degree to be a naturalist, just a willingness to learn and observe. Here are some tips to help you come home from the field (or that once-in-a-lifetime trip) with better wildlife images.

Do Your Research

It may sound obvious, but if an animal isn’t present in the area at the same time you are, you aren’t going to get the shot! Some animals migrate thousands of miles, others hibernate. A region may get used differently through the season, meaning that that bear you expected to see fishing at river’s edge is up in the hills eating berries right now. So, knowing when to go is the first step. What time of year is the animal (or behavior) you want to see most likely? What conditions are necessary for it to be present?

Of course, the best way to learn about a particular destination—and its inhabitants—is to spend time observing there through the seasons, but often that’s not possible. For destinations outside your own backyard, look for guidebooks and outfitter websites, or talk with birding clubs and other photographers. Consider hiring a local guide—a good one will have put in the time to learn an area inside and out. If you are taking an organized tour, ask questions. Once you know what wildlife you can hope to see, you can take your questioning a step further— what signs should you look for that a particular animal is present, or that a particular behavior might be about to happen? Do your research so you can be in the right place at the right time!



Be Prepared

To make the most of your time, resources, and luggage allowances, you'll need to carefully consider what gear you want to bring. Is your subject large or small? Fast or slow? Will it be easy to see it relatively close or is it more likely to be at some distance? The answers may influence your choice of camera lenses and equipment. Is your subject quite easy to spot, or much more reclusive? A pair of binoculars is an excellent addition to any wildlife photographer's kit. Will you need to be in a blind? On a boat? In a 4-wheel drive vehicle? Avoid disappointment by having the tools you need to get a good shot. And remember that you'll get the best shots of a wild animal when you avoid disturbing it. Learning about its needs and habits will help you to remain out of the way, aiding in the capture of natural behaviors.

Beyond making sure you have the right gear, it pays to be prepared in other ways too. Have you ever had the experience of being in the right place at the right time, maybe even having all the right equipment, but failing to come back with the images you were after? Understanding the animal and behaviors that you hope to photograph will help you decide on the correct camera settings—before the action starts. If you can't familiarize yourself with your particular subject before a shoot, look for local wildlife that you can spend some time with. For example, you likely have access to plenty of common birds near your home—practice with those, and you won't be struggling with your camera settings when that rare opportunity flies by!



Go deeper

Being a naturalist photographer doesn't just take learning, it takes time and patience and observation. The payoff though is a better understanding of your subject, which ultimately leads to more compelling images. Anyone can take a photo, but the challenge is to tell a story. What speaks to you about the scene? What impressions are you trying to make on the viewer? What emotions do you feel, or do you want the viewer to feel? In wildlife photography, look to capture the animal within its environment. How is it interacting with a place or with other animals? What stage of its life cycle is it in—migration, feeding activities, courtship, and reproduction? What challenges is it facing?



Going deeper also means getting creative with composition. Once you've captured an image in a certain way, how can you do something different? Perhaps try changing your angle, or switching lenses, or coming back at a different time of day when the light, or animal behaviors, might vary.

In short, make an effort to learn about your subject before you go out, and be sure to observe for a while once you get there. Know what behaviors to expect and how to be ready for them. And take your time! After all, much of the magic of nature photography is getting to be in nature. Your images will improve, and the experience of capturing them will be so much richer.