

Tips for Taking Photographs of Wildlife In Rehabilitation

Rehabilitators often take photographs of wildlife in rehabilitation to remember an individual animal, document a particularly interesting or challenging case, send to a veterinarian or fellow rehabilitator for consultation, use for training or publications, or “just because.” While some of the photographs turn out well and are useful, many are not. Here are some tips from rehabilitators to help you achieve better and more useable photographs – and prevent difficulties for wildlife.

Honoring the Subjects

Always photograph wild animals in ways that respect their wildness and humane care. Do not take photos of the animals that could suggest that they are pets rather than wild, such as their crawling on a person, suckling on fingers, cuddled in arms, and playing with toys used with pets.

Allow the animal to be in a comfortable position. Eliminate its stress.

Avoid frightening or stress-inducing backgrounds, such as other animals or cages, or objects, activities, noises, movements, people and pets.

Follow safe handling protocols! If frightened, animals may squirm, jump, kick, bite, or strike to try to escape. To avoid a safety risk, never hold the animal close to a person’s face, head, or exposed body.

Use gloves and/or other protective clothing/equipment if holding the animal in order to demonstrate proper and safe handling technique.

Take photos of healthy animals as well as those with health problems. If possible, it would be valuable to have photos of the same animal at several stages of recovery, after recovery, and just before release. If your camera does not have a date feature, note the dates of the photos.

Some animals may be in such a severely debilitated condition that euthanasia is imminent. If photos are desired of such medical problems, the photos should be taken after the animal has been humanely euthanized in order to reduce further pain and suffering.

Take the photographs in a safe and an appropriate area for rehabilitation. That means to not take photos in a kitchen, in a human bed, playing with a pet, around food for humans, and so forth.

In addition to highlighting the animal and/or condition, the photos should reflect effective rehabilitation practices.

Taking Photographs

Plan the photo and do any preparation *before* getting the camera in place or taking hold of the animal. This includes such things as arranging lighting and tripods, positioning the cage, and putting on gloves.

Use a more muted and neutral color fabric for background, such a soft, light blue, gray or tan. Do not use a very high contrast material as a background, such as a solid white or black cloth. A solid background color is best. Avoid background with a busy print, such as a floral design.

If the animal is not held, or if relative size is not apparent, place an object near the subject to help indicate relative size. Various coins provide a good comparison for small subjects. A ruler can indicate size for larger subjects.

Some animals – especially adults – may have a fear reaction to the camera, possibly perceiving it to be a large eye of a predator, especially if the camera is above the animal. If it seems less stressful and still safe, consider holding the camera at the same level of, or an angle that is a little below, the animal. If the animal develops any stress from proximity to the camera or the photographic session, stop photographing! It may be possible to take a photo without stressing the animal at another time. Consider taking the photo from a distance or in concealment. Do not take photos unless fear and stress can be avoided.

Camera noise also may startle an animal. Minimize noise by turning the camera on before approaching the animal.

The photo can be of the animal by itself, such as in its cage, nest or bed. Some people are able to hold the animal with one hand and hold the camera with the other. Most people find it much easier to have a second person take the photo.

Try to focus the camera on the most important element. This may be the entire animal, or may just be part of the body. If possible, try to maintain a larger depth of field to increase maximum focus.

If the animal is not fearful and there is no risk to either the animal or the handler, you may consider a close-up. Do not get closer to the subject than your minimum focal distance. This means holding most cameras about 18-24 inches from the animal unless you are using a close-up or macro lens. If you get too close, the subject of your photograph will be out of focus. Do not worry if you are 36" from the subject since most photos can be enlarged later – as long as the subject is in focus.

Use a high-speed film or fast shutter setting to minimize any blur from movement. If the subject is suitably illuminated, this should not be an issue. Allowing the animal to assume a comfortable, non-stressing resting posture helps avoid undesired movement.

Take multiple images of the same subject from various angles and positions. As a general rule of thumb, 1 out of about 20 pictures results in an acceptable photo.

Practice by taking photographs of 'easy' subjects and learning from them so that you develop skills and confidence to take effective photographs quickly and without problems.

Lighting

Natural light is the best for photos.

Make sure the subject is evenly illuminated. When using natural light, especially when outdoors, the animal should not be in both light and shade.

Diffused sunlight is much better than direct sunlight. Consider taking the photo on a slightly overcast day or placing a light-colored bed sheet overhead.

Flash is okay, although an indirect flash is better. Do not worry about red-eye caused by the flash – this can be removed later, unless the eye is red from natural coloring or from an injury. Stop photographing after a single flash photo and allow the animal to relax.

Incandescent/florescent bulbs also are acceptable, but full-spectrum bulbs are better.

Camera and Film

For digital cameras, use the largest format (file size) possible. This captures the most detail, which is critical for later image enhancement. Acceptable file formats include JPG or TIFF. RAW also is acceptable, but not necessary due to the very large file size.

For film cameras, prints can be scanned and the originals returned to the photographer. If scanning, use a high quality scanner, in color, using a large file format setting in JPG or TIFF.

Documentation

It is easy to forget the specifics about an animal or case – especially during busy season. Therefore, it is important to make notes of which animals and cases were photographed. It is also helpful to record the numbers and dates of the photos to avoid confusion later when trying to sort photos by case and date.

While still fresh in your mind, identify the species of the animal, general age (e.g., nestling, fledgling, juvenile, adult), condition or problem, rather than assume that you will later recognize the case or remember the details.

It is very helpful to have complete documentation of the treatment specifics, timing, changes, results, etc. since that will help fellow rehabilitators learn from the cases. Even information on diet and caging would be helpful.

Place notes on the calendar or rehabilitation records to remind you about the next dates to take photographs.

Consider placing a sign in the rehabilitation room to remind about taking photos – with a list of the photos desired (see attached example).

Contact Information

Always provide the date of the photograph, the name of the rehabilitator and address, and the photographer and address, as well as other relevant contact information.

Provide the mailing address where any photographs should be returned.

Credit for Photographs

Generally, the name of the photographer will be identified on the photograph unless one is not provided.

Indicate if any of the photographs are copyrighted (person, date, source, etc.). If you have copyrighted any of the photographs, indicate if permission will be granted to reprint for publication and how to arrange for this.

Clearly communicate if photographs that you share with others (i.e., consultation with a veterinarian or a fellow rehabilitator) should not be further distributed.

Wrapping Up

While taking the photograph is a goal, providing professional and humane care, respecting the animal's wildness, and maintaining safety are higher goals. And like many things, it helps to practice and learn from our mistakes before trying to take that most special photograph.

Authors

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