

ZOO Photography Rev II 07-18-91

1. Precautions:

- A. PAY ATTENTION! If you get too close to something, IT may get too close to you!
- B. DO NOT cross barriers to get close to the wire to shoot through it.
- C. The male lion WILL spray you if you get too close!
- D. The zoo staff could evict you if you don't follow the rules.
- E. DO NOT Feed the animals. Aside from the special diets that the animals are on, quite a few of the animals are susceptible to human diseases. You have germs on your hand, toss them some food, they eat it and get sick. NOT a good idea!

2. Equipment:

Keep in mind that a Zoo usually covers a fairly large area and the Santa Barbara, L.A., and San Diego Zoos are all on hillsides! All those goodies you stuff into your camera bag early in the morning are going to be there all day!

- A. Camera with assorted lenses, 100mm to 300 mm or zoom lens. A doubler is sometimes helpful.
- B. Tripod, or at the least, a monopod.
 - 1) Use it for stability but mainly to prefocus on one spot for a pacing animal. You can then relax a bit and wait for the subject to pass through the prefocused area.
- C. Cable release for use on the tripod.
- D. Flash for fill and catch lights.
- E. Gobo to block light from wire.
- F. Windex and cloth to clean glass.
- G. A range of film from 'normal' 100 ASA to 400 ASA. You may also want to take some slow speed film for static shots, and some high speed film for darker areas or twilight shooting.

3. Weather / time of day:

A. Overcast days are better than sunny days for many reasons:

- 1) On cooler days the animals are more active.
- 2) The overcast will not cause sharp, harsh shadows, and the bars won't cast shadows either. Something you have to watch out for on sunny days.
- 3) Mornings and evenings are better than mid-day because they're usually cooler, and these are the times when the animals would normally be active in the wild.

Mornings are good because they're cool, the animals have just been released from their sleeping enclosures and are out for their morning stretch. They also haven't had a whole day of TOURISTS!

Evenings are good for the cooler temperatures too. The animals are usually fed in the evenings so they start to anticipate the keepers. Some of the animals are fed where you can see them and this can make for interesting shots.

4. Obstacles

A. Wire and bars are everywhere! If wire isn't in front of the cage, bars are behind it, above it or all over the place!

For the wire or bars in front, get as close as you can, centering your lens in an opening, use the largest f/stop you've got, and hope for the best. It helps if the wire is painted black, and your best bet is if you can throw a shadow over the area of wire you're shooting through.

For wire/bars above the cage try to shoot tight enough so that it's not in the picture. This may require a higher than normal camera angle. Be careful on sunny days that the shadows from wire/bars aren't seen on the animal or the background.

For cages of wire, good luck! Get as tight as you can, hope for a cloud to knock out the shadows (you may only see the shadows if you squint, but they WILL be there in the sunlight) and move around the cage to try to get a solid background.

Flash through wire is possible. First, automatic won't work as the flash will see the wire. Second, move the flash far enough from the camera so that the flash doesn't illuminate the wire that you're trying to shoot through. And finally shoot close enough to the wire so that you don't cast a wire pattern onto the animal.

B. Glass is not that hard IF it's clean! Some glass is so dirty on the inside that it's not possible to get any kind of a shot. You may be able to clean the finger and nose prints on the outside and get a good shot. Most of the creatures behind glass are in dark, close areas. They will probably require a close up lens or a macro. Flash may also be necessary. Use flash off

camera, on manual, and far enough away that the flash doesn't hit the glass in front of the lens.

I use a rubber lens hood and snuggle right up to the glass on a tripod or monopod using the lenshood pressed against the glass to block out any reflections on the glass. If this isn't possible, I try to shoot in an area of the glass where there is something black reflected. Even if I have to put it there myself (like my own shadow).

Areas that are glassed in are usually lit by artificial light. This light will shift the color of your film. Be aware of this and use flash to provide daylight balance for your film.

C. Cages are a pain. I've seen some shots that were 'statements' by those against zoos where the cages were foremost. I try to get shots that show no un-natural surroundings. The way to get this kind of shot is to get as tight as possible, and move around until the background is natural. Backgrounds can be thrown out of focus if the animal isn't too close to it. Time of day will change the cage and background, too. You may get shadows to disguise the background for you.

5. Hints

A. Zoos are more crowded on the weekend and worse yet in the summer when the "kiddies are loose". If you can, try to hit the week days.

B. Know who gets fed and when. Animals are much more active at feeding time. The keepers may also have a set routine to show the animal off to the crowd which will gather. The crowd is the one drawback to this type of shooting.

At some Zoos that have tour busses, the driver throws food to the animals and you can get some action shots then. When you see that each bus going by does this, set yourself on the edge of the enclosure and pre-focus on the point where the action is.

Usually the action will take place in the same place each time. The routine happens at intervals (usually 10 to 15 minutes) and you can spot what's happening, setup after the bus leaves and be ready for the next bus ahead of the crowd that will gather. You can spend quite a bit of time "following the busses" for action shots.

C. When you first get to the zoo, check to see if there are any new births. Just like kittens and puppies, baby animals are almost all irresistible (I can do without the baby possums). There is always a lot more action when babies are present.

D. Time of day can be very important. You may want to get a certain animal backlit and that will take a certain sun position. You may want shadows in the foreground or background. There may be a certain time of the day when the sun is on a part of the exhibit that you want to emphasize. This usually takes some planning and knowledge of sun position throughout the day. You may have to scout out what you want one day, and come back the next.

E. Static Animals make for some of the most boring shots. Try to wait for the animal to DO something! Even a yawn can turn a dull shot into something interesting. It may even look like more than a yawn.

F. Get catch lights into the eyes. Nothing can ruin a shot faster than dead eyes, and nothing brings an animal to life like catch lights in the eyes. Catch lights can be achieved by having your back to the sun, using a strobe, or a reflector, though you may get into trouble waving a reflector around at the Zoo!

G. Noises..Stop next to almost any cage and listen to the 'people'. I've heard some of the most obnoxious noises from supposedly civilized people, trying to get a rise out of whatever is in the cage. I can only imagine the things that these poor animals hear day in and day out.

There IS a secret that I use that works most of the time. Quite a few people sneak food to the animals. Their favorites are salty snacks in crinkely packages. So, I usually carry a crinkely package, NO food, just the package! I had a racoon turn almost inside-out for me when he'd been ignoring everyone else. Is it cruel to tease the animals like that? I prefer to think of it as de-programming them. Maybe next time they hear a bag of goodies they won't be so quick to respond!

H. Motions: I saw this one demonstrated by a zoo keeper. The keeper got down on all fours and sort of hopped around just in and out of sight of the lion's cage. The male went into action stalking the keeper all around the cage. It got to the point where he stood up on his hind legs and pawed at the glass! This stopped the shooting because his feet were muddy and five or six swipes at the glass and you could barely see him through the streaks.

The keeper told us that they noticed that the big cats would pay close attention to small children at about the toddling stage. The cats were most interested in the ones that waddled more than walked.

I. Watch for special exhibits. Sometimes docents or keepers will bring an animal out into a public area for a closer look by the people. Talk to the keeper and find out how close you can get without upsetting the creature and without getting hurt. Ask the keeper to move around for the best lighting. This could be backlight (get some fill for catch lights) or some other light that brings out a coat, feathers, or but GET catch lights in the eyes!

J. Patterns: Some animals pace. They have a set pattern that they walk time after time. It drives a good keeper nuts because it's an indication of boredom and poor cage layout (they say). It does one thing, it lets you know exactly where the animal is going to be next. This gives you a chance to set up a tripod, get focused, and be ready for the next pass, or the next.

I spent almost half an hour taking pictures of a lesser panda. I got all set and made some shots. Then I added a strobe for catch lights and shot some more. I noticed that he was getting really close so I added an extension tube to my telephoto (because he was closer than I could focus normally) and reset my tripod. I checked the focus on each of about

five passes then shot for the next few passes. I'd never have had that kind of a shot if it had been a one pass deal.

K. While most of our zoos are for all sorts of 'animals' by far the largest and most exotic collections in most zoos are their botanical collections! I think the Santa Barbara zoo has at least three times the number of exotic plants as animals! Keep an eye out!