



The Easiest Way to Improve Your Wildlife Photos? Remember the Background!

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There are many reasons why wildlife photos can turn out poorly, but there's one that I see more than anything else. Is it bad focus? Not any more – subject detection has really minimized that problem. What about high ISO noise? Nope, a few clicks and the photo looks clean. The animal is looking in the wrong direction, or is obscured by a piece of vegetation? Well, we're getting close...

What if the wildlife looks great, but there's an unattractive background behind it? Yes, that's it! I see this problem frequently, and solving it is one of the easiest ways to radically improve the look of your wildlife photos. Let's demonstrate this with a few examples.



NIKON Z 9 + NIKKOR Z 400mm f/2.8 TC VR S @ 560mm, ISO 5600, 1/1000, f/4.5

The human brain is an amazing tool. Even so, it has some peculiarities that are good to know about. For example, our our hunter (and gatherer) brain tends to focus disproportionately on the main subject when we're taking pictures. Once we're looking at the subject, we tend to stop perceiving the space around it. Classic tunnel vision! The result is a photo with a bad background.

At that point, the only remedy is a judicious use of the delete key. Before it gets to that point, try to pay attention to the background and environment around your subject, not just the subject itself. Suppress the "hunter's brain" and make room for the artist's, or if you prefer, the photographer's brain.

All of the example photos in this article have one thing in common: I only had to make a small camera movement in order to change the background significantly. While that won't always be the case (oh how I wish I had wings of my own), you will usually have some control over how the background looks.



NIKON Z 9 + NIKKOR Z 600mm f/6.3 VR S @ 600mm, ISO 5600, 1/250, f/6.3



NIKON Z 9 + NIKKOR Z 600mm f/6.3 VR S @ 600mm, ISO 4500, 1/250, f/6.3

The photos above are what gave me the idea to write this article. I photographed the Superb Parrot at the Prague Zoo during my recent testing of the Nikon Z 600mm f/6.3 lens. In the first photo, vegetation at the back of the aviary was behind the parrot. The result is a natural-looking portrait in a seemingly wild setting. Meanwhile, the reddish background in the second photo may evoke the typical color of Australia, the continent where this species is native. However, rather than Mount Uluru, the sunlit facade of a nearby restaurant was the background this time.

In the next photos, you can admire the singing pose of one of Europe's smallest songbirds, the Eurasian Wren. The first image has the austere simplicity of a brown forest background, but such a great singing performance deserved more. I took a small step to

the side so that a beech tree with orange leaves would be between me and the Wren. This gave the bird's performance a much more colorful stage. Although in this case, technically speaking, it is the foreground rather than the background that I changed.



NIKON D500 + 500mm f/5.6 @ 500mm, ISO 640, 1/500, f/5.6



NIKON D500 + 500mm f/5.6 @ 500mm, ISO 800, 1/500, f/5.6

One of the target species I wanted to photograph in Sri Lanka was the Indian Pitta. A beautiful, colorful bird, but one that likes to spend its time in impenetrable thickets. I managed to find an individual that was regularly perching on one of the more exposed branches about three meters above the ground. The problem, as you might guess, was the background.

I stood up to my calves in murky water, trying to hide as much as possible while solving the problem of the unsightly background. The bird landed on a branch, started singing, and I tried to frame its head in one of the spots in the background. It wasn't entirely bad, but the bright spots on the right-hand side were too much for my taste. Because the background is so bright, it draws away from the subject.



*NIKON Z 9 + NIKKOR Z 180-600mm f/5.6-6.3 VR @ 600mm, ISO 2200,
1/320, f/6.3*

I tried to squeeze a little more into the bush I was standing next to. In the meantime, of course, the bird had flown away. I was standing in an awkward position, comfort was out of the question, but the background improved dramatically. The only thing missing was the Pitta. Luckily, she showed up after a while, and I finally got a shot I'm quite happy with. Perhaps the background could have been further improved in post-production, but I deliberately left it without any retouching.



*NIKON Z 9 + NIKKOR Z 180-600mm f/5.6-6.3 VR @ 600mm, ISO 5000,
1/320, f/6.3*

Next, an animal whose body is covered not with feathers but with scales. When I photographed this Oriental Garden Lizard in Sri Lanka, I already had this article in mind and wanted to see how many backgrounds I could capture. These are the variations I came up with.

First, a photo where the lizard was on the shady side of the trunk, with sunny vegetation in the background:



*NIKON Z 9 + NIKKOR Z 180-600mm f/5.6-6.3 VR @ 600mm, ISO 500,
1/200, f/6.3*

Next, a bit of a happy accident. I pressed the shutter right when someone in a green shirt walked around the tree behind the lizard. The tones behind the lizard's body are the person's shirt and arm:



*NIKON Z 9 + NIKKOR Z 180-600mm f/5.6-6.3 VR @ 600mm, ISO 640,
1/200, f/6.3*

The next moment, the lizard left the shadow and came out onto the bright part of the trunk. With small changes in camera position, I was able to get a desaturated green rice field as the background:



*NIKON Z 9 + NIKKOR Z 180-600mm f/5.6-6.3 VR @ 600mm, ISO 450,
1/1250, f/8.0*

Then a pile of logs, some of which were charred:



*NIKON Z 9 + NIKKOR Z 180-600mm f/5.6-6.3 VR @ 600mm, ISO 160,
1/200, f/10.0*

Next, a blue sky with a distant tree at the bottom:



*NIKON Z 9 + NIKKOR Z 180-600mm f/5.6-6.3 VR @ 600mm, ISO 500,
1/1250, f/9.0*

And lastly, for a "studio" look, the deep shadow of the neighboring shelter:



*NIKON Z 9 + NIKKOR Z 180-600mm f/5.6-6.3 VR @ 600mm, ISO 500,
1/1250, f/9.0*

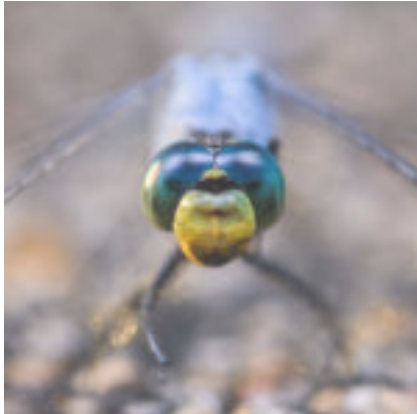
As you can see, each photo has a completely different color mood. Just pick the right one. For simplicity's sake, I've arranged four compositionally similar photos next to each other. Which one do you like best?



As I've shown you today, it is always very important to perceive the photo as a whole. Although our hunter's brain tries to focus primarily on the main subject, take a moment to engage your compositional brain to examine the entire photo. When you do, you'll see what you like and dislike about the background, and you will likely find a way to improve it!

Although I have used wildlife in the examples here, the same tips apply to human models or even product photography. As always, I would love to hear your experiences and opinions in the comments below the article. I wish you success in finding good subjects against pleasing backgrounds!

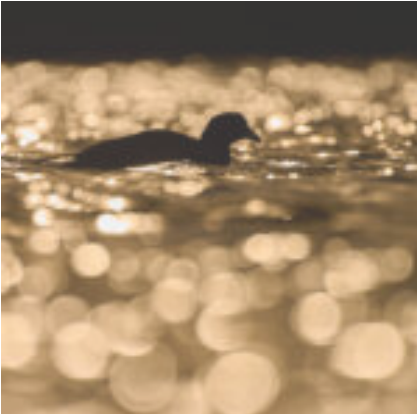
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