

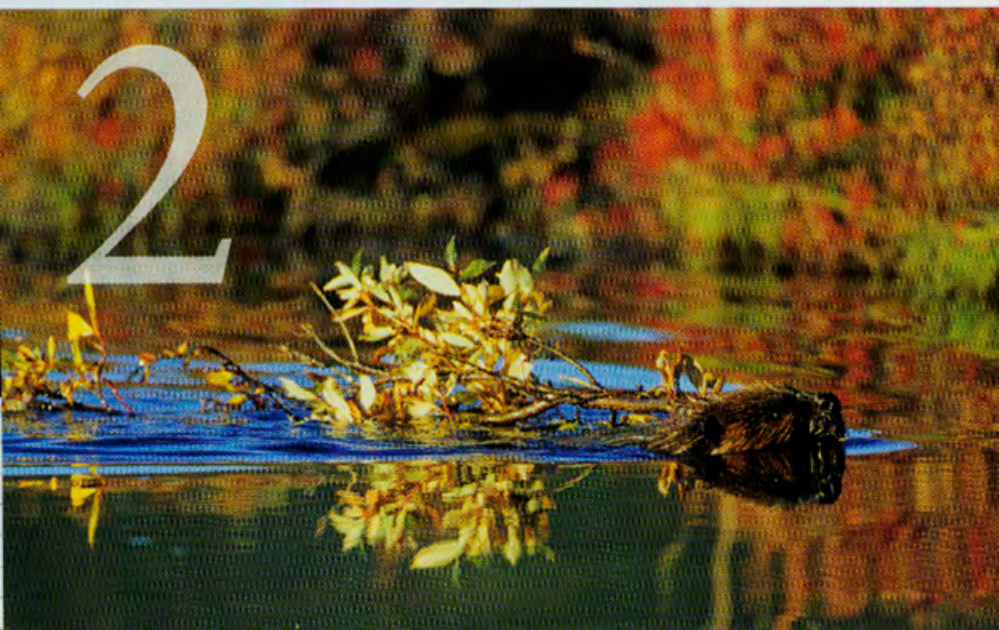
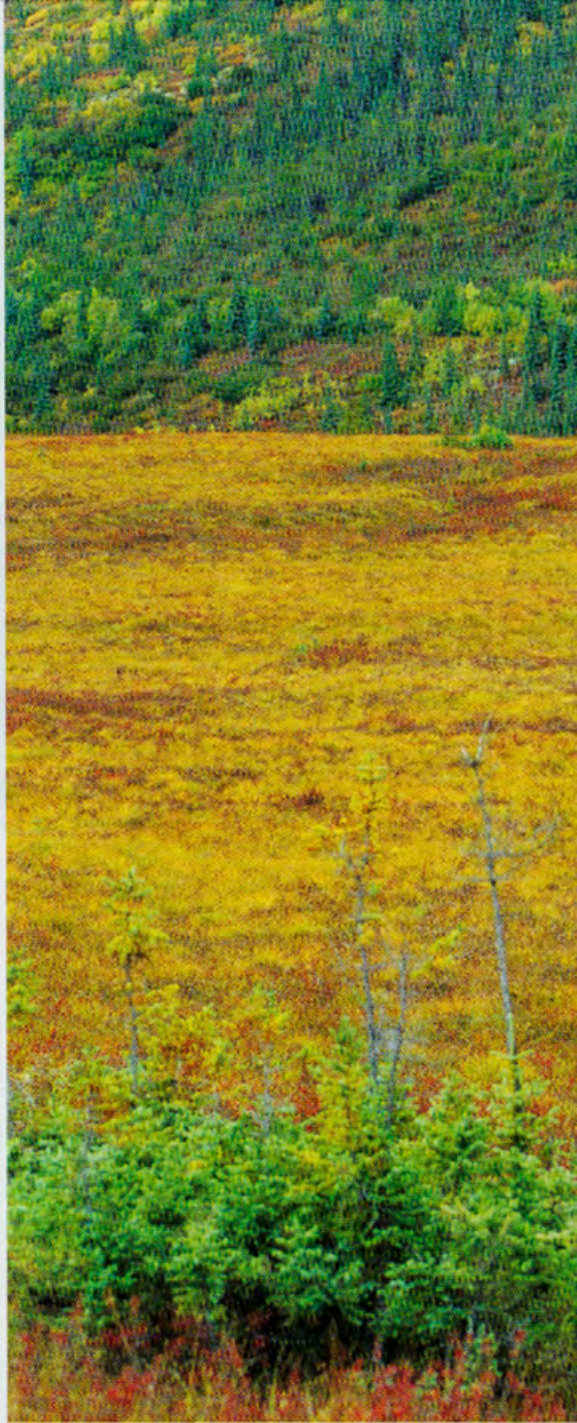
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5 Top Tips For Autumn Wildlife



With the seasons in flux, fall gives nature shooters some of the best photography possibilities of the year

*Text And Photography
By Daniel J. Cox*



There's so much happening with fauna in the fall—bird migrations are in full swing, it's the autumn rutting period for big game and even small animals are preparing for the imminent cold of winter. So we asked *OP* wildlife guru Daniel J. Cox to share some of his top tips for getting the most out of this dynamic time of year and composing more compelling wildlife images.



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1) Where Do They Live? Habitat Is The Key To Survival.

Often, wildlife photographers get caught up in the idea that the only good wildlife image is a close-up of a wild creature. No doubt these are the images that most people see published and strive to emulate, but I've come to understand that there's more to wildlife documentary work than headshots. In one word, it's called *habitat*. Without habitat, there are no wild animals to take pictures of. This not only is an important element to remember as a committed conservationist, but it also can work to your advantage when searching for beautiful images to capture.

There are two techniques I enjoy using

to help establish where an animal lives. The first involves pulling back to show the beautiful colors of the fall tundra as in the image of the black bear in north-central Alaska. It's especially effective in this situation since most people don't associate black bears on the tundra; it's a little visual surprise. In the foreground, you can see the small black spruce. The background is a relatively thick spruce forest. With ongoing climate change, scientists have documented the northward progression of the northern forests. Showing a black bear in this unusual habitat, along with the forest in which it will need to prosper, tells a compelling story.

The second technique involves using a telephoto lens to compress the fore-

ground, as well as using trees and bushes to add framing. This works well when capturing an image of an animal you might not be able to get as close to as you might like. Often, an image of this style not only is beautiful, but in some situations may be beneficial to the animal. Knowing how to make a good image from afar can be rewarding to you and the animals we love and strive to protect.

BLACK BEAR: Nikon F5, 500mm f/4 Nikkor

2) Anticipate Behavior

Being knowledgeable about your subject is the key to successfully capturing images that stand the test of time. I'm not



Cox uses a variety of long lenses. This 200-400mm Nikkor ED VR lens is a favorite due to the zoom range and built-in vibration reduction.



a trained biologist, but that hasn't kept me from studying the animals I enjoy. To compensate for my lack of formal training, I reach out to trained biologists.

Being a diligent student allows you to predict specific behaviors your subjects may perform, for example, the image of the busy beaver. These semiaquatic rodents always have been a favorite of mine. They're hard-working, and through their natural instinct of building a better home for themselves, they add lots of new habitat for other aquatic birds and animals. Fall is the time when beavers are most predictable. They're busy stashing willow branches for winter feed, strengthening dams and adding to their houses. Through several days of careful, distant observation, I knew this little fellow was cutting willows in one spot and bringing them to a place near his lodge. He traveled this route dozens of times per day. I eventually set up a blind on the side of the pond, which allowed me to get his picture.

A brown bear chasing a salmon is another example of an animal's acting predictably. I captured an image of a coastal Alaskan brown bear on a river known for its annual salmon run. I prefer working with these brown bears (actually, they're grizzlies) since they're much less stressed than grizzlies in the lower U.S. and Canada. I also was with a group in a designated viewing area, which allows the bears to become accustomed to humans watching from the bleachers, so to speak. Every fall these magnificent animals spend lots of time chasing their daily meals.

BEAVER: Nikon F5, 600mm f/4 Nikkor



3) Temperature Changes Add Drama

Migrating birds, colorful foliage and dropping temperatures are all part of autumn's splendor. It's my favorite time of the year, and my only complaint about this season of beauty is that it doesn't last long enough. As the temperatures drop, the lakes, streams and waterways often are warmer than the surrounding air. This combination of opposite extremes can create moody conditions that an experienced artist dreams of.

The best time for documenting the various bird species typically is early morning. Not only can you have the moody climatic conditions of fog and haze, but you'll position yourself to take advantage of the golden hours of light that early morning offers as well. The

geese image was shot 30 minutes after the sun had risen above the horizon. It was cold, -25 below zero on an early day in November in my home state of Minnesota. The warm hues were spread across the image due to reflections from the water and the steam rising toward the sky. My intention was a silhouette, and the added bonus of one bird stretching its wings was a piece of serendipity that only hours of being in the field affords.

Photographing sandhill cranes was another opportunity that took place in the early-morning hours shortly after the sun had ascended. Many, if not most, animals are typically active at this time of the day, as well as the last hours of light in the evening and into the night. These times of activity are the main reasons it's beneficial to have a fast, large-aperture telephoto. I used a higher ISO due to the



benefits of digital capture and a relatively fast 200-400mm *f*/4 zoom.

GEESE: Nikon D2Hs, 200-400mm *f*/4 Nikkor

4) Make Your Still Images Move

One of the limitations of still photography is the difficulty in trying to create a feeling of life in a medium that's inherently a "moment in time." Combining the feeling of movement with that "moment in time" can be extremely effective at stopping the viewer to study more closely. I'm constantly looking for ways to try and bring life to a still photograph.

The most common method to add the feeling of movement is a "controlled blur," or panning. Panning requires a slower shutter speed than what you'd typically think for a moving subject. The running pheasant was captured with a 500mm lens at $\frac{1}{25}$ sec. That sounds fairly fast, but it's not when combined with the magnification of a 500mm lens. The key to a good panning image is to be sharply focused on the subject, moving or panning the lens as the subject travels horizontally. Using a tripod is helpful, but with lens stabilization technology, it's easier to accomplish the same goal handholding your equipment. You have to shoot lots of images to score any keepers.

I use another technique sometimes for driving snow and rain. I opted for a slower shutter again when I photographed a resting polar bear ($\frac{1}{5}$ sec). This time the subject was stationary, and the heavy snow was falling and streaking across the digital sensor. As the snow drove toward the ground, it left a blurred trail and gave the feeling of movement. The bear remained sharp, giving the eye something to focus on comfortably.

PHEASANT: Nikon F5, 500mm *f*/4 Nikkor

5) Use Light To Create The Feeling Of Three Dimensions

Creating an image that has the power and dimensions to make you feel as though you're really there is a difficult task. My reason for specializing in wildlife and outdoor journalism revolves around my desire to be a part of nature. I want to see it, smell it and touch it and then bring that story to as many viewers as possible in hopes of making them want to conserve it. To that end, I regularly try to take a two-dimensional medium, a still photo, and turn it into a three-dimensional medium, one that gives the feeling of actually being there. Proper lighting can help make that happen.

We can thank Kodak for photography, but also for one of the most offensive light-

ing rules ever introduced. Back in the day of the Kodak Brownie, its manual stated, "The sun should be behind your back or over your shoulder." That was necessary then due to slow lenses and film with ISOs of 12 or less. But today it's one of the most boring lighting techniques you can follow.

To create the feeling of dimension in still photos, look for sidelighting or back-lighting to illuminate a subject. Light from these angles creates highlights and shadows that gives the perception of depth. In the photo of a young moose, notice how you have shadows in the foreground, a shaft of light coming from the left illuminating the middle ground and once again shadows in the background. Break it down further to see the rim light on the animal's back and shadows on its side facing the camera. All of this gives you the perception that you could reach out and touch this beautiful creature and the willow patch in which it's standing.

MOOSE: Nikon F5, 300mm *f*/2.8 Nikkor OP

To see more of Daniel J. Cox's photography, visit www.naturalexposures.com.

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