

ZOO PHOTOGRAPHY

Why Photograph at Zoos?

Zoos provide access to animals most of us will never have the opportunity to see in the wild. For those who will have the chance to see them in their native habitat, zoos are a place to learn about various species and to practice photographing them in advance.

Zoos and Conservation

Zoos have long been a component of animal conservation, historically through breeding programs to preserve endangered species.

The focus of conservationists has shifted from captive breeding programs to preserving habitats and species in the wild, but zoos are still an important component. For example, zoos support conservation by:

- Raising money for conservation programs. A portion of entry fees, memberships, and other zoo revenue is frequently allocated to conservation efforts.
- Educating the public on the issues and encouraging support for conservation. People care about issues they have personally experienced.
- Advancing veterinary medicine and developing animal handling techniques for use in the field.

Support zoos that:

- Focus on conservation of species and habitats – as discussed above
- Have a strong commitment to individual animal welfare – ensuring quality care including enrichment programs, promoting natural behaviors and environments, track animals and forbid transfer to substandard facilities, etc.

AZA Accredited Zoos (American Zoo and Aquarium Association) meet these criteria and are considered the “Gold Standard”, but many non-AZA accredited zoos are also fine. Check them out.

Planning

- Check the website: Information on the animals, schedules (e.g., hours, feeding times, programs), special events (that you might want to see or to avoid), tripod/bag policy, maps to plan your day, availability of food (for you)
- Choose a day: Animals are often more active in cooler weather, so consider going in the spring and fall. Try to avoid weekends (more crowded).
- Check the weather: Bright overcast is good for mid-day shooting.
- Prepare your gear.
- Be there at opening: Better light, more active animals, sometimes fewer people
- Be there at feeding time (if you can find out when and if the zoo is open then)

Gear

These are suggestions, not requirements.

- Longer focal length lenses are most useful (e.g., 200-300mm), but shorter focal lengths are also helpful. Zoom lenses with a range of focal lengths are convenient.

- Fast apertures (f/2.8-f/5.6) can be advantageous for low light situations and to allow faster shutter speeds.
- Image stabilization/vibration reduction in the lens or camera is very helpful (if not using a tripod).
- Monopod/tripod: Check if the zoo allows them. Tripods can get in the way of other visitors, can be knocked against, etc. Monopods are usually more practical on crowded days. Alternatively, increase the ISO and/or turn on image stabilization/vibration reduction if your camera system has it.
- Lens hood (consider a flexible, rubber one).
- Extra cards and batteries.

Etiquette

Use common sense:

- Don't bang on glass, shout, etc. to get an animal's attention. It annoys the animals and other people.
- Be respectful of other visitors. (E.g., don't camp out with your tripod blocking everyone else.)
- Don't use flash on nocturnal animals.
- Follow rules and don't cross barriers.

Copyright – Zoos own the rights to images of their animals. You need their permission to use these photos commercially and in some other situations.

General Considerations for Wildlife Photography

Not hard rules, but things to think about:

- Focus on the eyes – make sure they are in focus. Images where the animal is looking right at you may be stronger, since it helps make a connection, but it's not a hard rule. Get on eye level with the animal if possible.
- Look for activity – movement, interaction between animals. Photos that show typical behavior can also teach.
- To catch the action, set the camera on a high shutter speed with continuous auto-focus and burst mode. Capture a burst of images, then you can select the specific frames that best display the activity.
- Some cameras allow you to take a series of pictures before fully clicking the shutter, so you don't lose part of the action from the delay in hitting the shutter.*
- Consider compositions that show the animal in its habitat, if possible. Be aware that the surroundings in the zoo may not reflect the natural habitat of the species.
- Consider video, especially as part of an overall story.
- Patience – spend time with an animal. It could take a while to get activity or for the animal to move to a position with a better background.
- "Work the subject" - try different angles and focal lengths, portraits, full body and environmental.

**Focus on the animal and half press the shutter. The camera starts collecting/buffering images. When you fully press the shutter button, it saves the most recently buffered images from before and after the shutter release. This is available in several camera systems - Olympus (ProCapture) and FujiFilm (Pre-shot), and others.*

Photo Challenges - Backgrounds and Barriers

Backgrounds

In nature photography, as in all photography, backgrounds can make or break an image. Signs, fences and other man-made objects add to the challenge of photographing at zoos.

- Check the background for trash, food buckets, etc. and compose to eliminate the distractions if possible.
- Search for an angle that gives a clean, natural looking background, or wait for the animal to move to an area with a better background.

If your angles and movement are limited, so that you can't avoid a distracting background, there are still options for minimizing its impact, including:

- Using a shallow depth of field to blur out the background. This typically requires the animal to be away from background, but focus stacking can help if the animal and background are close together.
- Cropping in close to eliminate messy backgrounds. (This may also give the image more impact by filling the frame with the essential elements.)

If all else fails, there are options for improving backgrounds in post-processing such as:

- Heal and clone tools to remove unwanted objects/distractions.
- Blurring or swapping the background. Note: The Lens Blur tool in Adobe Camera Raw (and similar in Lightroom) can simulate using a shallow depth of field to blur the background after the image is taken.
- Use creative effects, such as painting.

Competition Rules

Important Note: If you plan to use your images in competition, be aware of the rules of the sponsoring organization.

- In the COPS "Wildlife" competition, entries "may be manipulated as long as the final result appears realistic".
- In PSA* Nature competitions, however, (including COPS PSA Nature), "processing or editing must be limited to making the image look as close to the original scene as possible, except that conversion to grayscale monochrome is allowed". Therefore, cloning, healing, swapping backgrounds, creative techniques, etc. are generally not allowed. See the PSA website for details
<https://psaphotoworldwide.org/page/division-definitions#nd>.
- Also note that images taken in zoos are allowed for PSA Nature, but NOT allowed in PSA Wildlife competitions.

**Photographic Society of America Worldwide*

Barriers - Fences

Various types of fences, typically chain-link, are common, but it is possible to "shoot through" many of them. Obviously, if you can get next to the fence and the openings are large enough to accommodate your lens, you can just focus through the holes in the fence.

When the openings are smaller and/or you can't get as close, using the following technique can help:

- Use a shallow depth of field – open aperture (i.e. lower F-stop)
- Long focal lengths work best.
- Use manual focus so the focus isn't fooled by the fence. Alternatively, some cameras allow you to limit the auto-focus range (for example, to focus only beyond 5 feet), so that the auto-focus doesn't lock on the fence.
- For best results, the animal should be as far away as possible from the fence. (Another reason to use a long focal length.)
- If possible, choose a section of the fence in the shade to minimize "hot spots" from the sun glinting off the metal.
- Don't use flash.

Barriers - Glass

"Glass" walls are also common, bringing the challenge of unwanted reflections, smudges, and scratches. The first, and easiest, option is to try using a polarizing filter to minimize the reflections and glare. It doesn't always work, but can help.

If this doesn't entirely resolve the problem, the following tips can help:

- Position the camera lens parallel to the glass – flat against it if possible. (This also helps stabilize the camera.)
- Use a lens hood - flat against the glass. Rubber lens hoods allow for flexibility and better block off the light. Alternatively, use a dark cloth to block out the reflections. (Check out "Lens Skirt" as a "high tech" alternative.)
- If possible, shoot through a shaded portion of the glass to minimize reflections and glare.
- Look for a cleaner section of glass without scratches. You can wipe off your side, but obviously not the animal's.
- A shallow depth of field and/or longer focal length can help to blur out scratches, etc. if the animal is away from the glass. (As with fences, the further away the better.)
- Use manual focus if auto-focus is catching on the glass (or try limiting the focus range if your camera has that option).
- Don't use flash.

Non-animal subjects

Zoos provide opportunities for a variety of photography beyond the exotic animals.

- Flora – The landscaping at the parks frequently includes beautiful flowers, shrubs, and trees.
- Native/local wildlife – Local birds, small animals, and insects also make their home at the zoo.
- People – The parks can provide fun photography of people interacting with the wildlife. This is best done with family and friends (particularly if children are involved).
- Signs – It's helpful to take snapshots of the signs, which provide information on the animals for future reference.

Other Photo events at Zoos – Examples:

- Southwick's Zoo's extensive Halloween decorations.
- After dark light sculptures like at Beardsley in the fall.

“Local” Zoos

- Beardsley Zoo, Bridgeport, CT www.beardsleyzoo.org (<50 miles), AZA
- Roger Williams Park Zoo, Providence, RI, www.rwpzoo.org (<75 miles), AZA
- Southwick's Zoo, Mendon, MA, www.southwickzoo.com (<100 miles), ZAA*
- Bronx Zoo, Bronx, NY, www.bronxzoo.com (<100 miles), AZA
- Turtle Back Zoo, Orange, NJ, www.turtlebackzoo.com (>100 miles), AZA

**Southwick is my personal favorite because, other than monkeys and birds, most of the animals can be photographed without barriers blocking the shots.*

Other local access to wildlife

- Ripley Waterfowl Conservancy, Litchfield CT www.ripleyconservancy.org (<50 miles)
- Action Wildlife Foundation, Goshen CT www.actionwildlifefoundation.com (<50 miles)
(largely, but not exclusively, herd animals)
- Mystic Aquarium, Mystic CT www.mysticaquarium.org (<75 miles) AZA
- Magic Wings Butterfly Conservatory, South Deerfield MA www.magicwings.com
(<75 miles)