

FIRST CLASS PHOTOGRAPHY LESSON 19: Zoo Photography

by Willis T. Bird



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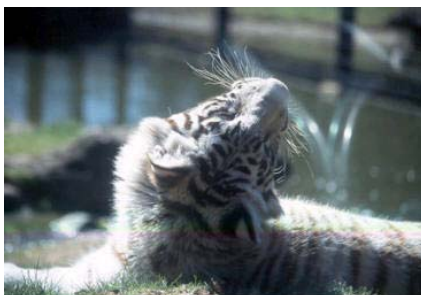
Figure 1

It's a zoo out there! Most of us will never have a chance to go into the wilderness to capture our own wildlife photos. One attraction of the zoos across this country is that they bring animals close so we don't have to disrupt their habitat. People often have mixed feelings about animals being kept in captivity. However, seeing these wonderful creatures "up close and personal" creates a stronger bond between man and beast, encouraging us to feel a greater need to preserve them. If we don't, they'll disappear.

There are a number of kinds of zoos. First, the everyday types feature animals inside cages so that we can walk by and look at them. They, in turn, look back at us. Second, very large drive-through wildlife areas are set up to enable us to drive through in our automobiles and watch the animals in their somewhat

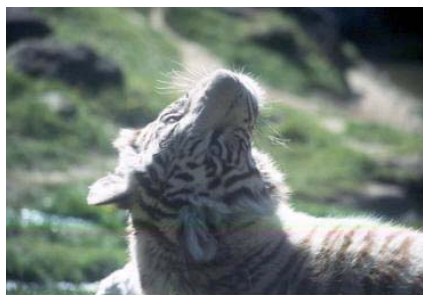
natural habitat while we stay in the relative comfort and safety of our vehicles. A third variety requires that we park our cars and use the zoo's transportation, whether it is a swamp buggy, monorail, or some other vehicle. And, finally, there are aquariums in which glass takes the place of cage wire.

One of the biggest problems you'll run into while photographing animals at a zoo is the very thing that keeps you and the animals apart--fence wire. Nothing can ruin a photo faster than the blur of a fence between the camera and the animal. Apart from climbing over the fence—an activity that's not only prohibited, but also very dangerous--what can you do? The best solution I've found is to use a telephoto lens and a wide lens opening. I move the end of the lens as close as possible to an opening in the links of the fence. Occasionally, I get a slight blurring around the edges of my image, but this problem can often be remedied with a product such as PhotoShop or some other editing software. A second way to escape the fence dilemma is to do some scouting and see if you can locate viewing areas that eliminate the fence in your way.



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Figure 2



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Figure 3



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Figure 4

Other distracting features to watch for include fences and buildings that will appear in the picture behind the animals. If at all possible, choose a position from which you can avoid them in your scene. Take a look at the photos I have inserted. In figure 1, a picture of chimps, I was able to shoot over the moat that acted as a barrier. In figure 2, you'll note the white tiger is standing in front of disconcerting background. I made this shot and the next one through a chain link fence. In figure 3, you can see the benefit of moving very slightly to improve the situation with a distracting background. In figure 4, I was able to catch the shot of the red wolf by shooting over the fence.

At aquariums, I've found it helpful to use a wider angled lens and place it against the glass to minimize any reflections. You must pre-guess your setting and DOF (depth of field) in such cases. But getting the lens right up to the glass is especially important if you're going to use a flash. Otherwise, the light will cause a very bad, bright spot on your photo as it reflects from the glass to the lens.

Feeding time is often a good time to get shots of animals at the zoo. Don't forget to take photos of the young or baby animals, too, as adorable youngsters with their playful actions and facial expressions will always bring "ooh's" and "ahh's" from your viewers.

When I suggested shooting close to fences, please notice that I didn't mention bars. If an animal is behind bars in a cage, it's likely that you won't be able to place your camera against the bars--nor would you want to. You may well lose your camera or even an arm or a leg, if you do. Always obey the posted rules and good common sense. Your subjects may look like docile pets, but they're still wild animals and can revert to wild behavior at a moment's notice. Caution is, of course, even more important if you happen to meet animals in the wild where there will be no bars between you and them. Not a good situation--unless you're extremely fast!

Even in a zoo, you can suffer from bug bites and sunburn, so remember to take and use bug spray and sunscreen. Scout out the area and pick your spot to reduce background problems as well as foreground problems. When confronted with a fence that just won't go away, get up close to it, and open your lens. If you stand back and make the fence a part of the shot, your image won't be nearly as interesting.

Zoos may be smelly, but they're a lot of fun. Don't monkey around. Go get those zoo shots!