USING GAME CALLS TO PHOTOGRAPH WILDLIFE

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The use of recorded bird and animal sounds has been greatly expanded in recent years. Originally produced as aids to the hunter, the sounds now are used by bird watchers, photographers and wildlife biologists.

Biologists in a number of states employ the sounds to index such species as the chachalaca, ruffed grouse, bobwhite quail, pheasant, coyote and wolf. In most cases, the bird or animal called answers and can be counted by sound if not by sight. The fact that this indexing method is successful will not come as a surprise to hunters and photographers who have been using calls to bring a wide variety of wild creatures within rifle, shotgun or camera range.

Electronic calling is one of the easiest, most enjoyable and effective means of observing and/or photographing many species of mammals, birds and even reptiles. In order to emphasize the variety of creatures which will respond to a call, I would like to list the animals I have called successfully and the sounds used:

White-tailed deer — rattling of antlers
Coyotes — rabbit squeals
Bobcats — bird squeals
Fox — bird squeals and the distress cry of a fox
Raccoon — bird squeals
Javelina — the squeals of a young pig
Alligator — squealing javelina pig
Moose — mating call of the moose
Elk — bugling elk
Barred owl — call of the barred owl
Screech owl — call of the screech owl
Horned owl — bird and rabbit squeals
Hawks — bird squeals

Almost all song birds, including cardinals, flycatchers, woodpeckers, titmice, thrashers and wrens are attracted to the sound of screech owl and sounds of squealing birds. Ducks and geese are gregarious and recorded calls are so effective on them that this method of hunting waterfowl has been banned by the federal government.

There are several reasons why taped or recorded calls are so successful for the photographer. By using a remote speaker which places the calling sounds a desired distance from the camera, the attention of the animal or bird being called is drawn to the speaker rather than the photographer.

The photographer can pre-focus his lens on the speaker or any spot where he expects the called animal to appear. This minimizes or, at times, eliminates movement needed to focus and permits the photographer to take his picture quickly.

Although time does not permit going into calling techniques for all wildlife species in depth, I would like to discuss methods which have been used successfully in taking photographs of 3 mammals, the coyote, bobcat and fox, and 2 birds, the barred owl and the screech owl.

Calling techniques for the 3 predatory mammals are similar. The calling area should be approached as quietly as possible. The remote speaker should be hidden in bushes on the ground or on a limb upwind from the photographer's hiding place.

The upwind position of the speaker is important because animals will sometimes circle the sound for scent and if the circle is at fairly close range, the animal will pass between the speaker and the photographer. This serves 2 purposes. One, the animal does not smell the photographer; two, it puts the animal close to the camera lens. An ideal situation is when the wind is in the photographer's face and the sun at his back.

Although most speakers come equipped with only about 7.6 m of wire, 15.2 m lengths of speaker wire are inexpensive, and, when equipped with jacks on each end, permit the photographer to place the speaker just about as far away from the camera as he wants it.

Do not start the player until the speaker is hidden, you are in position with your camera, the camera is focused either on the speaker or a selected distance, and both shutter speed and lens aperture are set for existing sunlight or artificial illumination.

If the camera has a depth of field preview button, use it to determine the exact area which will be in focus at a given aperture setting. Depth of field — minimum and maximum distances which will be in focus — also can be determined on many cameras by referring to the scale printed on the lens barrel. If this is done prior to calling, and the photographer has the depth of field pinpointed with natural markers — trees, rocks or brush — there is no need to focus the camera when the animal appears, and the picture can be made quickly.

Unless your camera equipment is sound-proofed, only a single exposure might be possible, since the click of the shutter will alert predator and prey animals alike of your presence. Therefore, that initial exposure can be all-important because it might be the only one you will get, unless you have a motorized camera. In that case, you should fire as many shots as possible while the animal is in focus.

When the call begins, keep the volume very low in case the target animal or bird is in the vicinity. Make no movements after the call has started. Have the tape or record player near at hand so that the volume can be controlled without moving.

When an animal appears, reduce the volume to just a whisper. The animal probably will move into the speaker area, but occasionally it will stop and look around. If the animal seems hesitant about approaching, I activate a radio-controlled "wiggler", which is a device I place near the speaker. A touch of a button causes a feather or piece of fur which I attach to the device to wiggle. Most of the time an animal such as a coyote becomes so curious when it sees the wiggler in action that it moves right in for what it thinks is a free meal.

When calling hawks, use basically the same techniques used to call predatory animals, but locate your camera closer to the snag or tree where you hope to get the hawk to land. Place the speaker in bushes on the camera side of the snag or on a limb in the tree if no snag is available. If there is wind, it should be from the camera toward the speaker and perch, just opposite of the recommendation for mammals. A bird will land into the wind, and you want it facing the camera. Use a very low volume when first starting to call.

The barred owl undoubtedly is one of the most talkative owls in the woods. This large bird is not difficult to photograph, but there is work involved in producing good close-up photos. Select a spot to call the barred owl during the daylight hours. Pick a dead snag 3.0 to 3.6 m high for a perch on which the bird will land. The speaker should be hidden in a bush or pile of brush 1.5 to 3.0 m upwind from the perch.

If you cannot locate a natural perch, build one by cutting and moving a snag of desired height. Clear away all possible landing sites at least 15.2 m in all directions from the perch you have selected or erected. You must be able to see the owl when it is on the perch, and there are 3 ways this can be accomplished. Call them at dusk when there is still enough light to see, wait for a moonlit night or skylight the perch against the glow of distant city lights. I prefer calling on full moon nights.

The distance from the perch to the camera will depend on the lens being used. If possible, focus on the perch before dark or mark the correct spot to place the camera during daylight so that you will be able to set it up properly after dark. Shining a light on the perch at night to focus will not frighten the birds, but focusing is not easy even with a strong light. Focusing will be even more accurate if the light can in some manner be held at the top of the perch pointing toward the lens.

The light source for your camera should be about 0.6 m above the camera on a bracket or slightly to 1 side on a separate tripod to prevent "red eye". A powerful strobe can be placed on a separate tripod behind and above the camera.

Neither the barred nor the little screech owl is always frightened by the brilliant flashes of light from an electronic strobe, and it often is possible to take 10 or more photos of an owl before it leaves. If, for example, an owl lands on the perch and is looking away from the camera, be prepared to take a second picture as fast as you can change the flash bulb or as fast as the strobe is ready. After the initial flash, the owl usually will stare in

the direction of the camera.

Screech owl photos can be taken much the same way you take barred owl shots, but the perch should be only 1.2 to 1.8 m in height, and the speaker should be hidden at the base of the perch on the camera side. A photographer can cut a perch and carry it from one calling location to another by making a stand which will hold the limb in an upright position.

The limb used as a perch should resemble an upside down L. The base of the L, which is at the top when in use, should extend no more than 15.2 cm from the vertical post. This short shaft, which should be more or less horizontal to the ground, is where the owl will land. If it is any longer than about 15.2 cm, the owl might land out of the field of view of the lens, especially if the camera is being operated remotely.

A remote firing system is not expensive. Air releases 6.1 m in length are available for a few dollars. I recommend an additional investment in several meters of camouflage netting and that part of it be used to hide the tripod while the remainder is used to hide the photographer.

When setting up a remote camera with a normal or short telephoto lens, tape a few twigs to the camera body for additional camouflage and to discourage the screech owl from landing on it.

For the person who can afford it, an ideal camera system for taking owl photographs includes a motorized body, telephoto lens of at leat 300 mm and the most powerful electronic flash available. However, a photographer with a non-motorized camera, small flash gun and normal lens can get one good photo of an owl if he also has a tripod and some means of tripping the shutter remotely.

A fortune in camera equipment is not mandatory for the production of good wildlife photographs. Selecting the site carefully, advance planning and using a call to make the animal or bird go where you want it to go and stop where you want it to stop means as much if not more than the camera equipment you use.