

OUTDOOR PHOTOGRAPHY

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Proc. Ann. Conf. S.E. Assoc. Fish & Wildl. Agencies 34:617-618

One of the biggest problems encountered in wildlife photography is getting good reproducible images of wildlife subjects in their natural surroundings. This, of course is the primary concern of the wildlife photographer, since getting reproducible images—those that can be duplicated and enlarged so the wildlife depicted can be recognized and studied—is what he's hired to do. For **OUTDOOR OKLAHOMA**, the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation's bimonthly magazine, we feel Kodachrome 64 35mm slide film gives the best reproducible images. As most of you already should know, Kodachrome 64 is a fine grained film that allows for blowups with a minimum loss of crispness and color rendition. We do not use Kodachrome 25 because it is just too slow for any kind of action shots.

The trick to taking good pictures, of course, is being able to get close to wildlife in it's own environment without scaring it into flight. We've all seen the results of being too far from our quarry—either a shot of the south end of a north bound goose or a photo of a meadow that requires a magnifying glass to decide if the brownish spot in the middle is a deer or a large dog. Getting close to wildlife subjects can be accomplished in 2 ways—by being extremely lucky or by using blinds. Now, I can't tell you much about being lucky because I don't have much experience in that area, but I can say that a blind, at it's simplest, is any object or structure that will conceal a photographer from wildlife.

There are many types of blinds that can be used by the wildlife photographer. Some of them can be transported to the location where you hope the wildlife will show up, and others can be made on the spot with the natural materials found in the area. And then there are painted blinds, cloth blinds, metal elevated blinds, blinds on boats. . . the list goes on.

With these blinds there is one catch—you have to put them up and then allow wildlife to recover from the disturbance you've caused, or, you can sit in them and wait, perhaps for hours, days or even weeks until the desired shot comes around.

There is another method of getting close to wildlife that's not as time consuming and can sometimes be accomplished on the way to or from the office. That method is using your vehicles as a blind. Photographers have been a bit slow to pick up this trick, although farmers have known about it for years. While on their tractors and in their trucks, farmers have noticed that wildlife pays them little if any attention. It's when you get out of your car that animals spook.

Photographing from a vehicle has many advantages. The first and foremost is that you are in your car or truck much of the time anyway, so getting into this blind requires no special planning. Also, your vehicle is mobile and can go off the road if necessary. Another advantage to using this method in outdoor photography is that animals in many areas have learned to accept autos and don't spook as easily when vehicles are around. Therefore, you can drive relatively close to them and not scare them off.

Using your vehicle as a blind provides the photographer with sturdy support for the long lenses usually required for wildlife photos. Our Department's Information and Education Division uses primarily 35mm SLR (Single Lens Reflex) equipment for our outdoor photography, and I personally use a Nikon F camera and lenses. When attempting to photograph wildlife, I generally use a 500mm mirror reflex lens. This fixed aperture lens (f/8) along with Kodachrome 64 film sometimes requires slow shutter

speeds that for me are impossible to hand hold. Some sort of support is needed for this lens.

If used correctly, a vehicle can give the stability of a tripod. Also, a car or truck provides better protection from the elements than do conventional blinds. This can be important, since it's difficult to take quality pictures when your hands freeze to your camera. But there are disadvantages to using your vehicle for a blind. The first is that you are limited to roads and smooth terrain, unless you are fortunate enough to have a 4-wheel vehicle.

Another disadvantage is that it's difficult to control composition from a car. If you need to move a foot or two to change your shot, you have to start your engine, move your mobile blind and stop the engine when you get into position. Meanwhile, your wildlife subjects may take a dim view of all this activity and take off for quieter grounds. Regarding the engine be sure to turn it off before shooting or the vibrations will affect your pictures, another disadvantage. Finally, you have to be careful where you stop to shoot, because you can get run over, stuck in a ditch or receive a ticket for blocking traffic.

The equipment needed to make your car or truck a luxury blind is really quite simple. I've had success putting a 6-inch split piece of surgical tubing on the window next to my seat whenever I'm planning to shoot. This tubing on the window gives a non-skid support pad for your lense, which won't slip off or become scratched from the edge of the window. The window itself can be raised or lowered to the most comfortable position.

Using a piece of tubing gives you good vertical support for your lens. To help reduce horizontal movement, you should brace your body against the seat, steering wheel or whatever necessary to insure stability. Another method is to put a bean bag or sand bag on the window instead of the surgical tubing. This also gives good support and helps absorb vibrations from the wind or your own movements.

A third way to mount your camera on your vehicle is to use a car window mount made for spotting scopes and attach it to your window glass. These mounts have been used by game division personnel for years. They have a head similar to a tripod that allows you to fasten your camera to the mount, therefore securing your camera to the car window. These mounts give you the stability of your vehicle, which can come in handy in low light situations. A spotting scope mount gives excellent horizontal and vertical support.

The fourth and fifth means of utilizing a vehicle as a blind aren't as successful as the first 3, but they do allow the photographer a bit more freedom of movement for his composition. You can ride in the bed of a pickup or, if you have a van, make your shots from a side door with the help of a tripod. However, these methods allow more movement to be seen by wildlife and can spook them much more easily than will taking photos from the window.

Photography from a car or truck allows the photographer to get those grab shots, and the deliberate ones as well, with an increased degree of success and quality. Since we are on the road so much of the time these days, this easy method of outdoor photography should be used whenever possible.