

[The Darker Side of Wildlife Photography: Understanding Ethical Practices](#)

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With the advent of high-tech cameras and editing software that just about anyone can get to grips with, we've seen a transformation in wildlife photography. A transformation that many say is for the better. But as with any change, there are problems. Editing software now means that it's possible to manipulate a dull image of a green field to be teeming with wildlife, which is misleading. And as [Jose Luis Rodriguez found out back in 2010](#), staging and manipulating wildlife photography in a misleading way can be costly. But this software also enables photographers to clean up a distorted shot, or a grainy picture, which doesn't impact the wildlife, but benefits the end viewer.



Issues in wildlife photography don't just revolve around staging or manipulation, either. As the technology becomes cheaper and cheaper we see more and more amateur photographers take to the field looking to capture their local wildlife. These amateur photographers often forget this golden rule:

“Take nothing but photographs, leave nothing but footprints, kill nothing but time.”

So what can we do to encourage ethical wildlife photography and how can we ensure that people coming into the hobby aren't adversely affecting their own local wildlife? Here we delve deep into the ins and outs of ethical photography and ask some of the world's best wildlife photographers what their codes of conduct are.

What is Unethical Photography?

Some wildlife photographers don't give a second thought to the impact they're having on the environment around them. It might not even occur to them that the tactics they're employing could be damaging a habitat, or even aiding in the extinction of a certain species. But certain tactics do damage habitats, wildlife, and ecosystems. The Great Indian Bustard for example. This bird is cautious around intruders and the minute one appears it will stop whatever its doing and fix its attention on them until they have left. It won't feed, mate, or court – which in turn can impact its chance of survival. The issue became so common place that the Ministry of Environment and Forests was forced to curtail photography of the bird during its mating season.

The other issue is that, even if a photographer does understand that a wrong move could negatively impact an environment, they may not completely understand the species in question. Prior research and gaining better understanding of an animal before you go out trying to capture your shots is paramount. One could, for example, without proper understanding, intrude on a rare period in which the animal mates or feeds, disturbing it and putting it at risk.



To comment and list every incident and behavior of unethical wildlife photography would be impossible. And to list everything you should and shouldn't do, would take forever. One photographer will likely have his very own code of conduct, which would widely vary from another's. The purpose of the shoot, some say, also alters what types of ethical standards you should adhere to. Taking a pretty picture to hang on your wall is much different to documenting a species' habits and way of life. Even staging a scene has its place in some forms of wildlife photography; providing that the animal isn't being put in danger or discomfort. What ethical wildlife photography does require, from all its forms, is a good dose of common sense. If you believe you are doing something unethical or dangerous to your subject, stop and change your tactics.

Common Unethical Practices & How to Curtail Them

While we have said that, in the main, ethical wildlife photography requires common sense more than anything else, there are few guidelines and rules one can follow to ensure proper practice. Here, we've looked at some of the most common unethical behaviors and how they can be curtailed.

Nocturnal Animals

Most nocturnal animals are extremely sensitive to light and in the face of powerful light sources, such as a camera flash, can be temporarily blinded. And because they're nocturnal,

these animals aren't often photographed, making them a much more attractive proposition to an amateur wildlife photographer. Those who genuinely study such creatures use specialist equipment to monitor the animals and minimize any damage they might do to the animals eyes.

Avoid taking pictures of nocturnal animals with your flash. And if you're looking to monitor them to study, use a night vision video camera.

Nest and Den Photography

Nesting and den photography is the act of getting close to birds and mammals within their dens. The issue is that this disturbance often causes serious stress to the animal and can sometimes lead to abandonment of the den or nest. This move can sometimes mean that a family moves to a more dangerous location, all because a photographer got a little too close.

It's simple. Don't participate in nest or den photography. There is no reason for any wildlife photographer to start manipulating and adjusting the nest of an animal.

Baiting

As the name suggests, Baiting is about offering up a free meal to an animal in the hopes that they'll come out into the open for your photograph. It has been proven that such practices can alter the way that wildlife behave and interact with humans. There have even been instances of baited animals attacking photographers.

Don't bait animals for pictures. It's even illegal in some countries and can seriously harm your local wildlife.

Animal Chasing

To ensure that the animal doesn't escape their lens, some photographers have been known to chase down animals until they're too tired to run anymore. The problems this causes are obvious. An animal is will be put under incredible amounts of stress and be too tired to hunt or escape from the hunter.



This is one of the worst ways imaginable to capture a picture of an animal. There is no excuse for putting an animal under such duress and risk, ever. No matter how good your final photograph.

Crowding an Animal

On some photography tours and even in wildlife parks, an animal is often crowded as paying visitors scramble to get a picture. By crowding, they often provoke a response out of the animal, like a snarl, which is often their aim. This tactic not only makes an animal stressed but can impact its natural behavior like mating and hunting.

Maintain a safe distance from the animal at all times. If you're with others who aren't respecting the animal's proximity, ask them kindly to back away. If you're ignored, photograph or film their behavior and report them to the necessary authorities.

Off-Roading

Off-roading in most instances isn't an issue. To capture photographs of wild animals you'll usually have to take your vehicle off the beaten path. The problem lies in off-roading sensitive habitats.

In an area that you know will be impacted by a vehicle, travel on foot. Also stick to designated trails and paths where possible.



The Future

The thirst for wildlife photography only seems to be growing and as this thirst grows, the importance of educating newcomers to the hobby on ethical practices becomes more and more necessary. This requirement is only made stronger by the fact that many photographers differ in their beliefs in what can and can't be done within wildlife photography. The key here is to ensure that veterans of wildlife photography take it upon themselves to promote and lead the way in ethical practices, helping instill a true sense of care and responsibility in a younger generation of photographers.

Damaging habitats and putting species at risk, ultimately, is only going to mean that we as wildlife photographers have fewer opportunities to capture images of the animals we love. And we guarantee there isn't a photographer out there that wants that to happen.

About the Author

Tusk Photo is a leading provider of wildlife photography tours and safaris.

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