



PHOTO MASTERCLASS PART 16

ZOO PHOTOGRAPHY



The best way to photograph exotic animals – without the expense or carbon emissions of a trip abroad – is to visit a zoo. But just because the animals are captive doesn't mean a great photo is guaranteed. You need to capture a sense of the animal's wild character.

WITH WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER MARK CARWARDINE

EVEN WELL-TRAVELLED professional photographers work in zoos, where it is possible to take intimate shots of shy or endangered animals that are difficult to see in the wild. It's not as easy as it sounds – you still need skill and patience to turn an ordinary shot into an outstanding one – but sightings are at least guaranteed.

Some zoos are better than others, of course. The worst cram animals together in tiny cages and should be avoided at all cost – they don't deserve support for humane reasons and their unhappy inhabitants make sorrowful subjects. But the best zoos provide large natural enclosures, which are better for the animals and much more inspiring for photographers. Many of the more progressive zoos even have high observation

walkways or moats instead of fences, which can provide particularly good picture-taking opportunities.

The biggest problem is usually the surroundings. Fences, brick walls, neatly-mown grass and horrible backgrounds all conspire to ruin good images. Capturing a sense of wildness amid the clutter is what separates the professionals from the happy-snappers. No respectable photographer should try to pass off a captive animal as wild and free (true professionals always label them 'captive'), but a sympathetic and natural background is essential. It should look natural, even if it's not.

This month, we'll be showing you how to keep it looking wild and exploring the best ways to amass a wonderful portfolio of exotic species.

▲ The golden-headed lion tamarin is an endangered species, which makes it extremely hard to photograph in its natural habitat – the fragmented lowland tropical forests of Bahia, Brazil. Pete Oxford took this picture at Singapore Zoo, where tamarins are 'free-ranging'.

MEET THE EXPERT...

Every issue, our world-famous photographers share their knowledge and skills.

PETE OXFORD Ecuador

British wildlife photographer Pete Oxford has lived in Ecuador since 1985. His award-winning work has appeared in publications worldwide and in four of his own books.



Pete Oxford is primarily a 'wild' wildlife photographer and spends most of his time in the field. But he has fond memories of zoo photography for helping to kick-start his career and, even now, never misses an opportunity to work in a good zoo.

"There are many negative aspects to zoos," he warns. "My Highly Commended shot from the 2002 Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition [showing a tourist striking a mock pose of bravado astride a chained tiger in China] exposed one of the worst. But I am encouraged that zoos in many parts of the world are getting better.

"Whenever I am in Asia, I visit Singapore Zoo," he enthuses. "It's my favourite zoo – the enclosures are fabulous and as natural as possible, and it has species I cannot easily photograph in the wild. Cotton-top tamarins are a good example, because they

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live in a region of Colombia where it's too dangerous to work."

Pete believes zoos are great places for honing photographic skills. "At a zoo, you have time to experiment," he says. "You can get to know an

animal's various moods and expressions." Pete recommends a minimum of three days to take a decent portrait. "Take no photos on the first day," he advises. "Just wander around looking at subjects and backgrounds. Then choose one or two species to work with and spend the next two days shooting."

Pete feels strongly about honesty in zoo photography. "It's perfectly OK to photograph animals in zoos," he says, "but you must label them as such. Truth is vital."

Pete Oxford's top zoo photography tips



Often, a shot of an animal that looks well-fed, with a shiny coat and bright eyes, is likely to have been taken in captivity, however 'wild' its setting appears.

1 Choose your subjects carefully

Pete has been a professional guide in the Amazon for many years, yet he has never even glimpsed an ocelot in the wild. Being able to photograph several of them in the beautiful, wild setting of the rehabilitation centre in Ecuador was therefore a special privilege. It was an obvious species for him to choose.



Photographs like this, of a giant panda in a forest park, give viewers a sense of a species that needs our protection if it is to survive.

2 Capture the 'jizz' of an animal

The vast majority of giant panda photographs have been taken in captivity. Pandas are virtually impossible to see (let alone photograph) in the wild. But with careful observation, it's possible to capture interesting behaviour and expressions in a captive animal that would otherwise be denied. It's this 'jizz' that lifts a picture above and beyond an ordinary portrait.

YOUR STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE...

Mark Carwardine shows you how to apply the theory to get the perfect picture.

1 SPEAK TO THE KEEPERS



- » **Ask about timing** – most animals have a time of day when they are most active (usually early morning or late afternoon) and have a typical daily routine. Find out when they are likely to move to the most photogenic part of the enclosure.
- » **Check feeding times**, because the animals will be especially active for at least half an hour beforehand. The keepers may even be prepared to use food to coax them into the best position for you.
- » **Don't forget to return** with some of your best prints as a thank-you present for keepers who provide assistance or advice.

2 SHOOTING THROUGH WIRE



- » **Hold your lens right up to the wire** and use a small depth of field (f4 or f5.6) to make it virtually invisible. Pick a shaded section where the wire will be less obvious (bright, sunlit areas create a fuzzy, unattractive glare – as if they've been shot with flash).
- » **Use a long lens** to minimise the impact of the wire you're shooting through and to isolate your subject from the background.
- » **Be aware of the background** – if there is too much unnatural clutter immediately behind your subject, try getting down low and shooting against trees or the sky.

3 SHOOTING THROUGH GLASS



- » **Hold the lens flat** against the glass to reduce reflections.
- » **Experiment with the angle** of your flashgun to avoid the beam reflecting back into the lens or directly into the flash sensor (which will cause under-exposure). Try holding it up high and to one side of your camera's position.
- » **Move in** for a tight, frame-filling portrait if the background is too close and distracting. Make sure the animal's eyes are in sharp focus and aren't covered (or partly covered) in shadow. Wait for eye contact – when the animal is looking straight down the lens.

4 BE CREATIVE



- » **Spend time observing** – see what your subject is doing, learn its routine and identify potential shots before releasing the shutter.
- » **Try to capture the character** or a distinctive feature of the animal – the long tongue of a giraffe or the extraordinary whiskers of a fur seal, for example.
- » **Be ready for the unexpected** – a slight change in posture or facial expression can make the difference between an ordinary shot and an outstanding one. As with all wildlife photography, patience is crucial. Set up and wait for just the right moment.



ESSENTIAL KIT... TRIPOD

There are two reasons for using a tripod in zoo photography: first, it will give you more pin-sharp pictures than trying to hand-hold your equipment; second, it forces you to set up properly and wait for the action. The temptation in zoo photography is to wander from cage to cage snapping as you go. But the magic formula is patience, and having to set up a tripod makes you stop, consider and wait. It also enables you to focus the lens on an animal for as long as it takes to yawn, growl or make eye contact.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

- » **Weight** – heavier usually means sturdier (though most professionals use carbon-fibre models that are sturdy but relatively lightweight).
- » **Heavy-duty head** – a good quality tripod head provides easy, smooth movements in all directions.
- » **Legs** – these must be easy to extend and adjust (not like putting up a deckchair) and should offer a comfortable maximum working height.

CHEAPER ALTERNATIVES:

- » **Monopod** – effectively a one-legged tripod that isn't as steady as its three-legged friend, but better than nothing at all.
- » **Brick-sized bean bag** – fill it up with beans, rice or even birdfood and use it to rest your camera on enclosure fences.

DOS & DON'TS

- » **DO** check first to see if the zoo is happy for you to take pictures of their animals (some zoos have restrictions on the use of tripods or flash, for example).
- » **DO** spend time getting to know possible subjects and evaluating their backgrounds before you start shooting.
- » **DON'T** tap on the glass or fence to attract an animal's attention.
- » **DON'T** forget to provide prints for any of the keepers who have helped you.

MASTERCLASS CHALLENGE UK...



Many zoos offer good opportunities to hone your skills and capture great portraits of exotic animals.

Terry Whittaker reveals some tricks of the trade.

Use your time effectively

Photographing zoo animals isn't necessarily easier than in the wild – it brings its own challenges. You need to arrive early and stay late to get the best light and avoid the crowds. Use the middle of the day – when the light is harsh – to get to know individual animals and observe their habits, and to scout possible photo opportunities for later.



Wait for good behaviour

Wait for interesting behaviour or an intense look or expression. Gorillas rarely make eye contact, but check you out with sideways glances. Don't stare at them or they will turn away. It's a good idea to spend an entire day photographing a single species to document a range of behaviour. Family groups of primates work really well for this.



Visit in winter

Snow transforms enclosures, hiding unnatural structures and concrete pool edges. Pick species that naturally occur in cold climates, such as snow leopards and Siberian tigers. They grow thick winter coats and are most photogenic in winter. Try to catch the animal's breath condensing in cold air. Experiment with the effects of slow shutter speeds on falling snow.



Go British

British mammals are tricky to photograph in the wild, but there are specialist collections where you can practise your skills. You should get good images of foxes, otters and deer on a normal visit, but for smaller, shy species some parks offer photographic days with special access to enclosures. Try www.wildwoodtrust.org and www.britishwildlife.org



MASTERCLASS READER PHOTO OF THE MONTH

Now it's your turn. Use all our experts' hints and tips to take great photos of animals in British zoos. Use Terry's ideas for inspiration, though you don't have to photograph the same subjects. Upload up to eight images on our website and the winning shot will be published in *BBC Wildlife*.

HOW TO ENTER

Log on to www.bbcwildlifemagazine.com and click on Photo Masterclass, then follow the instructions to upload your images. Closing date: Friday 11 May.

RULES 1) The competition is open only to amateur photographers. 2) Up to two entries only per category. 3) Entry of a picture constitutes a grant to BBC Worldwide to publish it in all media. 4) Entries will be judged by *BBC Wildlife*. 5) The winning image will be published in the July issue. 6) No correspondence will be entered into and winners will not be notified. 7) Entries will not be accepted by post or email. 8) Image file names must include your full name.



'BLACK AND WHITE' WINNER: TONY WEBSTER

We felt this image made best use of the black and white medium – the simple but dramatic symmetry of the swan and reflection would have been lost in colour.