

CLOSE TO HOME

With elk prominent in the author's town, she has learned to watch animal behavior and appearance to have a good idea of when elk calves will be born. This usually happens around Memorial Day weekend, so she sticks close to home to photograph the newborns.

Six tips for photographing wildlife without traveling far

Photos and story by Dawn Wilson

American white pelicans migrate through the author's hometown each spring. By staying close to home, she is able to photograph the birds during their brief stop.



Photographers dream of exotic locations with unique opportunities to experience rare animals and scenic vistas. Often these locations are in contrast to what we see in our day-to-day lives. Even for those living near photo-hotspots like Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks, a change of scenery can be exciting and fulfilling.

But, it's still possible to get your wildlife-photo fix closer to home.

"I shoot photos from my vehicle about 95 percent of the time," said Worland resident and wildlife photographer James Yule. "I bought my first camera in 1994. A year later, I entered the *Wyoming Wildlife* magazine photo contest. Over the years, I have had 83 images place or make honorable mention in that photo contest. About 80 percent of those photos — and 80 percent of all of my photos — are taken within 15 minutes from my home."

You really do not need to go very far to build a stunning collection of images.

We all know our home range better than anywhere else. We see it every day and know where to find the best photographic opportunities. We experience its daily changes, weather patterns and lighting at a pace you can never learn in a few days in a new location. We become familiar with specific animals and know their personalities and habits.

"You can really get to know an animal, and the

more time you spend with it, and the more you improve your chance of a unique shot," said Henry Holdsworth, nature photographer and owner of Wild by Nature Gallery in Jackson. "You don't have to travel far so you can learn habits and patterns of certain species of wildlife. You can check on dens and nests frequently. This allows you to visit the same animals in different weather, times of the day, different seasons and lighting."

There are some things you can do to get the perfect shot within minutes of your home or even in your own backyard.

1. KNOW YOUR NEIGHBORS

"In your area make friends with the landowners," Yule said. "I have about 1 million acres of land available to me because of asking permission from landowners to access for photography."

The owner of a large piece of land likely knows their property inside and out. They can tell you the wildlife they have seen on the land and any patterns they have observed.

Each spring, birds migrate through my hometown. If there is an approaching storm, they will rest on the lake to wait it out. Sometimes a local business owner calls me to let me know an American white pelican is on the lake or a bald eagle is watching the ducks at the pond outside of the local coffee shop.

I also had a call one summer morning from a former coworker saying he spotted a hummingbird nest in his yard. I ran over to capture some photos. The following week my friend told me crows raided the nest. My photos were the only images.

2. FAMILIARIZE YOURSELF WITH THE REGION

Spend as much time as you can at your nearby open spaces and lakes to learn the routines of the local wildlife. Living close means you can visit regularly and, even if it is for a few minutes, it will give you opportunities to observe the latest happenings.

Look for wetlands and creeks, especially inlets to a creek or river. Wildlife flourish in these areas where animals can create dens and nests in the slow moving water while using the faster water to search for food.

"My popular mink shots were photographed along an inlet on private property for more than two-and-a-half months," Yule said. "I spotted him in a canal but after the canal froze, I followed the tracks to his den. I would watch his den for three hours to get 20 seconds of shooting opportunity. That kind of patience is the benefit and challenge of backyard photography."



Vehicles can be used as wildlife blinds and can reduce disturbances to wildlife along roads when they're photographed. Remember to pull off the road to avoid blocking traffic.



Keeping a camera with you while running errands means you can capture spur-of-the-moment images, like these two bull elk sparring in a meadow.

3. HAVE YOUR CAMERA READY

The saying goes, "The best camera is the one you have with you." That is true for backyard photography.

As you go about your daily routine, you start to observe wildlife behavior patterns every time you go to the grocery store, bank or gas station.

Where I live, there is a herd of elk that roam around town. After living in the area

for a year, I learned their seasonal routines. I know where to look for calves born in the spring and where to find cows and bulls to photograph their mating rituals during the rut. I know where to find the bachelor herd of bulls after the rut is over. And I know the best spots to photograph elk during a snowstorm.

Often, the best photos I have captured of the elk are because I had my camera with me. Rarely will you have the time to go home to

get your camera and return when you see an elk with his antlers covered in a net or a calf only minutes old.

You can keep a camera ready inside your home for wildlife in the yard, such as birds at your feeders, fox passing by or moose on your porch.

"I have seen an uptick in moose in my neighborhood," Holdsworth said. "I have them in the yard on a weekly basis, including a mom with twins that visited for about 15 years. It was really fun and special to have them there but I had to be on my toes. I came home once and they were sleeping on the porch."

4. USE BLINDS

Blinds can be simple and inexpensive, and they make great instruments for capturing wildlife photos.

If you have access to private property or simply your own yard, you can set up the blind to allow wildlife to get used to it. For sensitive animals, such as sage or sharp-tailed grouse, you can enter the blind before daylight and wait for the action to happen, photograph during the peak of the activity with little disturbance to the birds and pack up after the birds have left.

Your vehicle also makes an excellent blind. "Areas of high traffic have animals that are much more used to cars," Yule said.



Mink are elusive animals, so visiting their habitat along rivers and streams provides the best opportunities to photograph them. When these areas are close to home, you can visit more often and increase your chance of spotting them.

“The animals won’t identify the presence of humans if you stay in your vehicle and you can wait for the animals to come to you. In particular, I recommend going to the edge of towns in Wyoming. Here the animals are used to people but use the out-of-the-way edges for safety, food and shelter. You can sit in your car and photograph the wildlife.”

If you are interested in bird photography, use your home as a blind. Set up a bird perch near a feeder outside your patio door or a window. Open the window or door to prevent soft photos and set up a chair and your camera just inside. Remember to watch the backgrounds in the photos and possible heat waves coming from inside the home if it is cold outside.

5. ASSIGN YOURSELF A PROJECT

A project is a great way to become disciplined about visiting a location on a regular basis.

“Every year is different, even seasonally too,” Holdsworth said. “Try assigning yourself a project so that when you find something

good, you stick with it to get a full range of images.”

A full photo project will include a wide range of photographs. For a wildlife story, you want to capture the subject in every season along with interactions between adults and between parents and offspring. This means you’ll have images of parents feeding the babies, the babies going out on their own for the first time and the siblings playing with each other. Be sure to photograph intimate details of the animals, such as claws or antlers, as well as portraits, shots of the animal in their landscape and action shots.

6. IF ALL ELSE FAILS, PHOTOGRAPH THE BIRDS

Backyard birds provide a challenge with fast-moving subjects, so staying inside or in your yard can provide a great way to learn how to photograph wildlife. Consider the angle of light, type of birds that may visit, time of day the birds are most active and the background.

As best as you can, shoot from eye level



A mountain bluebird lets out a warning to another bluebird that came close. The bird was near a nest box along a dog-walking route.

— even with small birds. You can overcome the challenge of photographing them on the ground by setting up a natural perch near a feeder. Find some sticks with moss, lichen, leaves, pine needles, buds or blossoms to give the branch a little character. Use sticks of a darker color because bright objects can distract viewers from the subject. Attach the makeshift perch to a railing, chair, table or other elevated object that won’t appear in your image. The birds will use this perch when waiting to get a turn at the feeder.

Most birds are active in the early morning and late afternoon, so plan your perch around the light of these times of day. The best light for birds is front lighting. Soft, overcast lighting can also bring out feather detail.

Keep the background clutter free by using a wide open aperture, a low angle to keep the background as distant as possible and free of distracting objects in the background — especially sticks that might visually appear to cut through the bird.

As we navigate toward a world where we can venture further from home, backyard

photography can be a great method to keep photography fresh, challenge you to build a strong portfolio of images and encourage you to get outdoors.

“Remember to be respectful when you find something,” Holdsworth said. “Don’t overexpose yourself or others to the animal so you can protect the animal. For example, be respectful of nests and dens to prevent ruining the opportunity by forcing an animal to move.”

Be sure to keep in mind the safety of the animal, yourself and those around you.

“Don’t risk the animal’s safety for a photo,” Yule said. “Wyoming residents have great places near their homes but do it because you love it and want to learn about the animals. Backyard photography is also great because you won’t have a crowd of people around you taking the same photo.”

— Dawn Wilson is a professional and award-winning nature photographer and writer who focuses on telling stories about wildlife of the Rocky Mountains and Alaska. Visit her website at www.DawnWilsonPhotography.com.



During late May and early June, many wildlife species have their young in Wyoming. Many newborns, such as this elk calf, will instinctively stay still to avoid being detected by predators. While its mother may not be readily visible, it has likely temporarily vacated the area and will return. If one should stumble upon a newborn animal, it is best to promptly leave the area. (Photo by Mark Gocke/WGFD)

THE THOUGHTFUL SHOOTER

By Mark Gocke

I have been photographing wildlife for some 30 years, and I think wildlife photographers by and large care a great deal about the welfare of the animals they photograph. But if there is one chief complaint directed toward us, it is too many wildlife photographers try to get too close to the animals. Inadvertently alerting animals can happen, but we just need to err on the side of giving animals more room than we think they need.

If we change the behavior of an animal, we are too close. Some changes in behavior may be subtle — a group of elk may continue to graze but slowly turn away or a bear may yawn at an odd time, a sign of stress. Photographers and wildlife watchers alike need to be hypersensitive to these behavioral signals.

Early summer is a time when many animals need extra space. Situations include a mother with young or animals at a den or nest site. Other times more room is needed include rutting big game in the fall and wildlife that are trying to survive the winter.

Here are a few guidelines to keep in mind when photographing wildlife:

- Learn about animals and how they use their habitat, and know how not to interfere with their life cycles and needs.
- Use a telephoto lens (400mm or larger) from a viewing blind or vehicle.
- If you don’t have a telephoto lens, shoot a wider angle shot that shows the animal in its natural habitat.
- Use a trail cam or remote camera setup to capture unique wildlife shots without being present.
- Never feed wildlife to lure them in for a photo (bird feeders are an exception).
- Move slowly and quietly around wildlife and never chase, herd, flush or make a deliberate noise to get a better shot.
- Never surround or crowd animals.
- Tactfully inform others if you observe inappropriate behavior, or report such behavior to authorities.

Bottom line, wildlife photography should be fun, and it is far more gratifying to capture a fantastic image knowing you did not cause an animal undue stress in the process.

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