PATIENCE / COMFORT / THE PLEASURE OF BEING OUTSIDE

Wildlife Photography for Seniors

How I Keep It Simple After 60

A practical approach from more than thirty years in the field

Steve Creek

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INTRODUCTION

A Hobby I Can Keep Enjoying

I looked forward to the day I could retire and photograph wildlife full-time. That is what I did. It is enjoyable work, and it is something I can see myself doing late in life.

I have been photographing wildlife for more than thirty years. My interest has not faded, but my approach has changed. I carry less. I look for places closer to the road. I photograph from my truck, from a fishing pier, and from a chair on my deck. Those choices give me more ways to keep doing something I love.

I am still in good health. Planning ahead was a choice I made while I could still get out and do the things I wanted to do. I wanted a place to photograph birds at home in case travel became difficult. I also knew I could find places to photograph from my vehicle if hiking became harder. I did not want the future of my photography to depend on being able to carry heavy equipment for miles.

This book is for anyone who enjoys photographing wildlife and wants to continue as they get older. It is also for someone who has never tried it and wonders whether there is a place to begin. Your yard, a local park, a nature center, or a nearby refuge may provide that place.

You will find my equipment mentioned where it helps explain a choice. You do not need to own what I own. The important questions are whether you can use your equipment comfortably and whether it allows you to

photograph in a way you enjoy. Buying used equipment can be a sensible way to try the hobby without committing to an expensive setup.

There will be very little camera talk here. You do not need a long list of settings before you can go outside. Learn enough to operate your camera, give it some support when you can, and spend time watching the wildlife in front of you. The rest can develop through practice.

I love being outdoors with nature. Getting a photograph is a bonus.

That is the spirit of this book. Find an approach that fits your life now, leave room to adapt, and give yourself reasons to go out again.

> *Getting a photo is a bonus.*

CHAPTER 01

My Simple Approach After 60

Planning before I have to

I like planning ahead. When I began thinking about how to photograph wildlife for as long as I could, I started with my yard. I wanted a setup where birds would come to a place I could photograph comfortably, even if a time came when I could not travel.

I thought about travel the same way. If I could no longer hike into an area, I wanted to know places where I could photograph from my truck. Auto-tour roads at wildlife refuges offered a practical option. Familiar locations with short, quiet approaches offered another.

These were preparations, rather than a response to losing my health. I am in good shape, but I know that may change as I get older. Having several ways to photograph gives me choices. A morning on the deck and a morning at a refuge can both be worthwhile.

You can make your own preparations in small steps. Find a place near home that is easy to revisit. Learn what you can see from a comfortable seated position. Notice which outings leave you eager to return and which make the hobby feel like work. Build around the ones that suit you.

When weight started to matter

The biggest equipment change came because of weight. I used a Canon EF 500mm f/4 lens that I had carried without trouble when I was younger. Eventually, lifting it to my eye and holding it there became more difficult and caused shoulder pain.

Even photographing inside my truck did not solve the problem. Moving that heavy lens from the seat beside me to the window hurt my shoulders. The issue was more than how far I walked. It included every lift and every movement needed to get the camera into position.

A tripod could provide support, but I did not like carrying one while hiking with the heavy prime lens. It added weight, and setting it up took time. Wildlife does not always give you that time. I needed to consider the whole process, from carrying the equipment to making the photograph.

That experience is why comfort matters so much to me now. A lens can be excellent and still be the wrong choice for the way you want to spend a morning. If equipment is uncomfortable to carry or use, look for lighter gear. Photography should be something you enjoy doing.

Carrying fewer decisions

I used to pack several cameras and lenses. Now I try to go out with one camera and one lens. I also used to hike miles to a location. These days I look for places that are closer.

Reducing the equipment is one part of simplifying. Choosing a location that works is another. A good place gives you opportunities without requiring constant movement. If wildlife is already using the area, you can settle in, watch, and give it time.

You do not need to copy my exact kit or my preferred locations. Start by asking what you actually use. If you carry something on every outing and

rarely take it out, consider whether it needs to go on the next one. Keep the essentials, including the batteries and memory cards that let your camera keep working.

What a fishing pier taught me

At Sequoyah National Wildlife Refuge in Oklahoma, I have photographed from a fishing pier overlooking a slough. From that one location, I photographed a coyote walking along the water's edge. I have also photographed deer crossing the water, along with beavers, muskrats, and waterfowl.

Those were opportunities at the same place over time, not a promise of everything appearing in one morning. The value of the spot is that I can reach it easily, settle in, and wait. As I have gotten older, I have become more willing to stay in one place and give it a chance to produce wildlife I can photograph.

The pier is a short distance from the auto-tour road. A sidewalk provides a quiet approach. The parking area lets me leave my truck out of sight of wildlife in the water. The waist-high wooden rail offers support for my camera and lens when I am not using a tripod, and it helps conceal me a little.

Shallow water and vegetation make it useful for wildlife, while I rarely see anyone fishing there. All those details contribute to a place where I can spend time comfortably. Finding your own version of that spot may help more than finding a more distant destination.

Try a simpler outing

For your next outing, choose one familiar place and take only the camera equipment you expect to use. Give yourself time to watch before deciding to move. The purpose is to find out whether a smaller, easier outing leaves you wanting to do it again.

- Choose a location you can reach comfortably.
- Take equipment you can carry and operate without strain.
- Look for a stable place to sit or support the camera.
- Let wildlife activity guide your attention.
- Count time outdoors as part of the reward.

CHAPTER 02

Finding Wildlife Close to Home

Begin with a place that welcomes visitors

My favorite places to photograph are national wildlife refuges, especially those with auto-tour roads. A road through wildlife habitat lets me look for animals while staying in my truck. It also gives me places to revisit as the seasons change.

For someone starting out, I suggest visiting a nearby refuge and talking to employees at the visitor center. Ask what wildlife is being seen at that time of year and where visitors are allowed to look. Staff can help you begin with current information instead of spending the whole morning guessing.

Nature centers are another good option. They may offer other things to enjoy if wildlife is not present during your visit. Look at their websites to see which birds and animals they list. State parks are also places I explore for wildlife that is relatively easy to locate.

Not every refuge has the same facilities, and not every road or trail will suit your needs. Before leaving, check the particular site's access, opening times, road status, and rules. Ask about the features that matter to you, such as walking distance, seating, and viewing areas. Planning around the actual place makes the visit easier to enjoy.

Follow food and habitat

Another favorite place of mine is near a river dam. I visit Kerr Dam near Sallisaw, Oklahoma, a lot in winter. When water is released, birds gather to feed on fish passing through the dam.

That is a useful example of learning why wildlife uses a location. A place becomes more understandable when you connect an animal's presence with food, water, cover, or the season. You begin to have a reason to return, rather than simply hoping something will appear.

At a dam, use designated public viewing areas and obey closures and warnings. Bird activity is a reason to watch from a permitted position, never a reason to enter a restricted area or approach hazardous water.

In your own area, start with what is available. A pond, a wooded edge, or a small park may be more practical to visit regularly than a distant destination. Watch how animals use it before deciding where to photograph.

Give a location more than one chance

I want to know that wildlife is using an area, and that can take several visits. Time of year matters. I may return in different seasons, because a place that seems quiet now can be useful later.

I make frequent checks. Years of photographing have helped me recognize the kinds of places wildlife prefers, but that familiarity came from spending time outdoors. You can develop it, too. Visit, observe, and return. One empty morning is only one observation.

I like isolated areas without a lot of human activity. When access allows, I arrive before sunrise and sit or park to see what is moving. I begin photographing once there is enough light. Early activity can help me learn what is present even before I make a photograph.

You do not have to arrive in darkness to start learning a place. Choose an arrival time and route that you can manage comfortably. The goal is to visit often enough to notice patterns, not to meet someone else's schedule.

First wildlife, then the photograph

Once I know wildlife is present, I look at the photographic conditions. I want a clean background without a lot of clutter. I also look for good light. My ideal position has the sun behind me.

A small change in viewing position can change what appears behind an animal. Look from camera height. A distant patch of vegetation may give you a calmer background than nearby tangled branches. A bright patch behind the animal can pull your attention away from it.

Sometimes there is no suitable angle from a safe, permitted position. That is fine. You can watch without photographing and remember the location for another visit. Learning when a spot works is part of learning the spot.

Access is part of the location

As I have gotten older, easy access has become more important. On refuge roads, I look for conditions that let me move quietly. I also want a good parking location and an approach that does not disturb the wildlife.

For your own scouting, consider both wildlife and your experience of being there. Can you reach the viewing area easily? Can you wait comfortably? Can other visitors pass? Can you leave quietly? A location you can use repeatedly has time to become familiar.

A simple location record

You do not need elaborate records, but a few notes can help you compare visits. Keep them in whatever form is easiest for you.

- Where did you watch from, and was access straightforward?
- What wildlife did you see or hear?
- What time and season was it?
- Where did the light fall, and what was behind the subject?
- What would make the next visit easier?

Return to a promising place before writing it off. Let several visits tell you what one visit cannot.

CHAPTER 03

Photographing Wildlife From My Vehicle

A useful place to work

My truck gives me a way to photograph wildlife without hiking into every area. At refuges with auto-tour roads, many animals are accustomed to seeing vehicles. In my experience, staying inside often works better than getting out.

That does not make the truck invisible, and it does not give me permission to crowd an animal. I watch how wildlife reacts and work from a safe position. My method is slow and deliberate, with the vehicle stopped whenever I photograph.

I want beginners to find a way they feel comfortable photographing. Some people prefer to get out where it is allowed and safe. I have had better success staying in my vehicle. What matters is keeping both people and wildlife safe and following the site's rules. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service advises using designated pullouts and keeping the road clear when stopping to watch or photograph. [1]

Prepare before the first opportunity

My camera travels in a quick-access backpack on the front passenger seat, with extra batteries and memory cards. While I am traveling to a location, I secure the backpack with the seatbelt.

When I arrive at the auto-tour road, I open the backpack and leave it open so I can get to the camera. Sometimes, while parked, I keep the camera

and lens in my lap for faster access. I prepare my camera settings before I start driving the route.

I also try to make the truck quiet. I remove items that can slide around in the bed. I learned the hard way to remove the receiver hitch because it rattles when I am trying to approach wildlife quietly.

Small preparations reduce the movements and noises needed later. Before you begin a route, think about where the camera will rest, whether you can reach it comfortably, and what might shift or rattle. Attend to the road while driving; save handling the camera and making photographs for a safe stop.

My beanbag at the window

I use a beanbag draped over the open driver's-side window to support the camera and lens. My bag is filled with buckwheat hulls rather than beans. I find the hulls lighter and softer.

Photographing from my truck with the camera and lens resting on a beanbag draped over the open driver's-side window.

The beanbag is easy to remove when another vehicle passes and stirs up dust. I can close the window to protect the equipment. I can also adjust the height of the window with the bag over the glass when I need a different working height.

If you try a similar arrangement, check how the bag fits your own vehicle. Support the equipment while adjusting the window, and keep fingers, straps, and the bag clear of the moving mechanism. Make sure the setup is stable before resting the camera on it.

I often drive the tour road with my driver's-side window down, even in winter. That saves the movement and time of lowering the window and placing the bag when an opportunity appears. Choose what is comfortable and practical for your weather and vehicle.

Stop, photograph, watch, then decide

As I drive slowly, I look for wildlife and watch its reaction to the truck. When I see an opportunity, I stop in a safe place and photograph. Before moving forward again, I check the animal's behavior.

If it remains relaxed, I may move slowly to another permitted stopping position. I stop again before taking photographs. This is a series of careful decisions, not photographing while the truck is moving.

I try to get the animal on the driver's side. When I reach a good position, I turn off the engine to reduce vibration and heat haze. I like having the camera supported so I can photograph for longer without holding the weight up.

If the animal looks tense or ready to leave, I stop advancing and wait. If it does not relax, I drive away when I can do so safely. I do not like photographs of wildlife that appears frightened. A relaxed appearance also does not override a required viewing distance: follow local distance rules even when an animal seems unconcerned.

When the angle does not work

An animal on the passenger side can be awkward. I sometimes stay in the driver's seat and aim across the cab, but that means handholding the camera and is more difficult for me. At times I exit the truck and photograph across the truck bed, when conditions and rules allow.

Another option is to continue past the animal and find a safe, legal place to turn around. That can bring it to the side I need, although it does not always work. The animal may move, or the opportunity may be over. I accept that.

If the light is poor or the surroundings do not work for a photograph, I drive on. Having seen an animal does not require me to make a picture of it.

A morning on the tour road

I begin the route when there is enough light to photograph. I drive slowly and look for movement and things that do not quite fit their surroundings. Learning to notice those clues takes practice. The more you do it, the better you become at seeing wildlife.

The open window also lets me listen. A Barred Owl calling or coyotes howling can draw my attention to an area. At a promising cove, I may pull into a permitted stopping place, switch off the engine, and watch and listen for fifteen to thirty minutes before moving on.

I may make several trips around the route while the light remains useful. Sometimes I park and walk into an area open to walking. The truck is an option that helps me stay out, while the morning itself determines how I use it.

CHAPTER 04

Backyard Wildlife Photography Works

A place I can return to

I started planning my backyard setup because I wanted a way to keep photographing if travel became difficult. My deck at home in Lavaca, Arkansas, gives me that place. I can sit, watch the birds, and work with a familiar view.

The chair matters. I chose one that I could sit in for long periods and that put me at the correct height to photograph from the deck rail. I use a beanbag most of the time. The photograph of my station shows a different support: a ground pod I had someone make for me.

My deck station in Lavaca, Arkansas. The support shown is a custom-made ground pod; I usually use a beanbag on the rail.

The important point is the fit between chair, camera height, and support. A comfortable chair at the wrong height can leave you reaching or lifting. Work out where you can sit comfortably before deciding exactly where birds should appear in your frame.

Start with the view through the camera

In my backyard book, I begin setup with background and light. Before placing a feeder, birdbath, or perch, look outward from the position where you will actually photograph. Judge the view at camera height.

Look past the place where the bird will land. A nearby fence, bright wall, or tangle of branches can dominate the photograph. A more distant, even background gives the bird room to stand out. Sometimes moving your chair or changing your angle slightly is enough to improve the view.

Then watch the light when birds are using the area. Morning and late afternoon are useful times to investigate. Open shade can also provide even light. A spot that looks attractive at noon may have patchy light when you want to photograph.

You do not have to make the entire yard work. Find one usable view. A small setup that you understand is enough to begin.

Give birds a place to pause

I like a natural-looking perch near the food or water. Birds often pause nearby before approaching either. That pause can give me a photograph without the feeder dominating the frame.

Choose a stable branch with texture and a shape that does not compete with the bird. Position it against the cleaner background and in useful light. Keep nearby cover and escape routes in mind. Birds need to be able to approach and leave on their own terms.

Watch what birds actually use. A perch that looks right to you may not be where they choose to land. Give a new arrangement time before deciding it has failed. If a change is needed, make one adjustment and observe what happens.

Eastern Bluebirds on a weathered snag in my yard. A useful perch gives birds a place to pause away from the feeder.

What I learned from the birdbath

My birdbath setup improved when I simplified it. Early on, I placed rocks and sticks in the water because I thought they would make the scene look natural and give birds somewhere to stand.

That worked for drinking photographs, but it restricted bathing. Larger birds, including American Robins, needed room to spread their wings, dip, and shake. Once I removed the clutter and provided open water, their behavior changed. They stayed longer and bathed more fully.

The behavior improved before the photographs did. That was a useful lesson: a setup needs to work for the birds before it can work for the photographer. I kept a landing area nearby, while allowing the bath itself to remain simple.

Feeders and birdbaths offer different opportunities. A feeder visit can be very quick. At the bath, I watch for the approach, a pause at the edge, drinking, and feather ruffling afterward as well as bathing itself. Water and wet feathers can catch strong reflections, so I look for gentle, even light.

Familiarity is an advantage

I approach my shooting area consistently and move slowly. I do not swing the camera toward every arrival. Sometimes I let the first visit pass and wait for a later, calmer opportunity.

Once a setup works, I give it time. Constantly moving the feeder, bath, or perch makes it harder to learn what is helping. Seasonal changes may require an adjustment as leaves, backgrounds, and light change, but I make changes deliberately.

Short sessions can be worthwhile. You can watch during good light, stop when conditions deteriorate, and return another day. You do not need to stay outside for hours to learn something about the birds using your yard.

Begin with a manageable arrangement

For a reader starting out, one comfortable viewing position is a useful first goal. Make sure any rail or other support is stable and suitable for the equipment. Keep access to the chair straightforward. Food and water features also need regular care; keep them clean and follow current local wildlife guidance about feeding.

- Choose your chair and camera position first.
- Check background and light from that position.
- Watch where birds already pause and travel.
- Add a simple perch only where it helps.
- Keep the arrangement stable long enough to learn from it.
- Let watching be worthwhile even when you do not photograph.

My earlier book, Photographing Backyard Birds, explores these methods in greater detail. Here, the central lesson is that a familiar yard can remain an interesting place to photograph through years of changing circumstances.

CHAPTER 05

Gear That Makes Photography Easier

Comfort earns its place

If your equipment is uncomfortable to carry or use, find something lighter. That is my main equipment advice. It is about being comfortable and pain free while enjoying what you love to do.

Equipment has to work for the person using it. Weight that feels manageable for a moment may become tiring when you hold a camera to your eye repeatedly. A lens that rests comfortably on a support may still be difficult to lift from the seat to the window.

Think through the movements involved in your own photography. Picking up the camera, reaching a control, carrying the bag, and putting everything away are all part of using the equipment. The full outing matters more than a quick test of whether you can lift a lens.

This is not a reason to replace equipment that already works for you. Keep using what is comfortable. If something is causing difficulty, identify that particular problem before looking for a solution.

My change from a large prime lens

The Canon EF 500mm f/4 was a lens I used when carrying and lifting it were easier for me.

I replaced it with the Canon RF 100-500mm F4.5-7.1 L IS USM. My current equipment also includes a Canon EOS R5 Mark II camera and a Canon RF 200-800mm F6.3-9 IS USM lens.

Those names describe my equipment, not what a reader needs to buy. When I go out, I try to keep the working kit to one camera and one lens. The aim is to simplify what I carry and handle.

There was a tradeoff. The old 500mm f/4 was better in low light. Equipment decisions involve accepting some limitations in exchange for something that matters more to you. For this book, that something is the ability to keep using the equipment comfortably.

Support can help more than another purchase

When I know I will sit for a long period without another support such as the deck rail, I bring a tripod. I also take a small stool. That gives me another option for a place where there is no convenient rail or window.

Your support should fit the place and the task. A tripod may make sense for a stationary session and be cumbersome on an outing with frequent moves. A beanbag needs a suitable surface. A chair needs to put you at a useful height. Look at the whole arrangement instead of assuming one support belongs everywhere.

You can try a comfortable existing surface before deciding whether you need another piece of equipment. Protect the camera, keep the support stable, and avoid arrangements that require stretching or balancing in an awkward position.

Start within your budget

For someone trying wildlife photography, buying used equipment is one way to find out whether the hobby suits them. You do not have to begin with a camera that costs as much as mine.

Choose something you can operate and carry. If possible, handle it before buying. Check that the controls are usable for you and that the camera and lens work together. A photographer friend or local photography club may help you understand the choices without turning the process into a competition over equipment.

A lower-cost setup may have limits in distant subjects or poor light. You can plan around those limits by choosing nearby opportunities, photographing in better light, or including the animal's surroundings. Keep a safe distance even if the subject remains small in the frame.

The first goal is to find out whether you enjoy watching and photographing wildlife. You can make later decisions after experience tells you what you actually need.

A small kit with a clear purpose

Extra charged batteries and memory cards belong in my kit. They are simple things to prepare the night before and easy to overlook if everything is packed in a hurry.

The rest should earn its place. For each item, ask what it will do on this particular outing. If you expect to remain at one viewing spot, a stool and support may be useful. If you will work from the truck, easy access to the camera and a well-placed beanbag may matter more.

Try not to pack for every photograph you could possibly encounter. An outing with one camera and one lens will have limits. It can also leave you

with less to move, less to sort through, and more attention for what is in front of you.

Before you buy, ask

- Can I carry this for the outing I actually plan to make?
- Can I lift it into position repeatedly without discomfort?
- Can I operate its main controls comfortably?
- Would a better support solve the problem I am having?
- Can I begin with equipment I already own or buy used?
- Does this purchase help me spend more enjoyable time outside?

Let your answers guide the choice. The right equipment is equipment that fits your photography and your life.

CHAPTER 06

Making the Most of the Equipment You Have

Learn a little, then go outside

I do not want this book to become a long discussion of camera settings. Its purpose is to help people keep photographing and encourage others to take up wildlife photography. You can begin without mastering every feature of a camera.

Start with the basic operations you need: turning it on, focusing, making a photograph, and reviewing it. Practice those at home so finding a button does not take all your attention when a bird arrives. Use the camera manual or ask someone familiar with your model when you need help.

Your camera may have a simple automatic mode, or you may already know another mode that works for you. Begin there. A familiar setup gives you a starting point. Change one thing when there is a clear reason, rather than trying to learn every adjustment in one outing.

The habits in this chapter are suggestions to try with the equipment you have. They are not a claim that every camera can make every photograph. Working within a camera's limits is part of keeping the hobby manageable.

Give the camera a steadier place

Before blaming the camera for a disappointing photograph, consider how you are holding it. A supported camera can be easier to aim carefully, especially during a long wait.

My beanbag does that job at the truck window and on the deck rail. You may have a different stable support available. Resting your elbows on a suitable surface can also help reduce movement. Choose a position that lets you look through the camera without reaching or straining.

A support steadies your equipment, but it cannot stop a bird from moving. A bird turning its head or shaking water from its feathers creates a different challenge from a camera wobbling in your hands. Recognizing that difference helps you decide what to try next.

If your camera offers image stabilization, learn its basic operation from the instructions for your equipment. It can assist with camera movement, but it does not replace a comfortable position or a suitable moment to photograph.

Wait for usable light

Good light makes many parts of photography easier. In my yard, I watch for even light that lets me see detail in the bird without bright patches competing for attention. Open shade can work well. So can gentle morning light.

When sunlight breaks through leaves in patches, a small movement can put the head in shadow and the body in bright sun. Sometimes waiting for more even conditions is easier than trying to compensate continually.

I usually photograph in the morning and stop when the sun becomes too harsh. The equipment has not changed, but the conditions have. Accepting that can save frustration. You can spend the remaining time observing or return when the light is more useful.

A Red-bellied Woodpecker in my yard. Even light helps the bird and the texture of the bark remain visible.

Give the subject some room

A wildlife photograph does not have to be a tight portrait. If your lens does not bring an animal close in the frame, include some of the place it lives. Water, vegetation, and open space can help tell the story of what you are seeing.

Avoid walking closer simply because the camera cannot fill the frame. Keep the distance required by the site and the animal's needs. You can choose another composition, wait for a different opportunity, or enjoy watching.

In the yard, look at what is behind the perch before the bird arrives. A clear background often improves a photograph more than squeezing the bird into a tighter frame. Move your position when it is practical, then let the scene settle again.

Watch for the pause

Animals move, but they also pause. A bird may stop on a branch before going to a feeder. A head turn may briefly bring the eye into view. These are moments to watch for, rather than trying to follow every motion with the camera.

Keep your movements slow. Settle before the opportunity. If you are constantly repositioning, you can miss the quieter moments and disturb the wildlife you are trying to photograph.

You will miss photographs. That is part of the hobby, regardless of the equipment. Learning a repeated behavior in a familiar place may give you another chance on a later visit.

Review without turning it into a test

After a session, look at a few photographs and ask a simple question: what would I like to improve next time? Choose one useful answer.

Perhaps the background is cluttered. Perhaps the eye is hidden, or the camera moved as you pressed the button. Perhaps the bird was moving too quickly for the camera's current setup. Each suggests a different next step.

You do not have to solve all of them immediately. Try a better support, wait for a calmer pose, or ask for help with the one camera adjustment that would address the problem. Avoid changing several things at once when you are still learning what each one does.

In my backyard work, I prefer an image with some visible noise to one blurred by movement. But the larger lesson is simple: judge the photograph by whether it works for you, then use it to learn. There is no requirement to turn every outing into technical homework.

CHAPTER 07

Comfortable Outings You Will Want to Repeat

The evening before

My outing begins the night before I leave. I check the weather, charge my camera batteries, and make sure I have extras. I also check that I have plenty of memory cards.

I look up sunrise and sunset times for the area I plan to visit. That gives me a reference for the light and helps me plan the day. The time of year and the place both matter.

Preparing ahead keeps simple tasks from getting in the way in the morning. You can put your kit in a familiar place and decide which location suits the forecast. A small amount of preparation helps the outing feel easier from the start.

You do not need to pack for a demanding expedition if you are planning a short local visit. You do need the things that make that particular outing comfortable. Choose the trip first, then prepare for it.

Before leaving home

I check the weather again before leaving. Conditions can change overnight. I dress for the weather and make sure I have drinking water.

For your own outing, think about where you will spend the time. An open deck, a parked vehicle with the window down, and a shaded path can feel

different even on the same day. Plan clothing and the length of the visit around what you will actually be doing.

Check access as well as weather when visiting a managed site. A road closure or different opening time can change the plan. If walking distance or seating matters, confirm those details before relying on them.

Keep a simpler alternative available. If the longer trip no longer suits the conditions, a short local visit or time watching from home may still be worthwhile. There is no obligation to complete the original plan just because you made it yesterday.

Let the light and wildlife set the pace

I like photographing in the morning, just after sunrise. I continue while the light remains useful. Most of the time, I finish around ten or eleven, when the sunlight becomes too harsh for the photographs I want.

High clouds can extend the morning by keeping the light good. Wildlife activity matters, too. The season affects what is out and when. Some animals will not be active later in the daylight hours.

Those times describe my routine, not a timetable every reader should follow. Your location, weather, and subjects may be different. Find a window that works for you and pay attention to when it stops working.

The camera does not have to remain in use for the whole outing. At a quiet cove I may park, shut down the engine, and watch and listen. Those pauses are part of the visit, and sometimes they reveal something I would have missed by continuing to drive.

Make waiting comfortable

If I expect to sit for a long time without a rail or other support, I bring a tripod and a small stool.
Comfort is part of the setup, rather than
something to consider only after it becomes a problem.

Think about the position you will hold while watching. Can you relax your arms between photographs? Can you reach the camera without twisting or lifting awkwardly? Is the support at a useful height?

You can adjust the outing to the day. A shorter session, a different position, or a return home can be a sensible choice when you are tired or uncomfortable. There is no photographic benefit in proving that you can endure an arrangement that hurts.

The goal is to leave yourself willing to photograph again. The number of hours outside is not the measure of the hobby's value.

A first outing with room to enjoy it

For a beginner, a refuge or nature center offers a useful starting point.

Keep the first visit simple. Choose one area, spend time looking, and learn to operate the camera there. Notice the sounds as well as the movement. Let the staff's suggestions give you a place to begin rather than a promise that an animal will appear.

If wildlife is quiet, enjoy the other features the site offers. Learn the route, identify a possible return time, or simply spend a morning outdoors. Familiarity gives the next visit a better starting point.

Your morning checklist

- Weather checked the night before and before departure.
- Sunrise and sunset checked for the destination.
- Batteries charged, with spares packed.
- Enough memory cards available.
- Clothing suited to the forecast and viewing position.
- Drinking water ready.
- Camera support and a seat included when useful.
- Access and local rules checked.
- Permission to shorten the visit if the day calls for it.

An enjoyable routine is one you can repeat. Keep improving the parts that make it easier to begin, stay comfortable, and look forward to another outing.

CHAPTER 08

Lessons From Decades Behind the Camera

The photograph is a bonus

I love being outdoors with nature. That is what makes an outing worthwhile for me. I have gone home many times without turning the camera on. It does not trouble me.

The older I get, the more I enjoy simply being outside. If I do not get a photograph I like, I hope for another day to try. That outlook leaves room for mornings when wildlife stays hidden or the light does not cooperate.

Wildlife photography remains exciting because I never know what I will encounter. I am also constantly learning something new about wildlife. Those are reasons to return that do not depend on bringing home a photograph every time.

You can decide what a good outing means for you. It might include making a picture, recognizing a bird, seeing a familiar animal behave differently, or spending an enjoyable hour in a place you like. Leave room for more than one kind of success.

Give wildlife space

I want beginners to photograph in a way they feel comfortable. On auto-tour roads, I see people get out when wildlife appears. I usually remain in the truck because I have had better success that way. Others may prefer a different approach where it is permitted and safe.

What worries me is someone approaching wildlife on foot and getting too close. That can be dangerous. No photograph is worth putting yourself or an animal in that position.

Learn the viewing rules for the place you visit and keep the required distance. If the animal changes its behavior because of your presence, give it more room. A vehicle can be a useful place to watch, but it does not remove the need for distance. National Park Service guidance recommends quiet observation, safe viewing distances, and using your camera's reach rather than approaching for a closer view. [2]

My own rule is to watch for tension. If the animal looks ready to leave, I stop advancing. I wait, and if it does not relax, I leave when I can safely do so. I do not want photographs that show wildlife frightened by me.

Let experience replace some of the effort

Over time, I have learned places where I can pull off safely, tree lines where birds perch, and seasons when certain wildlife appears. That knowledge helps me choose where to wait.

It did not come from one trip. I checked places often and returned throughout the year. Spending time outdoors helped me see patterns that were not obvious at first.

You can build that familiarity in a small area. Revisit a park or a view from your yard. Learn where the light falls and where animals pause. Watch what changes with the season. A place does not have to be new to offer something you have not noticed before.

This is one reason a familiar, accessible location can keep being rewarding. You bring more understanding to it each time, even if you carry less equipment.

Find people who make beginning easier

If you are wondering whether wildlife photography is for you, start in your yard or a local park.
Make friends with a photographer or look for a local photography club.

Another person may be able to help with the basic controls, suggest a nearby location, or explain a problem in a photograph. Ask about the specific thing you want to learn. You do not need to adopt someone else's whole approach.

Choose company that makes you feel welcome to learn. An outing should fit your pace and interests. There is room in this hobby for someone watching from a deck as well as someone who enjoys walking a trail.

Keep what matters to you

My backyard book includes a lesson about restraint when selecting photographs. I look at images small before examining details. I ask whether the bird looks natural, whether I can see the eye, and whether anything pulls attention away from it.

For me, a technically sharp photograph is only part of the result. Behavior, posture, light, and background matter. I often choose one stronger photograph from a group of similar frames rather than keeping every small variation.

As a reader, give yourself time to find what you value in your own pictures. Keep a photograph because it interests you, reminds you of an encounter, or shows progress you want to remember. Learning to choose is another part of learning to see.

A hobby with room to change

I looked forward to retirement because I wanted to photograph wildlife full-time, and I have been able to do that. It is enjoyable, and it is something I expect to keep finding ways to do.

That is why I planned the yard setup, learned places where I could work from my vehicle, and changed equipment as the weight became a problem. Each choice gave me a practical way to continue.

If your circumstances change, look at what is still possible. A shorter walk, a chair by a useful view, a lighter camera, or a familiar local spot may give you a way to keep going. You do not have to repeat the outings you made years ago for the hobby to remain yours.

If I can work the controls and buttons on my camera, I will be okay.

There is still something to watch. There is still something to learn. I hope there is another day to try.

KEEP GOING

A Simple Plan for Getting Started

You do not need to complete these steps on a schedule. Repeat any step that is useful and keep the outings short enough to enjoy.

1. Choose one easy place

Begin in your yard, a local park, or an accessible refuge or nature center. Check the site's website and ask staff where you can watch comfortably.

2. Get comfortable with your camera

Practice focusing, taking a photograph, and reviewing it. Keep the camera and lens manageable. If buying used equipment, ask a photographer or club for help.

3. Watch before trying to do everything

Notice movement, sounds, and places where animals pause. Learn even with the camera off. Keep a safe distance and use permitted viewing areas.

4. Make one improvement

Choose a clearer background, try a steadier support, or return in better light. Change one thing so you can notice its effect.

5. Return

A second or third visit may reveal more than a new destination. Notice what repeats. Find a pace that leaves you wanting another day outside.

KEEP GOING

Checklists to Keep Handy

Before leaving home

- Check weather and local sunrise and sunset times.
- Confirm access, road status, and site rules.
- Charge batteries and pack spares and memory cards.
- Bring drinking water and dress for the conditions.
- Choose one camera and lens you can handle comfortably.
- Include a support and seat when the location calls for them.

At a viewing location

- Keep the road clear and use permitted stopping places.
- Find a comfortable position before settling in.
- Look at the background from camera height.
- Notice the direction and quality of light.
- Watch and listen before deciding to move.
- Maintain required distances and avoid disturbing wildlife.

Working from a vehicle

- Arrange the camera for access while safely parked.
- Reduce loose items and rattles before starting the route.
- Use a stable support that suits your vehicle.
- Stop safely before handling the camera or photographing.
- Watch the animal's reaction before moving again.
- Keep an alternate angle optional; let the opportunity go if necessary.

At home

- Match the chair height to the camera support.
- Evaluate light and background before placing a perch.
- Leave birds clear approach and escape options.
- Keep feeding and water features clean and maintained.
- Allow time for a stable setup to become familiar.
- Stop when conditions or comfort no longer suit the session.

KEEP GOING

Sources and Further Reading

Visiting and watching responsibly

[1] U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Wildlife Viewing. Guidance on planning refuge visits, giving wildlife space, and using designated pullouts on wildlife drives.

https://www.fws.gov/story/wildlife-viewing

[2] National Park Service, How To Photograph Wildlife. Practical guidance on quiet observation, camera support, distance, and photographing from a vehicle.

https://home.nps.gov/articles/wwphotography.htm

Online guidance checked October 28, 2026. Follow the current instructions for the particular refuge, park, nature center, or other site you visit.

KEEP GOING

About Steve Creek

Steve Creek is a wildlife photographer based in Lavaca, Arkansas. He has photographed wildlife for more than thirty years and photographs the birds, mammals, and other wildlife of Arkansas and Oklahoma.

His regular places include his own yard, nearby back roads, and wildlife refuges, including Sequoyah National Wildlife Refuge in Oklahoma. He photographs from his truck, on foot where it suits the outing, and from a chair on his deck.

After looking forward to retirement as a chance to photograph wildlife full-time, he did exactly that. His approach continues to evolve around manageable equipment, familiar places, patience, and the pleasure of being outdoors.

His photographs and writing are at stevecreek.com. His photographs are also on Flickr under the name screek.