

knee-deep

in
waterfowl
photography

My trial-and-error methods can help you explore a range of intriguing photo blind setups.

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Getting eye-level with a pair of wood ducks makes for appealing wildlife photos.

My infatuation for photographing wildlife dates back to high school when I took my first portrait shot of a screech owl snoozing in a honeysuckle thicket. The owl was very cooperative and allowed me to walk within a couple of feet of him and take his photograph with a 110 Instamatic. At that time, I'd never heard of depth of field and didn't know a 110 wouldn't focus that close, but the experience stoked the fire that has burned within me ever since.

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I've come a long way since that high school portrait and my Instamatic camera. Today, my favorite weapon is a 500mm F4 lens and my passion for wildlife photography has grown from a hobby to a means that puts "bread on our table."

For a few years after the screech owl portrait, I successfully concentrated on photographing butterflies, spider webs, frogs, lizards, flowers and anything else that would allow me to approach with a 90mm macro or 70/210 zoom lens. Unfortunately, the waterfowl and other wildlife that I wanted to photograph were still pretty elusive. It didn't take me long to realize

that the old screech owl had been very kind to me. Most wildlife, especially waterfowl, do not take kindly to your walking right up to them. Even with a 300mm or 500mm lens, you have to be within a matter of feet, not yards, from your subject to photograph it.

When I finally had a few photos published, I decided it was time to move up to the big league and bought "big glass." I just knew that my new 300mm F2.8 would allow me to reach out and take full-frame photos of wood ducks and other wildlife at great distances.

For about a year, I attempted to take waterfowl photographs that someday would grace the cover of *Ducks Unlimited*. But it quickly became apparent that I had to get closer to my subjects. I soon discovered a well-placed, well-camouflaged blind increases the likelihood of getting those up-close shots.

I experimented with several blind concepts and spent hours watching wood ducks feed, swim, and preen on the other side of my favorite beaver dam. When I'd get my slides back, the "specks" (subjects) were unidentifiable. I blamed my blind, even though it had been there for several months. Then one day it hit me that the location of the blind was just as important as the blind itself.

I came to the conclusion that the wood ducks just liked being on the other side of the beaver dam better than where I was, so I moved my blind,



Set up your blind in a freshwater marsh with lily pads and you might get a shot of the beautiful purple gallinule.

camouflaged it with natural vegetation and, eureka, two weeks later I had wood ducks and great blue herons landing on top of my blind! That first weekend, I got more good photos than I had the entire previous year!

That was 10 years ago and I'm still at it. I've discovered that, while there are places where wildlife is approachable, most of us have to photograph true "wildlife" close to home. Now I spend a great deal of time scouting for locations. The ideal location has the three essential elements that make a successful photo blind: congregation of wildlife, substantial early sunlight, and approximately knee-deep water, which allows the lens to be placed closer to water level.

A prime example of a good location is the beaver dam where I have been photographing wood ducks for almost 10 years. My favorite "hole" is the third of four dams that join each other. Together, the dams are almost a mile long. My "hole" always has had more wood ducks in it than the rest of the dams put together. This dam also provides quality early morn-

ing light; and, it has a knee-deep water level.

As I explained earlier, blind placement is critical. Even though I now use a 500 mm lens, my subject must be 20 to 40 feet from me for full-frame portrait shots. The goal is to get as close to the eye level of my subject as possible. By set-

Successful photo blinds all share a congregation of wildlife, ample early sunlight, and approximately knee-deep water.

ting my blind in knee-deep water, I can sit on a folding chair with the water up to my waist and the camera lens will be about 12 inches above the water. Once I've found the ideal spot, I set the blind facing north to get early morning light on my subject as the sun rises in the east and maintain the light as it sets in the west.

Although blind placement is critical, the make-up of the blind itself also is very important. Basically, you have two options: buying blinds



PHOTO © JIM MAC WISSEIN, JR.

This partially submerged alligator probably never noticed the photographer hiding nearby in a blind made of native vegetation.

building a blind

Blinds don't have to be expensive or complex; they can be simple and cheap. What matters is that wildlife accept them.

I use CPVC pipe for the frame as it is lightweight, can be cut and repaired at the blind site and is flexible enough to bend in the wind. (I've had rigid blinds blow down in heavy winds.)

My blinds are approximately 42 inches wide and five feet tall. This gives one person ample room inside. I use a camouflaged material to match the local vegetation: for example, I use a tree bark pattern when there are trees and/or stumps and a cattail pattern when cattails and/or grasses are present.

Typically, you will be shooting with the sun to your back, so the blind material should be dark and thick enough to prevent shadows. (If shadows appear, you can add an additional piece of material behind you.) The material used can either be sewn to fit or tied to the frame. What's important is that you get it as tight as possible to the frame so that it will not flap in the wind. Flapping material can keep the wildlife from coming around the blind or scare subjects away if they are nearby when the wind picks up. Once the blind is set up, I use natural vegetation such as tree limbs, cattails and bushes to provide even more camouflage. You know you've got a good blind when wood ducks and great blue herons land on it while you're inside!

Shortly after hunting season, waterfowl can be "camera shy," so I often also add a phony camera lens made from a camouflaged coffee can to the blind. The waterfowl become accustomed to this large "camera lens" constantly sticking out of the blind; so, when I show up with my real lens, they aren't afraid. I also set up a perch or two, about 15 to 20 feet from the blind, for birds. After the blind is constructed and camouflaged, I generally leave the area for a week or two to let the wildlife become accustomed to it.



Use camouflaged material to match the local vegetation.



Place your blind in knee-deep water and sit on a folding chair.



When the water is too deep for a blind I use a poke boat, which is a cross between a canoe and a kayak.



or making them yourself. At present, I use both types for photographing wildlife. I tend to use my store-bought blinds on private property where I'm somewhat comfortable that they will not be stolen. I use my homemade blinds everywhere else.

I prefer to shoot from a blind in the early morning. I usually get in the blind 15 to 30 minutes before sunrise. This may seem early, but I'd rather be there waiting on my subjects to wake up and arrive at the blind site than to be late and scare the ducks away — not knowing if they will return that day or not. And you have to remember that you cannot start shooting until your subject is comfortable with its surroundings — this includes you and your blind. So, you generally have a one- to two-hour wait before you can start shooting.

When I set out for my blind, I take only the gear that's necessary; there is limited storage in knee-deep water. One necessary piece of equipment is a walking stick. In the early morning darkness, wading in old beaver dams can be tricky because of fallen trees, stump holes, etc., so I use the stick for balance. I also use it, from time to time, to discourage snakes. With my stick in hand, I transport my camera and lens attached to my tripod. I put a strong garbage bag over the camera and lens and tie the bag tightly; so, if I do fall and go



A blind set up on the coast might put you in position for a beautiful shot of resting white pelicans, left.

While waiting for the birds to show up, keep your eyes open for other species to photograph such as this red-eared slider, far left.

under, my gear will not take a complete bath.

Other gear I take includes a folding camp stool with a back; an extra camera body; a cable release; an incident meter; a 1.4 converter; an extension tube for close-ups of songbirds; a 55 mm micro lens; camo gloves and head net; a flashlight with a headband; insect repellent; a handkerchief; lens cleaner and tissue; a Swiss army knife/Leatherman tool; a rain poncho/garbage bags (just in case!); nylon string, a needle and dental floss; drinking water; and game calls. (I have called wood ducks into photo range that were preening on the other side of the beaver dam.) I also carry film, extra film and more film. I always carry at least 10 rolls. Remember, you can't go get more. I also toss in some batteries.

When the water is too deep for a blind, I use a poke boat, which is a cross between a canoe and a kayak. It weighs less than 30 pounds, floats in three inches of water and is very stable. My mounted tripod allows my camera and lens to be 12 to 18 inches above the water.

When I'm after ducks, I camo the boat, camera/lens and myself and back into natural vegetation and play a waiting game. During the spring and summer, in areas where fishermen are frequent visitors, some wading birds become tolerant of people in boats and are not as camera shy.

They can be approached with the boat set up and only partial camouflage. Purple gallinules, common moorhens, least bitterns, green herons, and great egrets generally are more approachable this time of year before their young fledge from the nest. On a few occasions, I've had purple gallinules come right up to me to check me out.

My methods of "getting close" to my subjects also allow me to closely observe their traits. You'll never appreciate what I'm saying until you've spent a morning just a few feet from a flock of wood ducks. Watching them feed, preen, fighting over territory and a new mate is something you'd have to see up close to

I carry film, extra film and more film. Remember, you can't go get more.

really appreciate. Sure, there are easier ways of capturing wildlife on film, but I prefer to "get my feet muddy" for unforgettable shots and memories. ★

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