



Interaction: Catching Wildlife in Action

by Andy Long

Learn some shooting tips so you too can capture some great wildlife action photos.

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Timing can be critical to get the peak of interaction.

don't think of as being in close proximity with one another move into the same shot.

Most interaction is a spur-of-the-moment occurrence that might be missed if the photographer isn't ready. For example, bighorn sheep butt heads without offering advance warning they're about to do it. On some occasions, however, the situation is less temporary, and the action continues for several minutes. A good example of this happens when a mother bear and her young cub are together. As the young bear grows up and prepares for life on its own, it needs to learn to show dominance. While its interaction with its mother qualifies as playtime, especially if there isn't a sibling, the youngster is also being taught how to fight. Of course, the mother could take her offspring out with a single swipe of her paw. Instead, she maintains the lesson for an extended period of time, having as much fun as her young.

When doing wildlife photography, every photographer wants to catch the peak of action. Typically, this peak consists of a movement such as a bird taking off or landing on water, or an animal splashing through water or pouncing through the air after prey. Another high point happens at the instant two animals come together--more often than not when they touch each other, but sometimes when a pair of animals you

Taking lots of shots of this can ultimately provide the photographer with some very interesting photos.

As the two bears tussle about, still images can capture aggressive poses that seem to represent bears really fighting with each other, positions that communicate tender touching, or cute shots of the pair resting together after outbursts of energy.



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A young bear must learn to be strong when it leaves its mother.

Mother/young action provides some of the best images of interaction between animals. There are certain to be several opportunities while the mother is feeding her newborn. The younger the newborn, the more times it needs to be fed. If a photographer is near a colony of birds, the opportunities multiply--especially in the Falkland Islands by a colony of one of several penguin species. Lots of action happens in and around the colony, so that finding the right setting becomes the main problem. The photographer should set up with a good light angle and wait. More often than not, a pair will separate from the group, making shots of them isolated from the rest easier.



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A mother gentoo penguin feeding its young.

One of those warm and fuzzy shots of a pair of king penguins in a moment of closeness.

Another good shooting opportunity occurs when there are numerous mothers with their young. This brings about a chance to shoot the young playing together. Once they get started, their interaction and playfulness is almost non-stop. A photographer can even catch images of youngsters by themselves as they bounce around play-fighting, which is their typical behavior even at a very young age.

On the bear trip, my photographic juices and those of everyone with me started flowing anew when a wolf approached over a small rise. Although it never came close enough for full-frame shots, the mere sight of it inspired a tap dance of shutter buttons being pushed. When it crossed a shallow creek not far behind a bear, the uniqueness of the setting increased. Even though the two animals weren't standing next to each other, a chance to catch images of a wolf and an Alaska brown bear in the same shot has to be special.



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It's not too often a scene like this will unfold. And they never even looked at each other.

Being able to see this type of behavior is fun, no matter if an award-winning shot is taken or not. Half of the enjoyment of doing photography is venturing out to see what's going on in the world around us. Capturing shots that preserve the moment or that allow sharing the experience with others just adds to the thrill of seeing it happen. However, the ultimate enjoyment comes when I push the shutter button. After such a perfect moment, I sometimes swear that I'll give all my gear away and never take another picture. (Those who stand next to me as I watch a mother bear and her cub play at fighting know this won't happen any time soon.)

A particular time that often presents good interaction shots is mating season. Lots of opportunities arise to shoot images of a male and a female together standing in both warm and fuzzy poses as well as performing other behaviors that are uncommon at other times of the year. Also, a photographer who remains watchful in the wilderness long enough is bound to witness some new scene, such as a male bluebird passing a worm to its

mate as a sign of bonding. Bonding scenes make great shots, no matter what species the pair of animals is.

As two animals approach each other, the photographer should move into position so the light is at a good angle, if possible, and be ready when the animals are finally close to one another. A serious wildlife photographer should have and hone a keen sense of anticipation. Just going out to try to get a great shot by luck isn't



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A male bluebird passing a worm to a female in a sign of bonding.

going to result in many top-notch photos. However, by watching and studying animal behavior over an extended period of time, he can learn what's likely to happen next. Setting up where the light is at the right angle is key, but knowing something is about to happen is even more important.

Few photographers take the study of animal behavior seriously enough. They need to be observant in the field. Even when they're busy shooting photos, they need to also be taking mental notes about the behaviors of the subjects that they're watching. If they do, the next time they see similar behaviors, they'll be prepared to get a better shot. However, simply being with a subject for a few minutes isn't good enough. A serious wildlife photographer should spend several hours watching and learning about a single animal or a group of animals.



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Taking lots of shots of a period of interaction can result in some interesting shots, such as this slap to the face.

Frequently, when I'm trying to capture animal action and behavior, I try to use a shutter speed of at least $1/1000^{\text{th}}$ of a second. If it's not a bright, sunny day, this can be accomplished by bumping up the ISO on the camera. With the quality of the cameras today, I'm not afraid to go up to 800 or even 1000 ISO to get a fast enough shutter speed. The shutter speed can never be too fast when I'm shooting wildlife. Another suggestion

I offer is to go 1/2 stop from wide open for the aperture just to provide a little more depth-of-field for the setting. I recommend this technique during all my wildlife workshops, regardless of whether there's one animal in the frame or a pair. Getting the little extra depth may mean a difference in sharp antlers from the nose of an elk or a bit of softness on the back tines. If the light allows, I suggest you stop down even more to get the depth-of-field necessary to keep as much of the animal as possible in focus.

Whatever shots you capture of animals interacting with each other, they are sure to cause you to remember the experience. These moments make wildlife photography special. Look for them. Wait for them. Be ready for them. No matter how long the wait, it will be more than worth it.

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