



Zootography

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Photos by Ray Meibum



It's a cool morning in late September. The Zoo has just opened and you're one of the first to arrive. You walk up Historic Hill, then up to the top of Big Cat Country. You're standing ten feet away from a snow leopard and it's just you and the cat. There's a feeling that goes along with this: it's at once a feeling of exhilaration and a profound peacefulness deep down inside of you. By standing near this extraordinarily graceful, nearly extinct creature, you sense that you're connecting with a wildness and beauty of a different world—and you're really glad you brought your camera.

The Saint Louis Zoo offers a world of opportunity for photographers at every skill level. The exotic animals and friendly surroundings combine to make it a great place to try new gear, experiment with new techniques and build your wildlife photography skills. I've been very fortunate to spend many hours at our Zoo shooting pictures. I've been contributing to the Saint Louis Zoo's award-winning publication, *stlzoo* magazine, for over five years now. During my time volunteering at the Zoo, I have worked closely with the Keepers and have had the opportunity to get to know some of the animals a little better.

In this article, I'd like to share some of the things I've learned about zoo

photography and pass on some tips that will help you take your photos to next level.

Earlier is Better

When shooting pictures at the Zoo, earlier is better. The Zoo opens at 8 a.m. from Memorial Day to Labor Day and 9 a.m. the rest of the year. The light is much better early and there aren't as many guests so you'll have more room to move around—especially important if you use a tripod.

Take advantage of the quiet of the morning. When you're around the animals, move slowly and quietly. Relax and take your time. Enjoy the morning and let the animals feel comfortable with your presence. If you're not getting good shots, don't worry about it. Just hang out for a while and enjoy the great outdoors, or go grab some coffee and come back. Patience pays off: when you relax, the

animals will be more comfortable and you'll eventually get some good shots.

Anticipate the Shot

Some of the best Zoo pictures are those where the animal is looking into the camera, but it can be challenging to get the animal to look at you (jumping up and down and waving your arms doesn't work very well). Many times, when you first walk up to a habitat, its animal resident will look you over and acknowledge your presence. After their initial look, they'll likely ignore you and you may have missed your chance. So try to anticipate the set up before you walk up to an enclosure so that you'll be ready to capture that first look when you get there. If you do get this rare opportunity, be sure to focus on the eyes.

Watch Your Background

Most casual photographers give their attention to the subject of the photo—the

Ray's Photo Shoot Favorites

Mary Ann Lee Butterfly Wing

The Butterfly Wing in the Monsanto Insectarium is just plain fun. The light is good almost all day and you can get very close to the butterflies and moths that inhabit this space. It's hot and humid inside, so be aware that in the wintertime your lens may fog. If it does, just take a few minutes to let your camera warm up before you shoot.



1904 Flight Cage

The 1904 Flight Cage is another spot where you can get some very good close-up shots. Be sure to look for the snowy egrets and the colorful roseate spoonbills. There are lots of good vantage points, but remember to check your background—use foliage or water behind the subject and avoid including parts of the cage.



River's Edge

At River's Edge, you'll get some exercise as well as good photos. The black rhinos, cheetahs and Asian elephants are all residents of River's Edge. The best light is usually in the morning.





elephant or giraffe that's right in front of them—and pay little attention to what's behind the subject. This attention to detail is one of the skills that separate the amateur photographer from the pro. Look at a few wildlife photos and you'll find that the best photos are the ones where the background is boring and there's nothing to distract your eye from the subject. A background that contrasts with your subject can also add a lot of depth to your photos.

To get the best shot, try to simplify your background. Generally, dark backgrounds are better. Try to find a spot where the animal is in the light and the background is in the shade. Check for distractions in the background before you snap your picture. Move around to find a better angle. If you get serious about simplifying your backgrounds, your pictures will improve dramatically.

Tell A Story

Some of the most interesting photos are those that tell a story. There's a lot of ways to do this at the Zoo. Show animals interacting, like a mother with her young or two young animals

playing. Try to catch a kangaroo hopping in Red Rocks or a bird in flight at the 1904 World's Fair Flight Cage. Photograph a Keeper feeding the penguins or maybe catch sea lions in action at the National City Sea Lion Show. There's a lot going on at the Zoo and you can always check with an Information Desk to find out what's going on when you're there.

Practice Makes Perfect

Great pictures are made when photographers return to the same scene again and again. Each time they tweak a little here and there and get closer and closer to that perfect photo we're all looking for. So if you have an almost perfect picture of that tiger, study it. What will you differently to make it even better next time? How would it look from a slightly different angle? Maybe if you were at the same spot a little earlier in the day?

Know Your Camera

Last but not least, know your camera. Today's digital cameras are complex instruments and yours can probably do a lot more than you think it can. Be sure to take the time to familiarize yourself with the camera's controls and capabilities before going to the Zoo. User manuals can be daunting, but there are hands-on guides for most camera models that can make it much easier.

Hopefully these tips will help you improve your overall photography skills and get you motivated to shoot that perfect shot. Overall, the Zoo offers an ideal setting to practice your photography skills. So keep coming back and I'll see you at the Zoo!



Want to Learn Even More?

For more tips of the zoo photography trade, you can visit www.zootography.com. You can also take a class with Ray through the Zoo's Education Department. To learn more about this exciting class offering, visit www.stlzoo.org/education or call (314) 646-4544.