

ALMOST, BUT NOT QUITE

By Andy Long



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"MISSED"

Sometimes they jump further than you think they will.

Every wildlife photographer has experienced it. Many sports photographers can relate to it, as well. You're capturing a perfect action shot, and everything seems flawless. You have great focus on the animal, the light is coming from an ideal direction, and your timing is perfect--just when the peak of action occurs. You can't wait to see the resulting image.

But when you look at the image on film or the LCD monitor, a dreadful feeling washes over you. You've cut off part of the animal. Several thoughts run through your mind. One is that you'll never get another chance at a shot like that again. You might be right. The same holds true if you're a digital photographer who doesn't review his shots until later. Even if you check your shots after

every few clicks, the animal might not perform for you again.

What to do? There are several ways to make sure you get the animal action shot you want. The first is to go to places where there is a high probability of a particular behavior happening more than once. Finding those places requires a bit of research. The best research may be to talk with other photographers about the locations of great wildlife areas around where you live. Web searching is another way to find good locations. A third resource is to check out the places where different photo workshop/tour operators are running trips. Trip leaders usually select destinations where trip participants are almost guaranteed to be pleased with their results.

Once you find a hot spot for wildlife, visit as often as possible. The more time you spend at a place where animals abound, the greater your probability of capturing the peak action you're seeking. Persistence pays off. Eventually you'll see what you want through your viewfinder.

Once you've arrived in a rich location for action, the next step is to be ready for your moment. Looking around or talking with someone nearby will definitely cause you to miss the shot. You have to be looking through the viewfinder with your finger on the button, waiting for something to happen. Unfortunately, the action often happens while we're changing film or flash cards, but that's when you tell the person next to you to be ready.

The third way to prepare for victory is to watch and study. The more you watch an animal, the more you can predict its actions. Many animals will signal in some way just before the peak action occurs. A perfect example of this is raptors. If you've found a raptor sitting on a pole or in a tree and you want to



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"GOT IT!"

Good jump. Good format. Good result.

get a shot of it in flight just after it takes off, you know what to look for if you've studied it. Almost every time a hawk takes off, it raises its tail and relieves itself first. Another example is coyotes on the hunt. They'll tense up and arch their backs before jumping on their prey. (They might jump higher or further than you anticipated.) A third example is the sandhill cranes that take off from the outer ponds of Bosque del Apache in the morning. They lean forward before running a few steps and taking flight.

Birds during nesting season will provide valuable photo opportunities. Most adult cavity dwellers with small babies will land just outside the hole and sit there for a second or two before entering. If the hatchlings are larger, they might stick their heads out of the cavity to be fed. Once you see the adult nearing the nest, get ready for some shots.



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Sometimes you get lucky when you have switched to vertical and they jump the right way for you.

Another setting with lots of opportunities for action is a bird rookery with lots of nests in one clustered area. The key here is to stay with one nest for a while, capturing the action before you move on to another nest. If you look all over the place and then try to move in when you see action, you'll miss what happened. If you elect to stay with one nest for a period of time, you'll miss whatever happens on another nest, but you know the same activity will probably happen again once you move to that nest to work it for several minutes.

Not all animals are cooperative, though. Some initiate action without any warning at all. All you can do is to be ready at all times and hope you catch the shot you want. Anyone who has tried to get bighorn sheep butting heads can attest to this. During the rutting season, you can have several rams in the area. When they move near each other, you need to be prepared at all times. They give no warning before rearing up and ramming into each other. They can stand there looking at each other for what seems like eternity before they suddenly rear and bang heads.

Almost every camera today has a servo mode setting to maintain focus on a moving object. Whenever you're shooting wildlife, this is a setting you want to use. Press the shutter button down halfway and keep it on the subject. This takes a bit of practice on birds in flight, and you'll lose shots in the beginning, but the more you practice, the better you'll become at this technique.

Camera position is another way you can inadvertently miss a shot by cutting off a bit of the animal. It never fails that just after you've switched from horizontal to vertical because of the position and shape of the animal, the animal does something to make you wish you were in the other format. As Murphy tells us, whatever can go wrong, will. Luckily, there's always Photoshop to fix missing wings or heads.