



LIVING THE WILD LIFE

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In my opinion, wildlife photography is more than a specialty; it's a lifestyle. I would compare wildlife photographers to photojournalists. Not newspaper photographers, but the real photojournalists who would, in times past, cover a war or get involved in documenting some facet of society. In my mind, wildlife photographers are people who live for that special picture and are happiest in its pursuit.

Of course, there are people who also have more of a hobby-level interest in photographing wildlife and will take pictures of squirrels and birds at the park or in their back yard. And catch shots of more exotic species at the zoo. Some may even get out into the field during their vacation. But the true wildlife photographer is, excuse the pun, a totally different animal!

Wildlife photos are widely used in the market place: in magazines that are completely devoted to them and some that are not; in textbooks and other educational materials; on cards, calendars, and other paper products; and even in ads. Agencies such as Animals Animals specialize in wildlife. Others, with extensive natural history collections like Bruce Coleman, are known for their wildlife photography. Even the big commercial agencies will include wildlife in their catalogs. And many photographers who specialize in wildlife sell their own work, too.

As part of their lifestyle, and to augment earnings from picture sales, some wildlife photographers have gone into publishing their own books on the subject. Leonard Lee Rue is one of them. And Joe McDonald is known for leading photo safaris in Africa.

With so many animal species in existence, subject matter is plentiful. But needs can also be very specific and animals don't change very much. At least not since Noah's ark. So the stock files aren't begging to be replenished with more "trendy" bears or giraffes. A good collection is almost timeless. This can work for or against a photographer: for the one who's established and against the one seeking entry into the field. Agencies, for example, will probably not be interested in more of the same kinds of shots of the same animals. They will want something different. This generally comes down to photographs depicting life processes and behavior; stuff that's harder to get.

Still, my stock agency, CORBIS, will occasionally include specific wildlife shots in its requests, though I'd guess it has close to a half-million such photos in its files right now.

If you're considering wildlife photography, you could begin by reading everything you can find on the subject. Check your library for starters, and the online. If you're an experienced hunter, you're probably ahead of the game, at least in what it takes to stalk and find your quarry. If you're not, you'd do well to subscribe to sporting magazines -- Outdoor Life, Field and Stream and others -- and learn from them. You'll also be treated to some good photography and they could be among the first markets for your work once you start getting some good results.

Success will require skills other than photography. You'll also need long lenses, appropriate clothing for the regions and conditions you'll be working in, and much, much patience -- not only to get the picture, but because the pay off is not likely to be a quick one. Like so much in photography, you've got to love taking wildlife photos, commit to it, and view it long term.

If you've ever considered photographing wildlife, you're already familiar with wildlife publications and probably admire the photography. If not, study them and see what's being used. Buy a copy of Photographer's Market or see if it's available through your library. There you'll find many other companies that sometimes use wildlife photography. But unless you maintain your own collection, let an agency market your work.

Wildlife photography isn't for everyone. But if it's something you really enjoy doing, it could be for you.