

A Good Foundation

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A good foundation is the key to building and improving your skills as a wildlife photographer. Whether you shoot with a disposable camera or a 35mm SLR camera, if your camera is not steady, you will not get sharp, consistent results. You need to know how to hold or support the camera and stand properly in order to eliminate vibration and prevent camera shake with longer exposures.

To properly hold your camera, stand with your feet slightly apart and knees slightly bent. This will allow you to relax and breathe so that your motions are smooth. Rest your camera in your left hand; if you have an SLR, you should place your hand under the lens. Your elbows should be held close to your side providing "two legs" of your tripod. Press the camera close to your forehead when you look through your viewfinder... this provides the "third leg" of your tripod. When you press the shutter, try not to jerk it. Instead, gently squeeze the shutter release. You can also try kneeling on one knee and resting your support elbow on your other knee.

A good way to prevent camera shake is to use a beanbag. Whether you photograph wildlife out of your car window or take scenics out in the field, a beanbag can often be the perfect solution. The beanbag cradles your camera and provides a secure base from which to shoot. I keep one in my car at all times and prop my camera on it whenever I shoot out of the window or over the hood. A beanbag also works well on the ground for those low angle shots. If you don't have a beanbag hand, improvise.... use a tree or solid structure to lean against or rest your camera on to help steady yourself and your camera while shooting.

The best way to ensure sharp pictures is to use a sturdy tripod with a good ball head. A good tripod is essential for large, telephoto camera lenses. However, just placing your camera and lens on a tripod will not guarantee sharp images on a windy day. Keep in mind that when you shoot with a long, telephoto lens, you should always place your left hand on top of the lens directly over the tripod. Also, your tripod should be strong enough to support your longest and heaviest lens. It should be tall enough so you do not have to use the center column. Center columns essentially convert your tripod into a monopod and do not prevent camera shake. The width at the base of the tripod should be as wide as your longest lens in order to provide adequate support.

Once you have learned the basics of a good foundation, you are on your way to consistently sharp images and better photographs.

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