



The Camera Hunter®

How To Be A Professional Nature Photographer

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In major national parks and similar places – hotspots like Florida’s Venice Rookery and St. Augustine Alligator Farm come readily to mind – it’s real easy to get close to wildlife to get some great photographs. That makes it seem an exciting career possibility to those who try it a few times. But with most animals elsewhere, it’s often not all that easy. And so the professional wildlife photographer learns to “camera hunt”, using the same techniques that the traditional hunter employs.

Camera hunting means just what it says: getting close enough to a wild and often wary animal to get a telling shot with a camera. The wildlife photographer needs to consider the natural behavior of the target species, their capability to see, smell or hear, and how to deal with all those things. But that’s where the analogy ends. Because the camera hunter also needs great light, a good background, a perfect pose and the right elements to create an interesting composition. All of that makes real camera hunting challenging and enjoyable.



What about landscape photography? The trick is to be there for the right light, something that often requires going back a number of times. It also matters where you go just as much – no, even more – than it does for the wildlife photographer. Editors have seen too many pictures of the icons of nature – Delicate Arch, Antelope Canyon, and the view of Denali from Wonder Lake might be on that list. Unless you can capture those scenes the way few others ever have, you might get some nice images, but can you make a living from them?

Here’s a plan for anyone who wants to pursue nature photography as a career. It’s easy to follow. Just three elements are essential for success.

Be Original

The most essential element is to find an original path. Imitators are just that: cheap copies. Blaze your own trail for true success. That applies not only to how you go about your work, but also where you go and how you present the image of who you are.

Editors and photo buyers have their own list of top professionals to choose from to meet their needs. To get on their lists, show them something different. They’ve seen lots of images of birds from Florida or Bosque – and moose from Maine. That doesn’t mean you can’t sell some of that stuff. But if it’s the major part of your file, you’re really way behind others who’ve “been there, shot that.”

You also need to learn to see your own way and to specialize in how *you* approach what you shoot. That’s not to say that we don’t all hike the same trail somewhere along the way. I learned much from cumulative months in the field with a top professional wildlife photographer and friend, Michael Francis of Billings, Montana. But I carved a different path to success than Mike had already done. That’s partly because I valued his friendship. It’s also partly because I had my own vision for where I might fit into the world of professional wildlife photography.



Pay Your Dues

The next vital element is to be prepared to pay some dues. Being a real professional requires more than shooting a handful of pictures. You need to totally cover a species, and more than one. I'm known as The Mooseman partly because of having one of the largest files of moose images – about 40,000 of them, with all North American subspecies covered. I've done four books on moose. But I've also done books on the common loon and the bald eagle, and have hundreds of other species on file. To do that, a wildlife photographer needs to know as much about the animals they're after as the naturalist or field biologist does. And so you learn when to go where, how to behave around wildlife and how they behave.

The landscape photographer faces different challenges. He or she not only needs to be there at the right moment, but also needs to learn how to look at a scene differently. Learn your strengths and weaknesses. I capture some scenic images, especially when doing assignments for a national or regional nature organization, photographing the special places that they've protected or want to protect. Be there for the right light and wonderful things can happen. I get decent scenics, occasionally some really nice ones. But things with a pulse always interest me more, and so the wildlife images take precedence. It's hard to do justice to both.

The professional nature photographer also needs to develop the ability to sell the use of images to a variety of customers. You need to become known in the marketplace as one who has what the editors need. The editors in the niche market I work with come back regularly for more because they know I can usually deliver what they're looking for. To do all of this requires years of improving at your craft while building an inventory of photographs. It requires that you spend many hours working in the office. And it often means that you need to be in the field sometimes past the point of it all being fun.

Don't Quit Your Day Job

Patience is the third requirement. If you look hard at the number of nature photographers who truly make a living at it, there really aren't all that many. A lot of folks sell some photos or teach some workshops, but to do it consistently enough to make a living at it is difficult at best.

I've been lucky enough to turn a love of the outdoors into a full time profession. Or was it luck? In 1990 I set out on a five-year plan. The plan was to build a solid reputation for quality original work so that photo editors would come to me for the pictures that they needed. My plan worked well enough that by 1995, I was regularly published on a regional basis, and published in a few national markets. But I didn't quit my day job for a couple more years. I still had to get deep files of a number of subjects, improve my shooting capabilities and develop a national reputation and business relationships to maintain success in this highly competitive field.



Sixteen years ago it was all a dream for this camera hunter. Today it's reality. If I can do it, you can too. But what if you don't want to do nature photography as a profession? You can still pursue it with a professional method and attitude, and take pride in the fact that you've done it your own way.

Catch yours in the good light.

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<http://camerahunter.com>

Comments on this column? Send them to the [editor](#).



Maine wildlife & nature photographer Bill Silliker, Jr. – The Mooseman - has photographed at many wild places in North America, with the results published in magazines internationally and in 9 of his own books. Bill has been an instructor of wildlife and nature photography for L. L. Bean's Outdoor Discovery Program since 1992 and is a member of the Fuji Film Talent Team. He maintains a web site with tips for wildlife photographers at www.camerahunter.com.

To see the 2003 dates for Bill's workshops with L.L. Bean and Great American Photography Workshops, slide talks sponsored by Fujifilm Professional and book signings click [here](#).

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