

IN THE PICTURE

Equipment is important but, for a great wildlife photograph – **YOU NEED WILDLIFE.** Here are some hints to ensure it's in the picture.

Many articles on wildlife photography are packed with recommendations about equipment, settings and techniques for great photos. These are all important considerations, but – you also need to make sure there's wildlife in your wildlife photography. Here are some basic principles that work for me and, I hope, for you as well. At the very least, you'll see plenty of wildlife – and maybe capture some great photographs as well.

Wait for it

On a quiet morning on a whale-watching boat, I waited, camera and lens ready, hoping for some interesting behaviour. Suddenly, passengers towards the front of the boat turned and lunged in one direction – towards a southern humpback whale that had just breached. I barely caught the tail-end of it.

But – on a previous trip, with the NSW Parks and Wildlife Service, I had seen males perform a second and even third successive breach. A spectacular sight! With this in mind, I pointed my camera in front of the whale's splashdown site. Sure enough, up it came again with another spectacular breach. I focused on the whale's body and pressed my shutter button to capture a continuous series of amazing shots within a breathtaking moment.

Observing a species before photographing it helps to identify and anticipate behaviours and prepares you to shoot when and where they happen. For example, there is a much higher chance of getting successful photos of a bird in flight if you know when it is about to leap off its perch. In the many hours I have spent waiting and watching various birds of prey, I have noticed some species will bob their head just before taking flight.

Main: This central-netted dragon is more interesting shot at eye level rather than from above.

Right: If you are interested in a particular species, like a thorny devil, be sure you are in the right location.

Right above: If shot from a different direction, this red-capped robin would have had distracting grass stems in the background.



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MY PHILOSOPHY HAS ALWAYS BEEN
'AIM TO GET IT RIGHT IN THE CAMERA'

Above: A splendid fairy-wren looks stunning against a clear blue sky. **Below:** Eye contact enhances this shot of a nankeen kestrel.
Bottom: Add a waterproof sheet to your gear to save yourself getting dirty while capturing the ground level appeal of animals such as this graceful tree-frog.

Identify and observe behaviours, then wait for the moment to grab an interesting composition such as the one this lace monitor's action has created.

Local knowledge

Here's a hint to help save many hours and kilometres: study seasonal behaviours and pay attention to local advice.

I had been told by locals about a pair of peregrine falcons that regularly landed on a particular branch and, several times over the preceding two weeks, mated there. I decided it was worth spending some time at that location. Sure enough, the pair turned up, mated right on cue and I was there with my camera ready.

If you want to find and photograph a male water dragon in full breeding colour, wait for the warmer months – water dragons hibernate during winter. If you want to photograph a wallaby with a joey in her pouch, find out when the joeys are likely to be old enough to stick their heads out.

It also helps to link species with habitat when planning your photographic excursions. Southern leaf-tailed geckoes, for example, generally cling to the sides of trees in sub-tropical rainforests in northern NSW and south-east Queensland. They are well-camouflaged and hard to find, so improve your chances and make sure you are in the right location.

Other species, such as the Australian sea lion, are more widespread, but not all their sites are accessible. However, Seal Bay Conservation Park on Kangaroo Island,



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in South Australia, is a stronghold for these animals and access is not only allowed but encouraged. By booking a ranger-guided walk, you can get close up right on the beach.

Eye to eye

The angle of a shot can make the difference between an average and a great photo. Photos always look so much better when your subject is closer to eye level. This may mean changing your position, especially when an animal is up in a tree. Try walking uphill a ways and taking some shots from a more elevated position.

The same advice applies when photographing wildlife on the ground. Don't shoot down – it just doesn't look right. Crouch or lie down (a poncho or ground-cover sheet are handy items to carry with you and will save you getting dirty). I photographed a graceful tree frog in far north Queensland while lying on the ground, resting on my elbows, with the frog looking directly towards me – a much more appealing view than if I'd shot straight down onto its back.

One occasion for which this rule doesn't apply is when photographing birds in flight. Sometimes you simply have

no option but to point your camera up. Still, you can achieve some great backlit shots with the bird against the sun.

Don't distract

Remember to notice your background! Photographers can concentrate so hard on their intended subject that they may not 'see' the background until they download the image onto their computer. You may be able to Photoshop the background distractions out, but my philosophy has always been 'aim to get it right in the camera'.

In the Red Centre recently, I photographed a red-capped robin on a dead branch. I couldn't believe how close he allowed me to approach. I was about to fire off a series of shots when I noticed the bright, distracting grass stems behind the bird and carefully moved to my right. Recomposing the shot against a distant, blurred-out background, I achieved a much nicer result.

Australia is blessed with an amazing array of wildlife. With prior research and observation, you can set yourself up to be in the right place at the right time to grab some breathtaking photographs. What are you waiting for?

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