

# **Secrets To Spotting And Approaching Wildlife**



**Steve Perry**

Spotting And Approaching Wildlife  
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# Spotting Wildlife



**All wildlife images rely on one pivotal component, and if it's missing, you're stuck in photographic limbo.**

**That element? A subject!**

The problem is, wildlife isn't exactly predictable, and finding a suitable target is often the biggest hurdle between a successful outing and one that ends with crocodile tears falling on empty memory cards.

The truth is, the best wildlife photographers are also often the best spotters. The more animals you find, the better your odds of landing a wall-hanger on your memory card.

***You can't shoot what you didn't see.***



Of course, spotting wildlife is an inherently tricky proposition. After all, our subjects have evolved to stay hidden. Wait! Don't despair - I have seventeen field-tested techniques that can help you win the game of wildlife hide-and-seek!

## 1. Movement

I'll admit that noticing movement is the low-hanging fruit of the wildlife spotting world since it's the easiest way to locate wildlife. Even novice spotters can quickly zero in when an animal is on the move.

However, there are two types of movement to think about: direct and indirect.

The first type, direct, simply refers to when you see an animal move. For example, there's a squirrel sitting on a bed of autumn leaves, and it decides to move to the next acorn. The moment it starts trotting off to its next prize, it pops up on your visual radar. Easy.



Noticing motion when you can see the animal is the low-hanging fruit of the spotting world.

The second type, indirect movement, is trickier. This is when you don't actually see the animal moving but rather the effects of its movement.

For example, maybe there's a cheetah moving through tall grass. You don't see the cheetah, but you see the grass moving in jerky, sharp movements.



We saw the grass move before we saw the cheetah.

Also, remember to look for indirect movement from above - maybe a branch is shaking erratically as an unseen monkey sneaks across it from deeper in the tree.

The key with indirect movement is watching for the characteristic jerky, sharp, shaking motion you typically see when an animal is moving on or against an object. This movement is different from the smooth, gentle motion we usually observe when caused by a breeze. In fact, a sure sign of an animal is when one small area of vegetation moves counter to the wind.

There's also a type of indirect movement where the animal isn't touching anything - a moving shadow! When a shadow slips across the ground, you know there's an animal above (usually a bird but arboreal mammals count here too).

Also, watch for both direct and indirect movement in the periphery of your vision. It's not unusual to catch motion out of the corner of your eye since animals will often attempt a strategic retreat once you're past. If they jump the gun there's a sporting chance for you to spot them.

Finally, it's often easier to spot movement of any kind when you're stopped. I know when I come across what looks like a good location, I'll often pause and take at least a few moments to survey the scene.

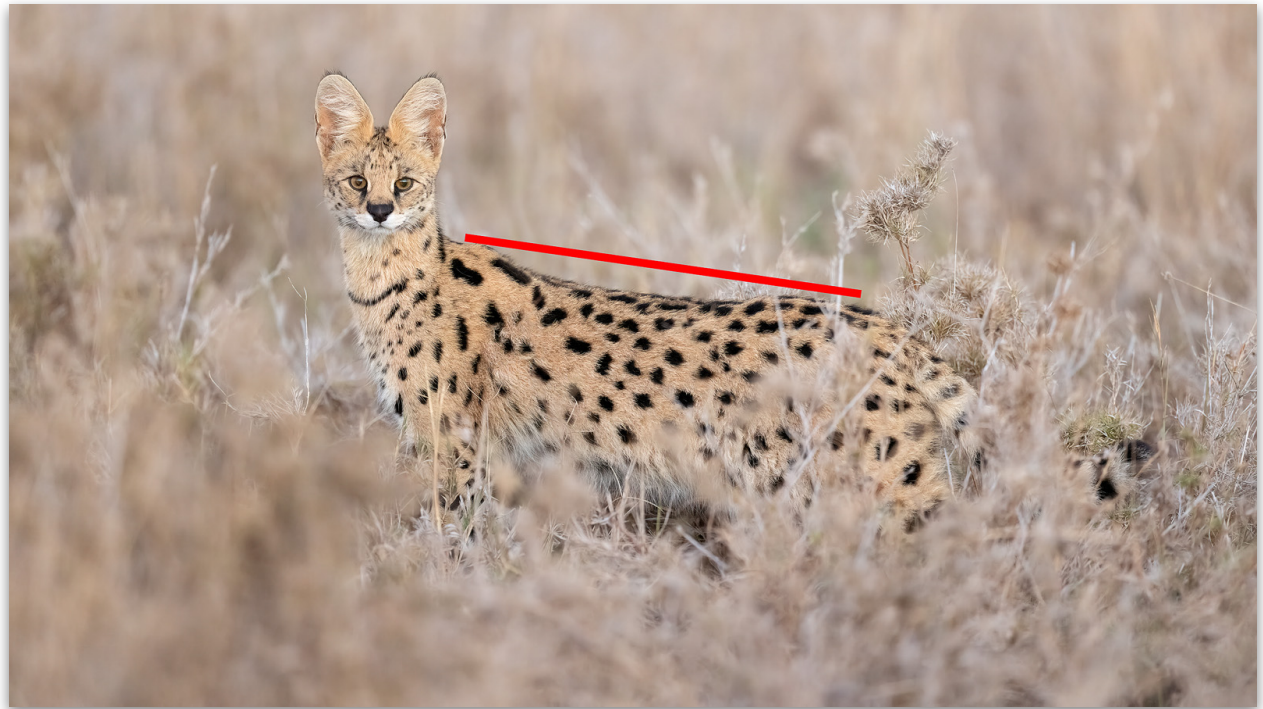


## 2. Look For Horizontal Lines In A Mass Of Vertical Ones

One of my oldest tricks is to look for horizontal lines when you have a mass of vertical ones—like grass, trees, etc.

The horizontal lines are sometimes the backs of animals - think deer, bear, fox, lion, cheetah, coyote, etc. The next time you scan a grassy meadow or even a forested area filled with mostly straight, vertical trees, look for those horizontal lines. You'll develop an irrational contempt for downed branches, but you'll also occasionally spot a nice subject.

The serval cat below is perfectly colored for its habitat, but watching for that horizontal(ish) line in the vertical vegetation helped us spot him.



### 3. Watch For Falling Debris

One trick that works well for finding subjects in trees is to watch for falling vegetation like leaves, nuts, fruit, sticks, or even branches (I've had monkey's throw them at me - although, that's not the worst thing they've tossed my direction).

If you come across a tree that's dripping debris, there's a good chance some hungry critter is behind it.

Take this little capuchin monkey below. We found him after noticing flower petals falling into a pile under him!



Anytime I see debris actively falling out of a tree - or even a bunch of leaves, cracked nuts, or other vegetation piled up on the ground - I'll take a moment to glance up. It's surprising how often you'll see an animal looking back down at you!



## 4. Learn What The Animal Looks Like In Its Habitat

One of the biggest hacks for spotting wildlife is simply learning what the animal looks like in its habitat. The trouble is, of course, this takes practice and requires you to spot the animal a few times to get started.

Still, this is the #1 way I spot animals while I'm out. Over time, you learn where your particular targets like to hang out and what they look like when they're there. Soon, the pattern-recognition part of your brain kicks in, and you're spotting your target animal all over the place!

For example, when I first started going to Costa Rica, I had a miserable time spotting sloths. The guides would wear out their fingers trying to point them out, but their excellent camouflage did a great job of keeping them hidden from my unaccustomed eyes. If only they always presented themselves like the one below!



Over time, I learned what they looked like in their habitat, and now I spot them without (much) difficulty. In fact, most of the time, they are fairly obvious and I wonder why I ever struggled.

This same thing happened with just about every well-camouflaged animal I photograph on a regular basis. Over the years, I've become better at spotting bears, monkeys, foxes, perched hummingbirds, coyotes, kingfishers - you name it. The more you spot a particular species in its habitat, the better you'll become at seeing them.

Each time you spot a critter, it's usually a different presentation and location than the last time you saw the same species. Each time we spot a particular animal, we gain a bit of experience and learn how it looks in various poses and locations. Over time, those experiences accumulate to such an extent that when you spot an animal you're familiar with, it stands out to you as effectively as if it were wearing hunter orange.

So, the takeaway here is that to get better at spotting wildlife, you have to take the time to go out and try to spot wildlife.

## 5. Look For “Football” (Or “Softball”) In Trees

Another great spotting pastime is scanning branches and looking for “footballs” of various sizes. As you’ve probably guessed, those footballs are usually birds or other animals.



The key is to scan the branch (or branches) and visually follow along the taper as you move out from the trunk. Look for “lumps” that don’t belong and give them a second look - it’s often an animal of some sort just waiting for you to point the business end of your lens in its direction.

## 6. Look For “Parts” Of An Animal

When people first start looking for wildlife, they go out searching for a “whole” animal - like the picture in a field guide. Of course, our targets didn’t read the field guide, so they seldom present themselves that way.

Sure, sometimes you’ll spot a critter smack-dab in the middle of a short-grass meadow, but most of the time you won’t see the entire animal - just a part of it.

You may see a head, the edge of a rump, an antler, a leg, or even a tail. Sometimes, it’s just a bit of fur or feathers.

For example, anytime I come across a hole in a tree, an opening under a log, or a space between rocks, I’m always checking for “parts” of animals. When I pointed binoculars at the hole in the tree on this page, I only saw a



little bit of fur, but waiting around paid off.

Your best bet when trying to spot animals is to *assume* you’ll only see a piece of them, at least at first. Once you’ve identified a part, you can often maneuver around and get all (or most) of the subject.

By the way, keep in mind that if the animal is too well-hidden for a good photo, you can always try to wait it out or check back later.

## 7. Learn The Coloration Of The Local Wildlife

Once upon a time, when I first started wildlife photography, I harbored an unhealthy obsession with whitetail deer. I'd go out searching for them on a (nearly) weekly basis. Over time, I started to learn what their coloration looked like at different times of the year, and it was amazing how easily I could pick those colors out when searching for my photographic prey.



As time has gone on, I've discovered seeking out coloration is a great way to pinpoint the wildlife I want on my memory cards. Like tip #4, this takes time to cultivate since you need to see the animal a few times before you can pick its color out in the forest, but it's certainly something to pay attention to as you develop your spotting skills.

Even if you don't have a ton of experience spotting, color can still be an ally and help you find wildlife. Look for colors, patterns, and textures that don't seem to match the existing habitat that well. It's not a foolproof technique, but it can help.



## 8. Learn The Habits And Routines For Your Target

Another tip is to learn the kind of habitat your target animal prefers and the signs to look for when you're in that type of territory.

For example, in my local area, we have an abundance of whitetail deer. I know that if I'm hiking through a new-growth area and spot a narrow path winding through it, I need to keep a sharper eye out for deer.

Another example takes us across the pond to Africa. I'm a raving fan of big cats (OK, all cats) and lions are always on the list of "must-have" shots. It's not unusual to find them lying around during the day and even a little into the evening. However, right around sunset they become active and the shutters fly (which is what happened with the shot below). Unfortunately, if you don't know their periods of activity, you might leave just before the action starts, thinking they've settled in for the night.



Of course, this tip may require a bit of research on your part, but in my experience, it's well worth the time invested. Whenever I'm looking for a new species, I always spend time researching that animal before trekking out to find it. It's good to know when it's active, where it lives, what it eats, etc.

Also, remember that your best luck for most species revolves around sunrise and sunset. Most animal activity slows down during the day, so prioritize heading out at sunrise and then getting back out again before sunset. Afternoons are for naps - for both you and your subjects!

Finally, don't forget that you can gather volumes of information from local guides, park staff, and even online from people who live in the area. In some cases, there are even apps like eBird that can show you where a particular species was sighted.

## 9. Look For Shapes And Silhouettes

It's also a great idea to focus on shapes and silhouettes. Often, our subjects are backlit or in shadow, so you only see their silhouette - not the usual field-guide presentation of the animal. Other times, they might not be backlit but positioned far off. If you can distinguish their shape from the surrounding landscape - or even other animals - it can help you capture the shot.

For instance, while the burrowing owl is clearly visible in the shot below, it was actually positioned at a considerable distance. The first spotting challenge was that this owl had commandeered an abandoned prairie dog burrow in an active colony so you weren't really thinking about owls as you scanned the field.

What's more, the owl's coloration and height closely matches that of the local prairie dogs. This clever camouflage often fools observers, and most people simply pass them by, assuming they're just distant prairie dogs. What allowed me to spot them was recognizing that something about the shape was off - subtle but distinct. It just didn't quite match the profile of a prairie dog. That, combined with my familiarity with burrowing owls, helped me identify them - calling back to point #4.



What about silhouettes?

Like some of the other techniques, spotting animals using only their silhouette takes practice, but it's a skill worth cultivating.

With silhouettes, you're still scanning for shapes, but against a bright background. As with some of the previous advice, you're looking for things like "footballs in trees" or "horizontal lines in a mass of verticals," but without the benefit of front lighting to reveal detail.

For example, the Agami Heron below was heavily backlit when we found it, appearing much more like a silhouette than what you see here (it took some seriously creative shadow adjustments and post-processing to pull this one off).



Additionally, I find that when a subject is at a distance, it often appears as a silhouette at first, especially if the area around it is bright. I sometimes spot big cats resting on rocks by first noticing their silhouette against the sky, as with the shot below. Only when you get closer do you start to notice the animal's details.



## 10. Take In The Whole Scene

When you first come upon a scene, don't immediately start zeroing in on specific areas. Instead, relax your gaze and take in the entire landscape.

This works in concert with many of the techniques I've outlined in this article, including looking for horizontal lines in a mass of vertical lines, spotting "footballs" in trees, looking for silhouettes, seeking out color, watching for movement, etc.

I'm often surprised by how often I spot an interesting subject just by stopping and surveying the area for a few moments. Also, don't forget to glance over your shoulder - sometimes a critter is just waiting for you to pass before showing itself! Check out the lion in the environmental shot below.



By the way, this is also good to practice when shooting. Work your subject but stay aware of what's around you. Sometimes, something even better is standing nearby, just waiting for you to turn it into a wall-hanger!

## **11. Break Out The Binoculars**

Sometimes, you gotta break out the binoculars - a trick I use frequently in Africa.

Of course, I start by taking in the full scene, but if it's over a vast landscape, I find it helpful to slowly scan the more promising areas with binoculars. As I scan, I keep in mind the tips I'm sharing with you in this chapter - I'm looking for footballs in trees, color, horizontal lines, etc.

However, I typically only employ this technique when I'm in more open, unobstructed areas. I'm happy to use binoculars to scan a field or the banks of a river, but I seldom use them in the woods unless I think I see a promising target and want a better look.

## **12. Spend Extra Time Where Habitats Meet**

Wildlife tends to congregate along transitional habitat edges. So, take a few moments when you come to places like the boundary between a meadow and a forest, or the edge of a lake or river.

The borders of habitats are often hotspots for a wide variety of wildlife, either living there or just passing through. Whenever I come upon a transitional area, I always take a bit of extra time to survey the boundaries. The chances of finding that perfect critter are always higher in those areas, and they frequently pay off.

In fact, you can often just sit or stand still in a transitional habitat area, and any animals frightened off by your initial approach may tentatively make their way back. Expanding on that idea, it's good to walk at a slower pace when looking for wildlife and pause frequently - you'll often spot something you may have otherwise missed.

### **13. The Animal May Not Be The Size You Think It Is**

When you first start looking for a new species, remember there's a chance it's larger or smaller than you think.

For example, if you've never seen a black bear in the wild, you probably think they are larger than they actually are. The uninitiated often expect them to be roughly the size of a small car, but the truth is, they are much smaller than that.





In fact, on more than one occasion, I've been photographing a sow with cubs, and the cubs were clinging to the upper branches of a tree. Since cubs tucked behind leaves sixty feet in the air are about as exciting as a knitting contest, I often focus on the mom. It never fails that if this happens near people, they believe the sow is the cub - they expect a much larger adult and often don't believe me when I tell them this is the mom!

Until you see an animal for the first time, keep a flexible image of its size in your mind.

## 14. Look For Sign

Another trick is to look for sign - you know, “poop” mostly.

For example, if I see lots of white streaks outside of a rock opening, there’s a fair chance a bird is calling that location home. If I see the white streaks or pellets at the base of a tree, I can assume that a bird - likely an owl - may have a nice roosting spot above me.



Sign on a trail isn’t quite as reliable, of course, since finding a pile of deer pellets seldom means there’s still a deer standing above it. Although I have been a reliable witness to the production of many such piles.

Sign can also include things like a heavily trampled area with lots of tracks, a burrow, or a matted-down depression. Even if there isn’t anything there at the moment, it’s still a good area to keep tabs on for the future.

## 15. Listen

When I first started going to Costa Rica, I noticed the guides had an almost supernatural ability to spot wildlife. It turned out they weren't always seeing the animal first - *they were hearing it.*

While I'd always carefully listen for things like breaking branches or rustling vegetation, I'm now much more aware of various calls from both birds and mammals

By knowing what sound a particular animal produces, you can often hear it before you see it.

Bird calls are obvious here, but it works for mammals too. One that comes to mind is the red squirrel. These guys are tiny and easily concealed by vegetation. However, they make a very distinct gnawing sound when they are eating. Most of the time, I find them as I walk because I hear the sound and can then locate where they are.



The advice here is to really learn the sounds and know who makes every sound you hear in your local woods (this is obviously trickier when you're at a new location). It can have a tremendous impact on your success rate.

In fact, I use this even when I drive. I often have the windows down and the radio off. I roll along slowly, keeping an ear out for any interesting sounds as I scan the woods.

## **16. When It's Hot, Check The Shade**

One trick I've learned from my guides in Africa is to always look in the shade when it's hot, especially if there isn't a lot of shade around. When there's only a single tree out on the savanna in the middle of the day, there's a really good chance a critter has taken up at least temporary residence under it.



This vervet monkey was staying cool in the shade of the tree.

## 17. Watch The Behavior Of Other Wildlife

Other animals in the area can often clue you in that something is going on in the neighborhood.

For instance, alarm calls are a reliable sign some sort of predator is lurking nearby. I'm always on alert for alarm calls when I'm out - they're often a good indicator of which direction you should start traveling!

In addition, I'm constantly on the lookout for congregations of scavengers like vultures, crows, or hyenas (you know, depending on where you live). Sometimes, they signal a kill is nearby, and that's always worth checking out.

Also, prey animals are often excellent barometers for detecting when something is amiss. A relaxed herd of gazelles is a good indicator that the coast is clear, but if they're agitated, scan for a predator's approach. The same holds true for monkeys and baboons: if the troop appears calm, there's likely no immediate danger. However, if they're on edge, keep a sharp eye out—a predator may be nearby.



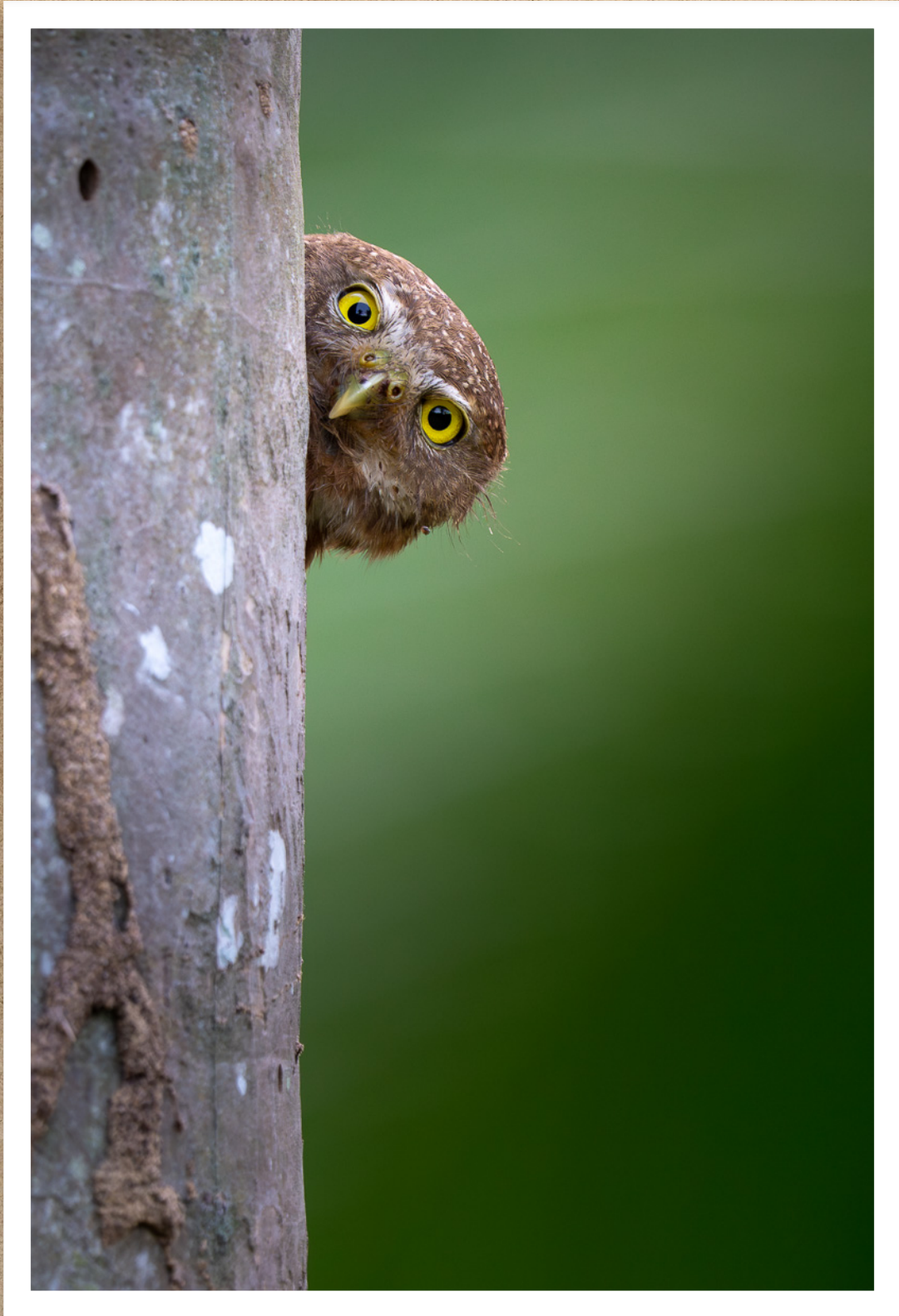
If you do happen across a kill, keep an eye out in the “hiding” areas nearby – often the “lesser” predators and scavengers are waiting in the wings while the apex animals take their fill.

*Of course, always exercise extreme caution around kills for the sake of your own safety. Depending on the local predator situation, not only could you look like the next item on the buffet, but you may also appear as a competitor trying to steal the kill.*

Finally, keep an eye out for sudden or unusual behavioral changes in your subject. I was busy photographing the cheetah cub below when he suddenly hissed - it turns out there was a hyena headed his way! (Don't worry, to the disappointment of the hyena, he survived the encounter.)



# Approaching Wildlife



## **Safety Note:**

Before we get started, remember to keep your safety and that of the animal at the forefront of any encounter. While these techniques can help you approach a prospective photographic target, always do so in a way that does not put you or the animal in danger. It's far too easy to wind up in a situation where both you and your subject realize you're too close. Never put yourself or your subject into an unfortunate situation. And, as always, obey any laws and regulations regarding the approach of wildlife.



People often ask how I get so close to the wildlife I photograph. My #1 response?

**"I don't do scary stuff!"**

I know, you were probably hoping for some covert, "super secret" stalking technique or perhaps a revolutionary piece of gear that masks your approach, but really, just don't do scary stuff. Here's what I mean:

### **1. Don't approach the animal too quickly.**

People often get as excited as a sugared-up five-year-old when they spot a new animal—and they all but sprint to get into photographic range. That makes critters do this:



Know what else likes to run towards that animal? Yeah, predators. Just approach slowly and...

## 2. Don't make a direct approach.

Again, predators tend to do that kind of thing, so take your time and approach indirectly. I often start wide and parallel to the animal, then (slowly) zig-zag in, never going straight at it.

I frequently feign interest in something else in the environment, like a rock, a bit of grass, or something off to the far left or right of them. I typically have my head down as well, keeping my target in the periphery of my vision.



*This marmot was NOT having it and it took a long, slow, zig-zag approach to get this close.*

### 3. Don't make eye contact.

In fact, act like you don't even know the animal is there as you approach it. Like humans, the eyes are the first thing an animal notices when seeing another animal. They know you're interested in them when you make direct eye contact.

Guess who else is interested in them?

Yup - predators. (Are you sensing a theme?)

When shooting, I try to avoid eye contact with the animal outside of the viewfinder. If they do look my way, I casually (but quickly) glance away - never get into a staring contest with a skittish critter! **They'll run, and you'll lose!**

Also, some people think that covering your eyes with sunglasses can help mask eye contact, but that only works when you're scoping out your fellow humans at the beach. All an animal sees are two giant, weird-looking—*and seemingly wide-open*—eyes instead of two smaller ones!

#### *Story Time:*

It's funny – I get down to Florida occasionally and remember my early attempts at shooting little birds along a busy beach. It was SOOOOOO frustrating to watch as people strolled by the birds – near enough to kick 'em – but each time I approached, they'd take off before they were even close to being in range.

I was scratching my head. Was I dressed funny? Did I forget to shower that day?

It didn't take long to discover the issue. The birds were just fine when they didn't think people were interested in them, but the second—the *second*—they decided your attention was directed their way, they scooted off.



Shorebirds can be wary of attention, even when they are always around people - approach them with care if you want a photo session!

In addition, watch for behavioral changes when you point your lens in their direction. Some animals don't mind, but many - especially the shy ones - see it as a giant "eye" that's fixated on them. Yikes!

In situations like that, things can go sideways faster than a squirrel in traffic and you have to play it smart. If the animal seems skittish when staring down the business end of your lens, use the lens sparingly. Keep it pointed away (even just a little is often enough) and only point back to the subject when the action starts.

#### 4. Don't stumble around

Crashing through brush, breaking sticks, and scattering rocks under your feet signals a predator approaching. I can't count how many times I've been slowly approaching an animal, only to have an unnoticed stick torpedo the entire thing. A careful approach pays off.

Also, if you're shooting from a tripod or monopod, be VERY aware of where your tripod/monopod legs are as you move. It's incredibly easy to snag a leg on a brittle branch and send an animal racing off.

Finally, avoid anything dangling - camera straps, backpack straps, scarves, lanyards, etc. Anything swinging around as you walk can send a skittish animal running for cover.



## 5. Use Your Car With Care

If you've spotted an animal from your car, it's not a free pass to toss caution to the wind.

As you approach, proceed slowly and carefully. Don't rush up and slam on the brakes, squealing to a stop. I had that happen once in the Smokies while working with an incredibly shy black bear. I had been with him for quite a while, and he was slowly starting to accept me (at a comfortable distance) but he had wandered within sight of the road. A car happened to see him and spasmodically slammed to a squawking stop that seemed to go on forever. I think that poor bear still may be running away.

When you spot something up the road, gradually decrease your speed and, simultaneously, strategize where you want to stop - ideally, pulled off and out of the way of traffic. I've found the angry horns of other cars encourages animals to run the other way.

If you intend to shoot from the car, it's a good idea to stick the lens out well in advance of when you'll need it - if you can do so safely. Coming to a stop and popping a lens out the window is often a surefire way to make a wary animal take flight.

If you plan to get out, sometimes it's better to pull a little past the animal and backtrack. Close your door carefully and quietly - people often do everything right up to this point, only to blow it by quickly leaping out of the car and slamming the door. (Note - don't be "that person" who leaves their doors open in the middle of the park - you're way cooler than that.)

## 6. Read the animal

Never ever (*ever, ever, ever*) push an animal. When you're first starting out, we all do it, but as you gain more experience, you quickly realize that the hundreds of "hind-end" photos you capture don't make for a very compelling portfolio.

Each species is a little different, so learning the behaviors of the species you're photographing goes a long way toward getting a successful image. However, there is one overriding guideline: If the animal changes its behavior as you're moving, it's probably because of you.



A slow, stop-and-go approach made this prairie dog more comfortable with me. Although it took a little work, I finally was within range and got a shot where he wasn't just peeking out of his burrow.

If an animal changes behavior as you approach, stop right where you are and let him adjust to your presence. It may take a while, but try again once he's used to you. I've spent hours at a stretch with an animal or group of

animals letting them become accustomed to my presence – and I promise you, once you're "accepted," the REAL good stuff starts.

Sure, they may never get used to you or let you approach, but once the critters scatter, the show's over anyway. Why stress them out in the process?

## **7. Get in front**

Chasing an animal never works out. Not only do you get a bad view, but you also don't get the photos you were hoping for.

Instead, I remember that great quote by Wayne Gretzky:  
"I skate to where the puck is going to be, not where it has been."

My most successful wildlife photos happen when I get to where the animal is going to be. I let them come towards me instead of chasing them through the woods. Not only is the view better, but since you're stationary and not making a ruckus, the animal is more comfortable with it as well.



Although this was from a vehicle, we positioned ourselves so we'd be in position as he came towards us.



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Have a great day!

Steve Perry

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