

VCC November Field Trip – Wildlife Photography

This month's first trip is to a secret location.... The trick is to find our subject!

Seriously, there are several key elements to wildlife photography, the first and most important is to be able to locate our subjects and then get close enough to them. Only then do we need to be concerned with equipment. However, I'm not going to dwell on finding the subjects other than to say a basic knowledge of their behaviours and likely habitat is critical, as is the way we approach them.

So, on to equipment, several items are really essential including a sturdy tripod with a good ball head, or for heavy lenses a gimball head, cable release, and appropriate lenses. Suitable clothing would include outerwear that is not going to scare the subject away; neutral browns/greens or "camouflage" patterns are useful here. You may also wish to disguise your tripod and camera/lens with various materials.

There are a number of other items that you might find useful; these include a shoulder stock/brace for circumstances where you can't use a tripod, such as in a canoe/boat, a "raincoat" for your camera (yes, they are available), a camouflage portable hide, and maybe a folding seat. When shooting subjects that are fairly close, flash is often useful to fill shadows or to be the "main light" in low light situations. A useful accessory is a "flash extender" such as the "Better Beamer" which can give you 2-3 stops of additional lighting.

The equipment that is most essential is the camera/lens. A digital or film SLR with a long wide lens is preferred. Long because you are likely to be "too far away" and wide because you will want to use a fast shutter speed to stop motion (both of the camera and subject) and a lot of wildlife action takes place early in the morning or at dusk.

Ideally, you would like the fastest lens of 300-400 mm or above that you can afford, or want to carry around. At 400mm, f2.8 lenses are available, but beyond that you are generally going to have to use something slower, usually f5.6. A good quality teleconverter is useful, but you will lose 1-2 stops of exposure with it. Again, zoom lenses give you the advantage of adjustable framing if you can get close enough to be within their zoom range. Vibration reduction lenses (or body, depending on brand) will give you 2-3 extra stops of shutter speed where you can hand-hold a long lens, but is not useful when using a tripod (varies by model). Remember that this gain only applies to your ability to hold the lens steady enough, it does not allow for subject movement.

Camera body features that are useful include a high framing rate and large buffer as you will often want to shoot in burst mode to capture the "right" spot in the action, and mirror lock-up to minimise vibration. Most of the other features you will use are standard on current cameras.

So now let us get down to technique. Some points to bear in mind include:

- Get as close as you reasonably can (the longer the lens, the further away you can afford to be)
- Don't get so close that you disturb the subject, especially nesting birds or mothers with babies
- Get low – a low "animals eye" view is often more effective than the "bird's eye" view from above
- Shoot the action – animals doing something are often more interesting than static portraits
- Include the environment – it often happens because you could not get any closer, but avoid the temptation to crop too tightly
- In general, a subject looking or moving into the picture is preferable
- When approaching other photographers "at work", make your presence known discretely, stay low and behind them, preferably using any available cover
- Leave no trace of your presence when you leave

How close can you get? A useful guideline might be the “rules” in Yellowstone/Teton National Parks, no closer than 25 m to wildlife, except 100 m for bears. I’ve been 25m from a herd of bison, and that is the limit.... For specific subjects such as a nesting bird, the rule is don’t disturb – if you can’t get a clear shot, find another subject.

Some specific issues you need to consider include:

- Balance your lens/camera over the support point to make it easier to adjust your “aim” at the subject
- If necessary, weight your tripod down with a bean bag or bag filled with stones
- Use the fastest shutter speed you can, while maintaining acceptable depth of field
- Use the lowest ISO setting (slower film) to minimize grain/noise, but still give you the required shutter speed and aperture. You will often be using 400-800 ISO, and shutter speeds > 1/250 sec to stop motion, especially in low light conditions.
- When shooting moving subjects, you will need to be able to pan smoothly to follow the subject, ideally keeping it at a fixed point in the viewfinder

In nature photography, patience is a virtue. You are likely to spend a lot of time wandering around looking for subjects, and then a long time sitting/standing/lying waiting for the action. When action happens it may be somewhat predictable, or totally erratic. Since you can’t predict exactly what the subject will do, when the action starts you want to judiciously use “burst mode” shooting to get the best chance of hitting the right point. You will want the largest and fastest memory card you can afford, and spares. It’s not unusual to shoot hundreds of frames of a single subject, and in a good day you can find several subjects.

You don’t have to be a naturalist to enjoy wildlife photography, but learning about your subjects may be worthwhile. There are numerous field guides including the Peterson and Audubon series with separate guides for different wildlife groups and in some cases regions (generally eastern vs. western north America). For birds, the Sibley’s guide is also very popular in Victoria. Beyond that, there is a wealth of more scientific information available. There are also very good resources on the internet, birds are well covered, as are our local whales.

The Victoria Natural History Society holds several meetings each month as well as botany and birding field trips (<http://vicnhs.bc.ca>) and is a useful source of information. Birding BC hosts “rare bird alert” websites for several regions in BC (<http://birding.bc.ca/regions/victoria/victoria-rba.php>).

Some local bird spots include: Esquimalt and Witty’s Lagoons, Wiffen Spit (Sooke), Panorama and Viaduct Flats (both off Interurban Road), Clover and Cattle Points, Mts Tolmie and Douglas, and Martindale flats (Martindale/Island View Road). If you have a bird feeder, you can arrange suitable backgrounds and perches in the vicinity and still get “natural” shots. Spring and fall migration times bring numerous non-resident birds passing through the area.

Victoria gets visited occasionally by, or has small resident populations of, some interesting birds including American Bitterns, Egrets, Sandhill Cranes (resident at Reifel Sanctuary in Ladner), Virginia Rails, Green and very rarely Black-Crowned Night Herons (Reifel), Snowy Owls (also Boundary Bay) and other smaller birds.

Mammals are a bit more difficult on the island, especially larger ones. There are small Roosevelt Elk herds in the Cowichan Valley, Strathcona Park and some winter near the Island Highway around Courtenay. You may encounter black bears on any of our logging roads or Highways 4 and 28. The area west of Lake Cowichan is probably the most accessible area, in the summer there is a loop road through Port Renfrew and Mesache Lake to Lake Cowichan, but it is not maintained in winter (well graded gravel road).

For this field trip we are likely to focus on the larger shorebirds and waterfowl (aka Ducks).

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