

# Getting Back Into Wildlife Photography

## *On Safari with Moose*

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Where in the world does a person start when they want to get back into photography after a long leave of absence? How does someone go about getting into a highly competitive field like wildlife photography? These were the questions I was asking myself nearly four years ago. Like so



many other men and women, I put my personal dreams and desires on hold in order to raise a family. For over 17 years my life was centered on my daughters, family and job. During that time, my photography was strictly limited to my daughters' gymnastics, family events and vacations. Now I had one daughter starting college, another daughter was beginning her junior year of high school and my husband was working on the weekends. I had time for myself once again. I knew exactly what I wanted to do - photograph wildlife, especially birds, in their natural habitat. A lot had changed since my college days of shooting with my Nikkormat EL. I needed to upgrade my camera equipment and more importantly, I needed to get the "feel" back for wildlife photography. In other words, I was in need of some serious help!

### **Research**

Since I enjoy reading, it was only natural that I chose to read as many books and current periodicals on wildlife photography as I could. While I read, I kept a notepad nearby and jotted down bits and pieces of information I wanted to try out. Armed with great ideas and new techniques, I went into the field on the weekends and photographed to my hearts content. It was wonderful to get back into the field.

Once I got my images back, I would make a mental note of what I liked and didn't like about each image. I would check off which techniques worked and which ones I just didn't like. Before long, I was craving more than just weekend outings.

## **The Internet**

It was at about this time that I "discovered" the World Wide Web through America Online. I particularly enjoyed reading what other photographers had to say about equipment in Kodak's Nature Photography Forum. The knowledge gained from reading the books, current periodicals and online information, were invaluable when it came time for me to upgrade my camera equipment.

At that time, I noticed that Moose Peterson was a frequent visitor to the Nature Photography forum. His Nikon Guide to Wildlife Photography had become my most referenced book. I had several questions I wanted to ask Moose. Being a little timid, it took me a while to get up the nerve to e-mail him. I must say it's one of the best moves I have ever made. Why? After several somewhat dumb questions on my part, Moose suggested that I sign up for one of his safaris. The idea of a photo safari intrigued me.

## **Photo Safaris**

Now I realize there are many professional photographers who offer photo tours. Many organizations also offer photography classes and organized photo shoots with a guest photographer. There's also the Great American Photography Weekend that offers seminars and workshops year 'round. All of these options are a great way of learning more about photography in general and getting valuable hands-on time in the field. So, why in heaven's name would a woman from Mississippi, opt to go on a photo safari to some place called Lee Vining Canyon in California with a guy who called himself Moose? I must tell you that my entire family thought that I was crazy and suffering from some sort of mid-life crisis. Besides admiring his photography, there are two main reasons why I initially selected Moose's photo safari. The size of his safaris is limited to four students. This assured me that I would get the much-needed individual instruction that I needed. Secondly, if the man was anything like his writing style, I knew that I would have a lot of fun as well.

A few weeks prior to the trip, Moose sent each of the participants an information packet. The packet consisted of local information and a booklet Moose had written. The booklet went over the history of the area, possible itinerary, what to wear, suggested camera equipment list, list of wildlife and a biological guide to the nesting birds of Lee Vining. There was also an excellent review of many of the basic techniques that we could expect to use during our five days with him. This is the type of booklet that every time you read it you discover a few more little bits of information.

## **In the Field**

My first day of shooting in the field with the group was fantastic! Up at the crack of dawn, Moose drove us to Lee Vining Canyon. Moose and his family had been scouting for nesting birds a few weeks prior to our arrival. His work paid off for us, as he knew exactly where the birds were nesting and took us right to them. The action-packed week flew by quickly.

I learned so many things that week, which I could never have learned from reading a book. By shooting under various lighting conditions, my ability to see the light in relation to the subject improved dramatically. My confusion over when to use fill flash was cleared up. And I finally realized that if the lighting on the subject is lousy, don't take the picture. So many times in the past, I would have taken the picture only to get the image back and wonder what I did wrong.

## **Results**

With my images back from Lee Vining, I eagerly laid the slides out on my light table. Now I can't say that every one of my images was fantastic, but I will say that my percentage of "keepers" increased dramatically. Even so, I still was not at the level I aspired to be. I was convinced that I needed to sign up for another photo safari with Moose. Five months later, I flew to Albuquerque, New Mexico to join Moose and participants in Socorro, the closest city to Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge. Nothing in the brochure or the books on Bosque could have prepared me for that first morning. The sight, sound and motion of tens of thousands of Snow Geese and Sandhill cranes taking flight as the sun popped up over the horizon was simply incredible. Talk about awe-inspiring!

Bosque is also a great place for hand-held in-flight photography. Prior to Bosque, I worked on my hand-held panning techniques by photographing my German Shepherd Dog running around in the backyard. This little bit of practice paid off for me in Bosque. Capturing birds in flight is one of the most rewarding aspects of bird photography I know of.

## **Awareness**

Admittedly, on any photo shoot, there will be some slow times when the shooting is just not the great. But that doesn't mean you should ever let your guard down. One afternoon in Bosque during one of those lulls, Moose spotted a coyote with a dead snow goose in its mouth trotting down the dike which would take him on a path directly in front of us. Since I had not "fallen asleep", I was able to fire off a few frames before the coyote disappeared in a matter of seconds. But I got THE shot and it's still one of my favorite images. Thanks to Moose, I have learned that in many situations, the subject will come to you. All of this comes from knowing your subject, its habitat and a certain degree of patience.

After the Bosque trip, my self-confidence soared. Coupled with my burning passion for wildlife photography I was convinced that I had to devote more than just weekends and a couple of trips per year to photographing wildlife.

## **Projects**

In between my photo shoots away from home, I create [self-assignments](#). Sometimes I don't go any further than my own backyard. At other times, I might photograph ducks landing at a nearby lake. These self-assignments keep me "in shape" and allow me to further hone my photographic skills. The old adage, "Use it or lose it" is so true, even in wildlife photography. It's a feel, a touch, a rhythm that you get into. If you put your camera up for a while and not use it, you could lose valuable time in the field trying to get the "machine" running smoothly again.

I still join Moose on photo safaris. Why do I keep going back on these safaris? Why don't I just go on location and shoot by myself? Well, I do. But, to me, being among people who share the same passion for wildlife and photography is energizing. Being outdoors and experiencing the sights and sounds of nature and wildlife with friends is thrilling. All of these feelings and emotions feed my passion for wildlife photography.

## **Summary**

My advice to you if you want to get a jumpstart on your wildlife photography is to sign up for a photo safari. When you do, remember to stay focused, listen to your instructor and ask questions. You will only get as much out of a safari as you put into it. Above all, have fun!

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