A CHARGING ELEPHANT, fighting bears or a leaping squirrel – there are so many possible subjects this month. What’s more, each one can be photographed umpteen times. A good mammal photographer can shoot the same species time and again, yet still return home with something new.

Autofocus lenses and motordrives have helped to push the boundaries in recent years, but they’re only part of the equation. Too many mammal photographers, armed with the best equipment, shoot with no more than a wing and a prayer. They panic and use the ‘scattergun approach’, aiming in roughly the right direction and firing away as if they were in the Wild West. They take the odd great picture, more by luck than judgement, but few get consistently good results.

A considered approach, requiring intense preparation, patience and concentration (as well as quicker reactions than Wild Bill Hickok) is much more satisfying and productive. You take great shots by working hard. And to be honest, they’ll be even better if you work alone or with a fellow photographer. Capturing mammal behaviour is so time-consuming that non-photographers tend to get bored quicker than in almost any other field of photography. It’s hard to be creative when you’re feeling guilty for taking so long, and your companions are fidgeting and whispering.

But what makes it all such good fun is the element of surprise. No matter how much you practise or prepare, many of your best mammal behaviour shots will be of moments you hardly remember – because they happened so fast. These are the ones that make all that effort worthwhile.

Though there are plenty of subjects to choose from, actually photographing mammals in action is a very exacting skill. Planning and patience are important, as is knowledge of your subject’s behaviour – sometimes you have to predict what it’s going to do next to capture the moment.

WITH WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER MARK CARWARDINE

PHOTO MASTERCLASS | PART 18

MAMMAL BEHAVIOUR

A young adult female bear tries to steal a salmon from a larger male. Fish were in short supply on this Alaskan river and some bears resorted to theft. This female was quickly put in her place. Jonathan and Angie Scott captured the violence of the battle in the muscular movements of the combatants, and also in the ferocity of the spray.
MEET THE EXPERT...

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

Jonathan and Angie Scott are passionate about wildlife photography. “We are both visual people,” says Angie, “and thoroughly enjoy looking at art of any kind.” “But it’s not just enjoyable,” says Jonathan. “It’s essential. We make the time to look at everything from fashion to architectural photography, because it helps to keep our work fresh.”

They don’t like to criticise the work of other photographers. “We all have different styles,” enthuses Angie, “and whether a particular style appeals or not, it is always enlightening.”

“In fact, the two of us are very different in our approaches,” says Jonathan. “Angie comes from a family of artists and is inventive and spontaneous. But I have a scientific approach, a way of thinking and make your photography more adventurous. “A friend once said to me, ‘Photography is about carefully constructed compositions.’”

Japanese photographer Mitsuaki Iwago was a big influence on Jonathan, especially when he was first working in Antarctica, the Mara or in your own back garden,” says Angie. “The Japanese photographer reminded me of how I might shoot as an artist, rather than as a scientist, and my photography improved.”

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Jonathan and Angie Scott have formed a prolific partnership for nearly two decades, working together in tv, art, wildlife photography, books and much more.

Jonathan and Angie’s mammal behaviour photo tips

1. Be more imaginative and adventurous
   To take outstanding pictures, you have to break the boundaries created by your own way of thinking and make your photography more adventurous. “A friend once said that he would put his head inside a shark’s mouth to get the best shot,” says Jonathan. “He was speaking metaphorically, but he had a point. Just don’t overstep the mark.”

2. Be organised and plan ahead
   So many pictures are missed due to lack of organisation. This begins with packing – Jonathan and Angie produce detailed lists of everything they might need – and continues into the field.

Your step-by-step guide...

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

1. Anticipate the action
   Don’t worry if you do miss – just delete and try again. But do your deleting later, in case there is a repeat performance.

2. Shoot from your car
   Use your vehicle as a hide. Many mammals don’t associate vehicles with danger – yet if you get out of the car they’ll be off. And in some parks and reserves, remaining in your car is mandatory.

3. Prepare for the unexpected
   Many mammals don’t associate your vehicle with danger – yet if you get out of the car they’ll be off. And in some parks and reserves, remaining in your car is mandatory.

4. Do some research
   Research your destination and local conditions to increase your chances of being in the right place at the right time.

5. Choose the right lens
   Mammal action often involves a flurry of movement, so select a lens that gives you lots of room around your subject. Otherwise you’ll be cropping off snouts, horns and tails.

6. Keep up with the action by paring
   (Following the subject with the camera). This technique is second-nature to sports photographers and requires practice, but gives a strong sense of motion.

7. Experiment with slow shutter speeds
   To get your main subject sharp and the background blurred. This requires a lot of trial and error, but can be very effective.

8. Shoot first, ask questions later
   Don’t wait until you have the perfect image in your viewfinder – the most dramatic mammal behaviour often begins and ends unexpectedly. If you stop to think, even for a second, you could miss the shot.

9. Don’t worry if you do miss – just delete and try again. But do your deleting later, in case there is a repeat performance.

10. Keep shooting even if conditions aren’t perfect – you never know what you might get. The more images you take, the better your chances of capturing a good one.

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There is plenty of great mammal action to be seen in Britain. Here Ben Hall provides all the inspiration you need to catch them doing what they do best.

Red squirrel climbing
The red squirrel’s preferred habitat is pine woodland, so your first task will be to locate your subject. Squirrels move fast, but when climbing trees they often pause briefly to survey their surroundings. To capture this behaviour you need super-quick reactions. Follow the squirrel through the viewfinder and be ready to fire at all times.

Mountain hare sprinting
I always like to express the spirit of my subject in my images. Mountain hares can move at an incredible pace, so try to capture this behaviour in an artistic way. Set a slow shutter speed on your camera and pan with the hare as it runs. This will create an abstract impression rather than a straightforward record shot.

Roe deer leaping
Roe deer activity usually peaks during the rut in July and August. These shy mammals possess highly acute senses, so fieldcraft plays a big part in capturing successful images. Venture out at dawn and dusk when the deer are most active and always wear dark or camouflaged clothing. Approach from downwind and keep below the skyline.

Grey seals playing
Grey seals are incredibly photogenic. For the most intimate shots, adopt a low viewpoint and use a beanbag for support. Seals often interact with each other, so watch out for signs of play behaviour. Set your camera to ‘drive’ mode and fire as many shots as you can to capture that perfect moment. Practise your skills at Donna Nook, Lincolnshire.

Now it’s your turn. Use all our experts’ hints and tips to take great photos of mammal behaviour. Use Ben’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.

DOS & DON’TS

DO study art and photography of any kind to keep your own work fresh and inspired.

DO shoot like an artist — but prepare like a scientist.

DON’T forget to turn off the car engine before you start taking pictures — or the juddering will make everything blurred.

DON’T disrupt the behaviour of the mammals you are trying to photograph — it may harm them and will certainly show in your pictures.