

# Talk To The Animals

**Michael Snedic explains some of his tried and tested techniques for photographing wildlife.**

Photographing animal behaviour can be a rewarding experience. Capturing on camera that split-second moment when an animal is midway through performing some amazing feat is special. It can also be very challenging, and my aim here is to show you how to photograph different types of behaviours by following some basic techniques and principles.

Although using an SLR camera makes it easier to photograph wildlife you can still use a point-and-shoot or compact camera, but it's more difficult to take your photo at the precise moment when something dramatic is happening. Compact cameras have an inbuilt shutter-lag, which basically means there's a delay from the time the shutter button is pressed until the photo is taken. Photographers who use compact cameras often tell me they're frustrated by missing that special "moment", due to the delay in the shutter action on their camera. If the subject you're

photographing is stationary you first need to compose your photo, then press the shutter button partially to pre-focus. Wait for the right moment to happen, then press it all the way down. It takes a bit of practice and you'll no doubt have near-misses, but once you're used to this technique it becomes relatively easy.

## Freezing Action

With photographing birds or bats in flight or mammals running, it's essential you use a fast shutter speed if you want to "freeze" their action (that is, capture it sharply). Using Shutter Priority mode will allow you to choose the shutter speed you need; the aperture will be set automatically. When you're photographing a bird in flight, you need the bird's head to be in sharp focus, so I recommend a minimum of 1/1000th of a second shutter speed. Obviously the higher the shutter speed, the better chance you have of capturing that split-second moment. If lighting conditions are fairly good, then your shutter speed can be set high, but when lighting is poor, increasing the ISO speed on your camera is also a good option. With each increase in ISO (eg; 100 to 200, or 200 to

I was on board a large tourist boat, specially designed to track Humpback Whales, hoping to get some photos of these majestic mammals breaching. My camera and lens were ready and my settings pre-set. The whale breached in front of me and I quickly turned to see where the action had just occurred. Since I had studied whale behaviour over the years, I was aware that often there will be a series of breaches after the first one. I quickly aimed my lens in front of where the whale had just crashed into the water and sure enough, out it breached again. I aimed my lens at the body and fired off a series of shots. Had I not observed whale behaviour and had my camera ready, I could have easily missed the shots. Nikon D200, 80-200mm f/2.8 lens @ f5.6, 1/2500s, ISO 200, hand-held.



A flock of Silvereyes was feeding on a group of flowering Grass Trees. One Grass Tree had an interesting bent shape and I focused my camera on it. A Silvereye landed on it and I was about to take a photo when in the corner of my eye I could see another flying towards me. It flew through the centre of the Grass Tree and I waited until just the right moment to press the shutter. Nikon D200, 80-200mm f/2.8 lens, @ f/2.8, 1/1600s, ISO 400, hand-held.

A male Regent Bowerbird in flight looks stunning and I'd been hoping to photograph one for a number of years. I decided to make a concerted effort and drove to Lamington National Park in south-east Queensland three or four times over a number of months, taking countless shots using very fast shutter speeds. They're fast, so focusing on the bird in flight is near impossible. I manually focused on one spot where this particular male was flying back and forth and waited for the precise moment when he was "in frame" to take a series of continuous shots. This took many attempts, but I eventually succeeded. Nikon D200, 80-200mm f/2.8 lens @f3.2, 1000s, ISO 200, hand-held.



I was photographing Grey Kangaroos in northern New South Wales, hoping to take some shots of some with backlit fur. This individual started scratching precisely when I was focused on it. I couldn't resist the opportunity to take a whole series of shots. I used Vibration Reduction (Image Stabiliser) technology to stabilise my lens and manually focused on its eyes. Nikon D200, 80-400mm VR @ f/8, 1/500s, ISO 400, hand-held.

**“If something is happening in front of you and you don't have time to adjust the settings on your camera I recommend using the automatic “sports” mode...”**

400), your shutter speed can increase by one stop (eg; 1/250s to 1/500s, or 1/500s to 1/1000s). Be aware that when using a digital camera – depending on the model – you'll see some “noise” or digital grain if you set your ISO too high. Noise appears as tiny coloured specks, mostly in shadow or black areas of your image.

When you're tracking a fast-moving animal with an SLR I recommend setting it to continuous-servo AF (auto-focus). As you follow your subject, partially depress the shutter button. This keeps focus on the moving subject. When you feel the time is right, press the button. Without this feature, it's a lot more difficult to focus on your subject just before taking the photo. I also suggest using the continuous HS (high speed) setting on your SLR. This enables you to capture a full sequence of shots of movement in a series, without having to press your shutter button repeatedly. Depending on the camera you own, your frames per second using this setting can vary from 5 to 9. If something is happening in front of you and you don't have time to adjust the settings on your camera I recommend using the automatic “sports” mode (the usual symbol for this setting is a figure running). This will let you follow the action and press the button without having to think about individual settings.

### Using Macro Mode

If your aim is to photograph small lizards or frogs, it's generally best to use the macro setting on your compact camera or a dedicated macro lens on your SLR. This allows you to focus at a close distance and fill the frame with your subject. Position yourself as close to eye-level as possible and focus on the animal's eyes. Then wait for that moment when there's some movement or interaction and quickly press the shutter. With wildlife behaviour you can't predict what will happen and when it will happen. To me, this is what makes it so exciting and challenging!

### Zoom & Auto Focus

Many animals are shy and won't act naturally in close proximity to humans. It's very useful to use a zoom or telephoto lens with a decent focal length. Zoom lenses with constant maximum apertures are expensive (they are often pro quality), but they offer the best possibilities for shooting wildlife. If you would like to photograph birds in flight a long lens is again essential. If the budget allows, it's worth purchasing a lens with a fast auto-focus capability. It will allow you to track the animal more easily and will give you more chance to fire off a sequence of shots.

One of the more exciting photographic experiences you can have



You need lots of patience to photograph a lizard's tongue poking out, because you never know when it will happen! I was lying on my stomach at eye level with this blue-tongued lizard. It was very sedentary and didn't seem bothered by my presence. I was using a macro lens to try and get a sharp photo of the head and manually focused on its eyes. It was reasonably dark so I used a macro flash to light up my subject. As soon as the tongue poked out, I was ready and took the shot. Nikon F90X, 105mm f/2.8 macro lens, macro flash, hand-held.

is photographing an animal jumping or flying out of the water. These can include a humpback whale breaching, a dolphin surfing or an osprey powering out of the water after it's caught a fish. Try to freeze-frame the exact moment when your subject is out of the water and the droplets around it are 'frozen'. This will require anticipation of any animal's movement, which in turn can be acquired only by spending time watching the habits of your chosen subject. This can chew up a lot of hours without much obvious photographic reward, but it's definitely time well spent. Any worthwhile photography project can be improved by getting to know your subject (be it human or animal!). Also, if you know an animal or bird's regular patterns of movement, it can pay to simply pre-focus your lens on a given spot, and wait until the animal is

## How To: *Take Creative Animal Shots*

right there again before shooting. A tripod can be very useful with this type of shot because it may take a while before the creature returns to the location and you could simply get too tired to hand-hold a big lens. If your shot is taken correctly, these types of photos can look breathtaking.

### Slow Shutter Speeds

An interesting alternative to shooting clear and sharp photos is to intentionally slow down your shutter speed to create a blurry effect, which can be quite artistic. You can use this technique for all types of situations, but I've found it can be especially effective in taking photos of birds bathing, scratching or ruffling their feathers. Set your shutter speed fairly low (eg; 1/20s to 1/60s) and again use Shutter Priority mode. Then set up your camera and lens on a sturdy tripod, focus on the bird's head and take a series of photos while it's moving. While this is a "hit and miss" technique to some degree, the slow shutter speed, coupled with the bird's movement, will often create an interesting effect. This type of photography is experimental and may not be your normal style, but it's worth considering. You may be surprised by the results!

### Background Research

Choosing the correct camera settings and appropriate photographic techniques will help you to take better photos of wildlife behaviour. But this is only part of the equation. One of the most important aspects of this type of photography is to spend time observing the animal you wish to photograph. Each species will behave differently and often individuals will follow a distinct pattern of behaviour. Many of the world's best wildlife photographers will spend days or even weeks observing one particular species, watching their every move closely. When they see a pattern, they'll set up their equipment and choose their lens and camera settings accordingly. It's then much easier to concentrate on composing and focusing on that particular animal,



### TIME AND EXPOSURE

I prefer photographing wildlife either early in the morning or late in the afternoon, when the light is subtle and most animals are more active, though of course, you can't control when wildlife interactions will happen. If you're out shooting in the middle of the day and you see something happening, you should still attempt to take your shot. You may need to set your exposure compensation to minus one or above one on your meter reading, depending on the general scene brightness, as this will prevent the area around your subject from being too "hot" or overblown. This technique is known as "bracketing", and it involves shooting frames either side of a metered exposure, because sometimes in-built light meters can be fooled. With digital SLRs you'll quickly be able to determine which exposure is "correct" (or which one you feel best conveys the image you were trying to capture). Check your rear screen, but also look at the histogram setting as screens can be hard to see in bright light. A histogram should generally have more of its graphic line towards the left of the screen (slightly under-exposed), unless you have a reason to have it otherwise. Slight under-exposure can be adjusted in your computer if necessary, but blown out highlights will rarely recover good detail.

rather than just using guesswork as to where it will end up or how it will behave. Geckos and lizards will often lick their faces after eating; you can be prepared for this and be ready to take the photos in anticipation. Many birds, after catching their prey, will take their catch and land on one particular branch of a tree. By spending the time observing these patterns you can set yourself up in a position where you know the bird will land. Not only can you end up with photos of the bird flying to its perch, there may be an opportunity to photograph it devouring its prey. Male frogs will expand their throat pouches when calling for females. By observing



### HOW I SHOT THE COVER

A number of months ago, I spent a week on a boat in Tropical North Queensland, looking for wildlife to photograph. A pair of osprey were circling the area regularly, scouring the area for fish to feed their hungry offspring. One of the pair suddenly pulled back its wings and dived at amazing speed into the water, coming out with a fish in its talons. To my disappointment, it was flying in the opposite direction. Then, suddenly, it turned and flew in my direction! I realised that it was heading back towards its nest, so I quickly focused on the bird and took some shots in continuous shutter mode, using my digital SLR. I knew that if I had an opportunity to photograph the flying osprey, it would need to be a fast shutter speed to freeze the movement of the bird, so I used aperture priority and set my ISO to 800, ending up with a shutter speed of 1/6400s. Due to the bright sky and the white on the bird, I also set my exposure compensation to approximately -1, to stop any "blown highlights". I also made sure I focused on the osprey's eye – an important aspect of wildlife photography. The experience was absolutely exhilarating and I felt a chill up my spine when I looked at the photo on the back of my camera's LCD screen.



This Sedge Frog was making a racket, continually calling for a female one hot, balmy night. He was hard to find due to his size and green colour, camouflaged amongst the leaves. Once I found him, though, I manually pre-focused on his eyes, composed my shot and waited for him to expand his throat pouch. I used a large depth of field (a small aperture opening) to get his whole body in focus and a macro flash to light up the photo. Nikon D200, 105mm f/2.8 macro lens @ f/29, macro flash, handheld.

their routine, you can find the exact location where they display (like a local pond) and also when they tend to call. These displays usually occur on hot, humid and rainy nights. By doing some groundwork and putting in a little extra effort to get to know your species, you have a far greater chance of getting the photos you want.

### Patience Pays

Another essential requirement in getting special photos is patience. If you expect to get those stunning photos within the first 10 minutes of your shoot, then you will be greatly disappointed. Many of my more successful behavioural shots of wildlife were taken after days or weeks of trying. To photograph a displaying male Albert's Lyrebird I spent seven weeks in a cold, cramped bird hide in a rainforest in the middle of winter. The photos of osprey diving for fish were taken after repeated flights to Tropical North Queensland, driving many kilometres each day and spending countless hours on a boat. And a photo of a breaching whale was only achieved after driving 200kms return on a number of occasions, with little else other than a few photos to show for my efforts. These may be extreme examples, and you certainly don't

need to go to these lengths to get some special shots, but it does illustrate the importance of never giving up. You may score that amazing shot first time around, but often it's patience and persistence that will get you there.

### Conclusion

No matter where you live there are always opportunities to photograph wildlife. You don't have to go to exotic places to achieve this. You could be at a local pond in a botanic garden, at a zoo, by the beach, on a boat or even in your own backyard. Capturing a split-second moment in an animal's life and creating that special photo is very satisfying, but it's also the wonderful wildlife experiences you'll have along the way that can make it even more rewarding.

*Michael Snedic is a professional nature photographer, writer and presenter of photography workshops in south-east Queensland. His new book "Wildlife of Australia – a nature photographer's journey" is a 200-page, hard-cover coffee table book featuring photos of Australia's diverse and unique wildlife. For more information, please visit [www.michaelsnedic.com](http://www.michaelsnedic.com) or [www.trekaboutphotography.com](http://www.trekaboutphotography.com)*