



## Beyond the Wildlife Portrait

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Wildlife photographers have two things in common; the love of nature and the desire to improve our images. We constantly seek to better capture the essence of our subjects; saying "it doesn't get any better than this" is not valid. The day I feel I "have arrived" I might as well sell my gear and take up computer games. In life, as well as photography, challenge is the mother of creativity. Once you have reached one skill level, it is time to move on to the next.

For most photographers, the first challenge is to master the skills required to produce technically acceptable photographs. Up until recently, that could take years for the casual shooter. The world of digital capture has changed that, compressing the years of mastering exposure by trial and error into the instant feedback and correction of the histogram. Auto focus can help eliminate the frustration of slightly soft images due to moving subjects, and Image Stabilization or Vibration Reduction can mask poor camera handling technique. So with the right tools you can now produce great images in record time. Right?

Sure. Or you can be using the world's most expensive point and shoot. It all depends on your goals.

When we start out, we are all happy just to have sharp, well-exposed records of our wildlife subjects. Then as our skills progress, we want more. We want our images to show something more than just what the subject looks like. Let's face it, most nature photographers are in photography not for the photography itself but to capture the awe of the world around us. We can do this best by showing more than just a "clear" picture of the subject.

So how do you show that sense of awe you want to convey in your unique view of the natural world? For me at least, there is no one way. Resting on the laurels of "technique skills" we have acquired in using our fancy point-and-shoot equipment will only limit us. Let me offer some examples.

In today's wildlife photography circles, bird photography would be the obvious place to start. I love a simple, pure portrait of a bird as much as the next person and I never pass one up. My files are full of the classic "bird on a stick" image; a uniform, out-of-focus background, great exposure, with just the perfect turn of the head. This recipe is considered "perfection" by many of today's bird photographers. But really, it's only a starting point. While portraits like this are pleasant to look at, they don't tell me anything about the "life and times" of these thrilling feathered creatures. So along with your quest for the perfect avian portrait, don't forget about those images that show us more about the subject, such as its behavior and the environment it resides in. I recall a statement by the photo editor of one of the world's largest nature publications saying that one of the most difficult images he ever tried to find was that of a robin catching a worm. Is it in your files?

Behavior images tell us much more about the subject than simple portraits, but effective ones are infinitely more difficult to capture. Behavior usually implies action, which brings a completely new set of challenges to our photography. Combining good composition, artistry of colors and masterful technical execution with behavioral action is a goal that keeps even the most gifted nature photographer busy for a lifetime.

This "Holy Grail" of nature imagery may seem to be an impossible task to many, even those who have been at it for a while and have mastered all of the "technical execution" skills. But taking the first step beyond the typical "portrait" image doesn't need to be



that difficult. For bird photos, start with showing a more interesting perch. Try finding birds and their foods - bird photos with berries on a branch are a great example. Images that depict birds with nesting materials, food or even preening begin to tell us something about a species. Let your images tell us something about where the subject lives. Is your subject a shore bird? Show us the shore. Does it live in the forest? There must be more to a forest than a soft, smooth green background. A classic example of an image that combines many of these elements is Jim Zipp's [photo of a Great Gray Owl](#) perched on a branch, hunting for food during a snow storm. The bird is concentrating on the ground below with such intensity that I can almost hear the soft rustlings of the voles beneath the snow. Despite its technical flaws, Norbert Reif's award-winning [photo of a gull taking a duckling](#) tells us so much more about the subject, about nature and even about ourselves than any perfectly executed bird portrait could ever convey.

But it is not only bird photographers who are guilty of not showing us more about the subject. Large mammal photographers popularized the "sterile background" portrait during the late 1950s and early 60s. Portraits of big bucks, bulls or any other furry beast are great, but again I would like to know more about the subject than simply what it looks like. Please show me where these magnificent animals live. Show me how a bison gets through the winter, or how prairie dogs live with the heat of a 100-degree South Dakota afternoon. The same goes for reptiles and insects – let your nature imagery illustrate where the subject lives and what mechanisms and behavior it has evolved to survive.

Moving beyond the simple "wildlife portrait" is something that not all nature photographers may be interested in doing. But for those who embark on the search for this Holy Grail of wildlife photography, there cannot be a more challenging or potentially rewarding photographic endeavor.

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#### About the author...

Over the past 30 years Jess's photos have appeared in a diverse range of publications from *National Geographic* and *Paris Match* magazines, to specialized publications such as *Defenders of Wildlife* and *Peterson's Hunting Annual*. While past experience is one measure of skill, Jess believes that what you are doing today is more important. With that in mind, he continues to record the evolving culture, lifestyles and especially the wildlife and wild places of the North American West and beyond. You can view more of his work at <http://jessleephotos.com>.

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