

Furry Encounters

Michael Snedic presents an easy to follow guide to photographing Australia's smaller animals.



Eastern Pygmy Possum

This tiny, rare Eastern Pygmy Possum is part of a registered breeder's captive collection. It was climbing over and exploring some Queensland Tree Waratah flowers and this allowed me time to set up multiple, diffused flash units, for even lighting. I spent hours waiting and it simply wouldn't face the camera. I was getting ready to pack up, thinking there wasn't a chance of getting any decent photos, when it looked up and stared at the camera for a number of minutes. My patience was rewarded! Nikon F90X, 80-200mm f2.8, f/5.6, twin flash (diffused), tripod, Fuji Sensia slide film



Spotted-tailed Quoll

Spotted-tailed Quolls have the most beautifully-coloured fur and I wanted to show this in my photo. This adult was foraging around in the leaf litter, mostly with his back to me. I was watching him through my viewfinder, carefully following his movements. Since it was night time (quolls are nocturnal) I asked a friend to accompany me, so he could shine a torch on this particular individual. In order for his fur to be mostly in focus, I set my aperture to f/11 and used two diffused flash units for lighting. Nikon F90X, 80-200 f2.8 lens, f/11, twin flash (diffused)

you and you want its entire body to be in focus, a smaller aperture such as f8 or f11 is preferred, in order to achieve greater depth of field. If, on the other hand, the animal you're photographing is tiny and you wish to have most of its body in focus, then a setting of f16 or f22 may be needed to have the whole subject in focus. This is especially so if the lens you're using is a macro such as a 50mm, 60mm or 105mm.

If the number of entries in nature photography competitions is anything to go by, wildlife photography has been experiencing an increase in popularity over the last few years. Organisations such as BBC Wildlife (Britain), Nature's Best (United States) and ANZANG (Australia) are receiving a huge number of entries in the various wildlife photography categories. My aim here is to explain some techniques that will allow you to capture competition-quality images of various Australian animals.

Understanding Light

Interesting animals are found right across Australia. Kangaroos and wallabies inhabit many of our national parks, state forests and other nature reserves. The best time of day to photograph kangaroos or wallabies is early in the morning or late in the afternoon, when lighting conditions are at a premium. This is when the light is at its most subtle. Photographing in the middle of the day creates a harsh glare that can burn out an image. A well-composed, sharp image of a kangaroo with the beautiful morning light reflecting off its fur makes for a very pleasing photo indeed. But smaller animals make great subjects, too.

It's important to be aware of these animals' "personal space". The best way to approach your subject is to move very slowly and carefully towards it, stopping every few steps to assess any reaction. If your subject hasn't moved and isn't concerned by your presence, you may take a few more steps, reassess the situation and repeat the procedure until you feel you're close enough. Always have your camera and preferred lens ready, otherwise any movement created by fumbling through your camera bag may cause the animal to scamper off.

The Value of Composition

Composition is an important part of creating an interesting photo. Make sure you make the subject of your photo the centre of attention, rather than some out-of-focus shape in the background that catches your eye. Try to avoid any branches or objects in the foreground that may be obscuring your subject. If the animal is standing straight up, compose your photo as a vertical or portrait shot. If it's feeding or has a joey in its pouch and is bent over, the best way to compose your photo is to use a horizontal or landscape format. Spend a few seconds composing the photo in your mind.

The eyes are usually the first things people look to when looking at an animal. If they aren't in focus, the viewer may lose interest in the photo immediately. When using a digital camera or if the film or slides you've taken have been scanned, it's easy to selectively "capture sharpen" eyes that are a fraction soft or out of focus. By using one of the many image-correcting software programs available today, a photo that may otherwise seem unappealing can be saved by performing a few 'tweaks' on the computer.

Depth of Field

I've photographed wildlife and conducted nature photography workshops for many years. During that time many people have asked me what the "correct" depth-of-field is. There's no hard and fast rule, as it depends on the positioning of the subject, the background and the effect that you're trying to create (you may want to have the whole animal in focus or just the head). I like to use an f-stop (aperture) of around f5.6 when using a zoom or telephoto lens from a distance, as the subject is usually in focus and the background tends to blur out. If the animal is facing towards

Golden Brush-tailed Possum

To photograph this Golden Brush-tailed Possum, I set up two diffused flash units, pointing to his feeding station. He didn't stop for a second and was impossible to keep a focus on. Eventually he stopped on the branch where the flashes were pointing and ate some fruit. I waited until he finished, he looked up and that was the magical moment this photo was taken. Nikon F90X, 80-200mm f2.8 lens, f/5.6, twin flash set-up (diffused), Fuji Sensia slide film



Grey kangaroo Joey

The female adult Grey kangaroo was lying lazily in the sun in a field. I noticed that the joey in her pouch was moving around, so I stayed with her for a while. My thoughts were that eventually the joey would poke its head out of the pouch and create a great photo opportunity, which is exactly what happened! I had ample time beforehand to work out which lens to use, the preferred settings on my camera and the type of composition best suited for this scene. Nikon F90X, 80-200 f2.8 lens, f/8, Fuji Sensia slide film, on-camera fill flash



Spinifex Hopping Mouse

Being winter, this Spinifex Hopping Mouse was quite slow and calm. Usually they bound around like crazy. As a captive specimen, it was easy setting up a series of diffused flashes aimed at the area it was favouring. My main objective was to have the body in focus, with the tail and background out of focus. I did this by setting my aperture to f/22 using a macro lens. Nikon D200, 105mm f2.8 macro lens, f/22, twin flash (diffused)

for a few photos. Why not approach a wildlife carer and see what response you receive? You may be surprised by their response. It's a great way to photograph some of the different natives you wouldn't normally have the opportunity to otherwise shoot. Often these individuals are the orphans of mothers killed in road accidents or fires and caring for them is their only hope of survival. They will mostly be in enclosures. Position yourself so there's some foliage in the background or bring in a few branches from a nearby native tree. You can then place your marsupial either in, or in front of, these branches in readiness to take your photos. Since the foliage is new to the subject, it will often gravitate around it out of curiosity and this makes for easier photography.

When photographing mammals in a closed or captive environment, using multiple flashes is a way of creating even, shadow-free lighting. If the subject you're photographing is positioned in one spot and is stationary while feeding or cleaning its fur, separate flash units can be set up, pointing in its direction. These can be set up at different angles, in order to diffuse any shadows created by a single flash. Many of Australia's mammals are nocturnal and active at night. Some sort of soft lighting, such as a small torch, is needed to illuminate the subject.

Zoos and Wildlife Parks

Zoos and wildlife parks are also a great place for practicing your animal photography techniques. The best example that comes to mind is the iconic koala. Since they're often displayed at eye level and fairly close to the photographer, koalas are a popular subject. Zoos and wildlife parks regularly have koalas with a baby on their back, a photo opportunity that shouldn't be missed! Because the koala is often completely still, a sturdy tripod can be used. This allows for the aperture to be set to f8 or smaller, even in poorer lighting conditions, making the shutter setting quite low. The tripod minimises camera shake caused by holding the camera in your hands.

Photographing Australia's many different types of mammals can be a rewarding experience. If you follow some of the straightforward photographic techniques I've recommended, there is no reason why you can't end up with a series of top-quality photos. The whole experience can be a load of fun, too! *

Michael Snedic is a professional nature photographer, writer and presenter of one and two-day nature photography workshops in south-east Queensland. He is also, with Andrew Teakle and Debra Doenges, co-shooter of "Australian Journey - Wildlife" which is one of a series of four books. It was scheduled to be published by New Holland Publishers in December. For more information please visit www.michaelsnedic.com

The smaller the f-stop, the more your subject will be in focus, but the downside of this is that you'll either need to have good lighting or to increase your ISO. It should be noted that the higher the ISO is raised, the more 'noise' your photos will have when using digital, while with film the photo becomes much grainier. If raising the ISO isn't an option, it's worth considering using added lighting such as fill flash. Using your inbuilt flash is quite acceptable at close range, but if you own an SLR I highly recommend the purchase of an external flash unit. The flash can be attached to the hot shoe of your camera or connected to a cable attached to the hot shoe. There are also some models of digital SLR cameras where the flash can be triggered via a "master and commander" system. The inbuilt flash in your camera can be used as the trigger and it then sets off the external flash via a remote, wireless system. An external flash allows light to go much further, but care needs to be taken not to overpower the subject with too much light. I regularly use a diffuser, whether it's the inbuilt one that flips over the front of the flash or a purchased one that can be added separately to the flash. Fill-flash is also recommended in sunny conditions, as it helps to diffuse any harsh shadows on the animal you're photographing.

Captive Options

Throughout Australia there are many dedicated wildlife carers who voluntarily look after a variety of different mammals. These can include common possums and kangaroos, various types of gliders, and more unusual native species such as dunnarts or native hopping mice. I'm sure there are carers who would be more than willing to allow a keen photographer to photograph their charges in return