



Technical ability, field craft or just plain luck?

I often hear debates between photographers as to which is the most important for successful wildlife photography – field craft or technical ability. In addition there is often quoted retort ‘isn’t it all just down to luck anyway’. As always there is no one golden bullet and in view it’s a mixture of all three, miss out on one and the results will suffer. In addition when one of these three lets you down it’s how you resolve it and move on that makes you better next time. Luck most certainly does play a large part but none of us will be lucky all the time so you need to learn how to manage things, adjust your approach and hone your skills in all areas to increase your chance of ‘getting luckier next time’.

Sometimes I hear that with the proliferation of photo safaris, animal centres and workshops (like mine) then everyone can produce great shots. When confronted by a fashion photographer recently who claimed that “wildlife photography was easy” as people like me set up the shots and guests just take them. “Pay to shoot” he called it. I asked why it was not the same for fashion after all he hired models and clients paid him to let them shoot them. He told me that to be a great fashion photographer you had to understand lighting, be able to work with models as well as fully understand the technical issues and art of creating the exposure to create the mood you want. I commented that surely it’s just the same for wildlife but, perhaps to provoke a debate, I suggested that for wildlife rather more skill was required. It was still shooting light but the lighting is often natural and far less controlled requiring more understanding and experience, the models won’t speak to you so you have to understand and ‘second guess’ what they will do and the technical skill whilst different was just the ‘technically challenging’.



I have had the good fortune to work with many different people but in the mid 70’s when I had a particular mentor, Eric Ashby, I learnt a great lesson. He challenged me to go out into the New Forest with a fairly basic camera a fixed lens, a single roll of film and produce some great shots which would be exhibited in a local gallery the following week – it took a week in those days to develop and print photos. My mentor was a first rate naturalist and a very well-known film camera man and importantly an expert and diligent naturalist. He produced some superb early natural history films for the BBC and worked in particular on badgers in the New Forest. Knowing of his excellent reputation and skills I challenged him to do just the same. We were both to use the same Minolta camera, the same 50mm lens and a single roll of black and white HP4 film. I was young at the time and with the confidence of youth felt that my superb understanding of my camera and a good grasp of the technical skill set required would count for a great deal and ought to balance his excellent field craft. We met a week later at his delightful and aptly named Badger Cottage near Linwood



in the heart of the forest. When we started to compare our efforts it soon became apparent to me who was the better observer of wildlife and how much that contributed to the success of his photos over mine. We had both expertly judged the light, properly exposed the shots and capably controlled the settings on our cameras. However his pictures captured the essence of the wildlife subject and produced an image that took you back the very moment he pressed the shutter. It allowed you to experience the scene as if you were right there. Although well-crafted and technically competent mine were simply representations of what I had seen. They didn’t have that magic that came from an experienced eye, the eye of an experienced naturalist very skilled in his field craft.

Those of you who have heard my camera club talk entitled “The Art of Wildlife Photography”, more details [here](#), will know that I often quote some other sage advice I was given 40 years ago by the late H.G. Hurrell. H.G., as he was known, was a Devon naturalist who, with Sir Peter Scott, produced some of the early Look programmes on the BBC. He was a first rate naturalist and highly competent photographer who counselled me that if I wanted to be successful as a wildlife photographer I had to first be a naturalist. A naturalist, who has his eyes and mind open, is prepared to observe

everything and above all ask questions. Only when I started to understand the natural world could I possibly photograph it.

It's never been an easier time to assemble a large portfolio of well-crafted wildlife photographs even without travelling to far flung and exotic locations. The introduction of digital photography with its immediacy of feedback and the myriads of helpful options available on modern cameras has captured the interest of thousands and made photography more accessible. The availability of good lenses and accessories has enabled us to produce higher quality images. There is always a need to further hone your technical skills but there have never been more options available such as the guided workshops I offer or internet blogs. Some are far better than others, but that's no surprise, and careful research and asking others will direct you to the best. In addition the many TV programmes, wildlife trusts and organisations such as Natural England make it their remit to engage more people with, and educate them about, the natural world. We also have many more of the, often derided, collections of wildlife to photograph and can thus obtain shots of difficult subjects like the shy British mammals. Again there are good and frankly downright awful such collections so careful research is certainly required. When photographing captive animals it is very important to me that:



1. The facility put the welfare of the animals above everything else. That's a central tenant of my photo workshops.
2. The facility understands the natural behaviour and natural habits of the animals and is prepared to share that with you – nothing makes for a more successful wildlife photograph than understanding the subject.
3. The settings allow for as natural photography as possible. Clearly that depends on the animals in question – it's perfectly possible for example to go into an enclosure with a pole cat but not with a lion.
4. You are honest and never pass off a captive animal as wild shot.

Field craft

The title of this musing is technical ability v field craft so having considered the options and opportunities now available it is worth returning to what set Eric Ashby's and my photos apart in my little New Forest challenge of the mid 70's. Eric was a skilled naturalist and lifelong observer of wildlife and wildlife behaviour. This is something that comes with practise and patience but with the (previously discussed) options available these days is perhaps easier and quicker to acquire than it was in the 70's. There is no replacement however for patience, first hand observation and simply *putting in the hours*. When we were shooting film we were much more careful and considered carefully before we exposed a frame. For a start it was a more expensive process and we simply couldn't take as many images as we do now. This necessitated us understanding our cameras more and carefully setting them up – no chimping and reshooting in those days. It also meant we had to select the shots we took more carefully I thus spent many hours just sitting quietly and patiently watching my subject to select the moment. Perfecting my field craft was absolutely central to my achieving better photos. We live life at a far faster rate these days and our photographic opportunities are more often stolen as slots between other pressures on our time. There is no replacement however for spending time just watching the subjects we want to photograph before we even pick up a camera. Maybe even considering going out without a camera in the first instance. A friend recently remarked of my Africa trips that the guests are all too keen to shoot 100's of photos in the understandable excitement of the moment. On the other hand she had noticed I will watch for a long time and then only pick up my camera and take a few shots when I have worked out what the animal is going to do.



Elements of field craft

1. Awareness of the subject.

Whilst there is a great deal written about what contributes to good field craft we must never lose sight of the fact that first and foremost you need a good understanding of your subject and it's natural behaviour. A key consideration is how the subject understands and interprets its world and how it evaluates danger. Wild animals see us as a threat and will try to avoid us. They have developed an excellent awareness of their environment and have

far better senses than ours which have been dulled by modern living. My grandfather who was a game keeper used to make me stand in a wood and tell him what I heard, saw, smelt and sensed. An hour sitting quietly on a log in muted clothing can change the way we perceive our natural world and is a worthwhile exercise. Animals like deer have excellent eyesight, others have incredible hearing and most animals have a superb sense of smell. We can never expect to compete thus need to know how to avoid detection and that's comes in large part from watching and observing a prospective subject.



2. Avoiding being detected.

Once you understand your subject and how it interprets its world it's simply a case of ensuring you do everything you can to ensure you don't trigger any of its senses. Most animals are acutely aware of movement often a slight turn of your head or the movement of the camera. This can't be helped but try to ensure that you are against a background that "absorbs" or mutes your shape – skylines are definitely to be avoided as are bright coloured clothes. More on clothing later on.

We all like to shower and present ourselves to the world and our fellow photographers nice and clean. Be aware however that the nice smelling shower gel or shampoo, designed to impress your fellow human being, is a beacon that will give you away as easily as if you have a neon sign above your head. I am not advocating avoiding washing and dressing in sack cloth and ashes. However avoiding those special fabric conditioners and going out without your favourite after shave or scent will contribute as much to your success as will the very best camera.



All animals have very acute hearing so avoid as much as possible making a noise. Clothing that rustles is a nonstarter as are crinkly crisp and sweet wrappers and noisy cameras. If you have a tendency to cough take some cough sweets or your own patent solution. It's one thing to cough and scare the wildlife you are shooting it's a completely different and unforgivable thing to do that when sitting with others waiting to photograph an animal. It also pays to ensure your mobile phone is turned off or at least on silent.

3. Approaching your subject.

You can't always get into position before hand or use a hide so there will always be a need to approach your subject as carefully as possible to avoid spooking it. Some animals are much more approachable than others – roe deer, otters and foxes for example are some of the easiest spooked British mammals I know. Your biggest aid when wanting to approach unseen, apart from not wearing bright coloured clothes and keeping quiet, is noting the wind direction. All animals have superb senses of smell but this only works if the wind carries your scent to them. Always approach your subject downwind i.e. with the wind blowing from them to you. There are many ways of checking wind direction but the best I know is a little wind puffer bottle with powder that you can buy from any hunting store. A cheaper and just as effective solution at the right time of the year are dandelion seeds. Another effective and free approach with a 'longer season' is to collect a few bull rush heads when they are ripe and full. Carry them in a paper bag (plastic causes them to go mouldy) in your camera bag. Releasing a small pinch of seeds will soon tell you the wind direction.



There are many techniques for approaching wildlife all of which come under the heading of stalking and any good book written on the subject by a highland stalker is well worth reading. Crawling through the undergrowth in camouflaged gear is however not always possible and might get you noticed by the police before the wildlife. It does however help to understand your subject. Roe deer feeding downwind are much more oblivious to your approach than an alert animal with its head up. Animals preoccupied e.g. fighting or mating are equally less aware of their surroundings. Simply walking obliquely rather than directly towards your subject is often a worthwhile approach

especially when there is less natural cover. Equally important is learning to walk quietly – there is a style of walking and a way of setting down your feet that makes it much quieter, learn it and practise it. A good site with sensible tips can be found by clicking [here](#). It will make you look foolish but will certainly pay off.

4. Clothing and camouflage.

When I started out as a wildlife photographer we tended to wear old scruffy army surplus clothes and hoped that helped us blend in to our surroundings. It did after a fashion but now, influenced largely by the American hunting fraternity, there are many more effective options available and I am often asked if these are really necessary. The answer is simply that it depends on what you are trying to photograph. For skittish roe deer, otters and foxes yes it probably is. There are however many other species that have become more accustomed to seeing people maybe just simply making sure that you don't stand out and moving carefully, not making a noise and remaining downwind will work. The photo (right) shows a hunter blending in perfectly to his background note that even his weapon is camouflaged.



Whatever you choose however check carefully that it is comfortable, waterproof and warm or at least suitable for the weather you are going out in. No good for example wearing thick warm clothes on a hot sweltering summer day. If you are kneeling it helps to have knee pads or trousers with thick padded knees. As a photographer plenty of secure easy access pockets are a god send but beware of Velcro which makes a noise.

Just as with the hunter above make sure that your camera and white areas of skin e.g. face and hands are covered in camouflage or at least dull coloured material. I find the neoprene covers sold for lenses not only make for effective camouflage but also offer some resistance against knocks and scratches.



When stalking deer I once donned a gillie suit – right – but that was really total overkill. It was so effective however that I was once very embarrassed to find myself sitting on a fallen log in the new forest when two lovers approached and thinking they were alone settled down for an amorous kiss and cuddle. Whether it was my attire or their interest in each other I will never know but I did manage to creep away unnoticed.



An equally effective and simpler solution are the many bag hides now available. These are simply a cloth cover that rolls up small to fit into a bag but that you can throw over yourself as required to totally camouflage you and your kit. These are readily available from suppliers such as wildlife watching supplies www.wildlifewatchingsupplies.co.uk or even on e-bay.

More reflections and musings of a wildlife photographer.

If you have found this interesting please visit <http://www.naturesphotos.co.uk/pages/musings-of-a-wildlife-photographer.php> for more of my thoughts

If you are a member of camera club and would like me to come and share more of my thoughts on what it takes to be a successful wildlife photographer ask your programme secretary to visit my website [here](#) and look at the talks I provide together with the feedback from clubs where I have been in the past.

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