

Stalking Wildlife in the Woods

By Larry Kilgore

Here are some Nature photography Tips and Tricks. Some apply to ALL Photography. When walking through the woods, ALL animals of every kind scatter away from you in all directions. You are the most dangerous thing in the woods to them, but if you're not aggressive some may learn to trust you. But it's a slow process that never lasts more than an afternoon. When you walk through the woods and see NOTHING, it's actually FULL of wildlife that has left the area because of you. Once you're gone, they will return. Trying to be quiet and hide your presence is well worth it.

1. **Above all, stay safe around wildlife** - Wild animals can be unpredictable. Even birds can suddenly jump at your face in self-defense. An ornithologist told me that even juvenile hawks, if they get a good grip on one of your limbs, can sink their claws, clear to the bone. They are incredibly strong for their size, with dinosaur tendons and muscle. A deer can easily kill you. Most animals, when cornered, are fast and crazy. Almost all animals want to run away from you. Conversely, if you see an animal and it's not afraid, it could be sick or rabid. **STAY AWAY.**



Wild Animals Can Be Dangerous!

2. **Walk Like an Animal** – Animals can hear magnitudes better than you. They also know what other animals including humans sound like without seeing them. If you watch a squirrel, it will run for a bit, then stop and stand up and listen. Do that; walk a dozen quiet steps, and stop and listen. You're more likely to fool an animal as opposed to what we usually do: a noisy, non-stop stumble through the woods. That's a major warning sound to all animals.
3. **You stink** – Animals can also smell even GREATER magnitudes better than their hearing. This is critical since they can smell you a hundred yards away and will vanish before you are even close. As you walk through the woods, be aware of where the wind is. If you walk into the wind, animals in front of you can't smell you. If the wind is to your back, you're sending a stinky plume hundreds of yards ahead of where you're headed. If the wind is coming from the left, animals to your left can't smell you, but animals to the right can. You get the idea.
4. **Keep Sunlight off the end of Your Lens** – When sunlight strikes your lens, it can wash out your image. You've probably taken washed out grey images and wondered why. You may have gotten

the sun on your lens. When starting on your walk, think about which direction is going to let you shoot with the sun to your back or to one side. So while you walk, look towards the direction **opposite** the sun. Any subjects in that direction will have better lighting than those where you try to shoot into the sun. **Note:** Lenses using Extra-Low Dispersion glass (ED Glass) help reduce the effect of sunlight on your lens.

- 5. Spin in Circles like the Crazy Photographer You Are** – Occasionally, just pause and do a 360 degree scan. You will often spot things you missed, and birds in particular may appear now that you've walked by. If you see wildlife, FREEZE. Take a shot immediately in case they flee moments later. Even if it's bad or obscured, you may have an identification image. Then jockey for a better position, moving like molasses, and shooting occasionally along the way. Shoot, shoot, shoot. Delete them later. You're a photographer.



You too can be a Crazy Photographer!

- 6. On Sunny Days, Stop in the Shadow of Trees** – If you're looking ahead towards the sun trying to spot wildlife, it's hard to see with the sun in your eyes. If you stop in the shadow of a tree, you can see again. That may let you spot something. Once spotted, you can move to a better position. Also, if shooting from the shadow of a tree, trying to keep the sunlight off your lens, remember that based on the size of the tree, your head may be in shadow, but the end of your lens may be in sunlight.
- 7. Buy a Portable Duck Blind** – Even if you spot something interesting, like an unusual wood pecker, try to spot where it lives then come back with a portable duck blind and have a picnic waiting for it to show up. Don't let the name make you think it's only for ducks. In fact, I rarely use it for Ducks. They cost about \$50 from Cabelas. They even have small ones the size of a single lawn chair. All have straps to carry as a backpack, and they are lightweight, and spring open automatically! Birds will come right up and sit on top of your duck blind! Even if they see your face and camera, they aren't nearly as timid. They don't see your legs or body, so they aren't sure exactly what you are, but more importantly they don't take you immediately as a human. That may give you time to get your shot. In general, they are really dumb, and easily fooled. In a duck blind, I've had hummingbirds come right up to the camera lens within inches and dart back and forth wondering "what are YOU?", then go feed on a flower, ignoring me totally.
- 8. Sit With the Birds** – If you can't buy a duck blind, and are willing to sit and wait and enjoy nature, simply pull up a lawn chair, even within 6 feet of the bird feeders, prop your camera in the "ready" position, and wait. Some will eventually come. Try not to move much, or move slowly like molasses. They may get to trust you after a while.

- 9. Position Bird Feeders Near Trees** – Bird photography that includes a bird feeder in the shot can be wonderful. However, even more thrilling is the same shot of the bird in its natural setting, like on a tree branch. Birds come to feeders carefully and wait their turn. Don't photograph birds on feeders; shoot the ones waiting their turn on the branches. Be smart; make it close to your house with quick easy access; right outside a window. However, never shoot through window glass unless you're collecting proof as a bird watcher. Window glass will degrade all images.
- 10. Be Aware of What's Behind Your Bird Feeders When you install them** – Don't pick an ugly brick wall, or the neighbor's house as your back drop. Pick a wooded area or a beautiful bush or garden. You'll thank yourself later since your background will be lovely. Note: The most successful, squirrel proof feeder setup is a guy wire overhead between 2 trees, then drop wires for the feeder(s) to hang free. No feeder should be closer than 6 feet from the trunk of a tree and should be at least 5 feet from the ground. Feeders CAN be close to very small branches that won't support the weight of a Squirrel. I speak from experience when I say a squirrel can clean out a large feeder in a single day. If you get your seed at wild birds, you will go broke quickly trying to feed the squirrels. If you want details on how to put up your feeders in a squirrel-proof way, let me know.
- 11. Plant Zinnias in the Spring** – They grow like crazy and bloom all summer long. They attract tons of bees, butterflies, hummingbirds, finches, and sparrows. Think about where you want to plant, and make sure you choose a spot with a beautiful background. Also, don't forget that you need to be able to setup and photograph. Be smart; make it close to your house with quick easy access.



Zinnias Attract Critters

- 12. Whistle To Your Bird Friends** – If they fly away they don't like you (stop whistling!). But chances are they may see you sitting in your lawn chair with tripod and camera whistling like a bird and think maybe you're all right. I can call in Hummingbirds now with kissy sounds. It WORKS!
- 13. Patches of Sky** – When shooting birds and/or flowers, always try to lower your camera until patches of sky appear in the background. Patches of light through the trees adds even more subtle background effects. They will end up as out of focus blotches in the background. They can be very beautiful and produce what's called appealing Bokeh. Always make that extra effort to force wonderful sky tones behind your subject. You may have to crawl around on hands and knees, but the results are worth it. Colored Sunset or Sunrise sky patches are the best.



Blue Sky Backdrops are Great!

- 14. Remember Beautiful Locations** – If you always drive by a huge Oak that you admire, or there's a beautiful lit up landscape that takes your breath away when driving, start to keep notes on those places then go back at sunset or sunrise with your camera. Literally keep a note pad, and record each location. You'll be surprised at all the places you'll accumulate for taking beautiful pictures.
- 15. Avoid Shooting Down on Flowers** – Same problem occurs as in previous tip. It's LAZY to simply walk around and shot down at your flowers and the results are usually not very good. Roll around on the ground. You're a PHOTOGRAPHER!



Not That Good



Much Better

- 16. Avoid Wildlife Photography On Windy Days** – Even if it's sunny, there's not much you can do with subject movement except using high shutter speeds. Even VR/IS lenses (which help keep the lens steady on hand held photograph) can do NOTHING for subject movement. Flowers, limbs, trees, leaves, etc. all move in the wind and can introduce blur in your images. It's preferable to photograph when there's little or no wind. **Tip:** There's a device called "The McClamp" which lets you hold a flower motionless. It also doesn't usually damage the flower. They are very inexpensive. Even with a mild breeze, a flower will move around enough to ruin your shot. The McClamp is an essential "must have" for great flower photography.