

**Wildlife Park  
and Zoo  
Photography  
Keys for Success**

*Prairie Dog, thru glass*

Photographing wild animals is one of the most rewarding areas of photography. It touches our emotions, is dynamic and fast moving, and when we allow ourselves to enter an animal's world, the experience changes our lives.

Wildlife parks and zoos are an excellent place to observe animal behaviors and master your camera functions. I often get asked about photographing at wildlife parks, and specifically how to take pictures through a fence or glass. This article provides the answers and will prepare you for success.

### In Preparation

- Join the wildlife park or zoo as a member.
  - ▮ You will be contributing to the care of the wildlife. And a healthy, happy animal makes for a more pleasing photograph.
  - ▮ You may get early access as a member.
  - ▮ You will not need to pay every time you visit; therefore, you will not mind being at the park only in the early morning and late afternoon on a given day for the best light.
- Review the park map in advance (generally available online) to know which outdoor habitats get early direct sun and which habitats get late afternoon direct sun.
- Visit mid-week when the park is less crowded. In addition, avoid holidays.
- Talk to the staff. Caregivers and docents are knowledgeable about the animals and enjoy sharing their knowledge.
- Bring only what you need. Try to be hands free. Use a backpack for your gear. While I am a firm believer in using a tripod, try to handhold your camera, as it will provide the most flexibility to move around in tight spaces. Consider using a sling camera strap to carry your camera/lenses to take the weight off your shoulders.
- One telephoto lens with an approximate focal range of 80-400 mm is typically sufficient for all outdoor habitats. A macro lens with a focal range of 60-100 mm is appropriate for indoor habitats. If you rent a lens, take some photos with it beforehand to be sure it functions properly, and you know how to operate it.
- Flash is needed for indoor habitats.
- Knee pads can be useful when there is an opportunity to kneel on the ground to be at the animal's eye level.



By Kathleen Reeder



Arizona Mountain Kingsnake, thru glass



*Mountain Lion, thru a fence*



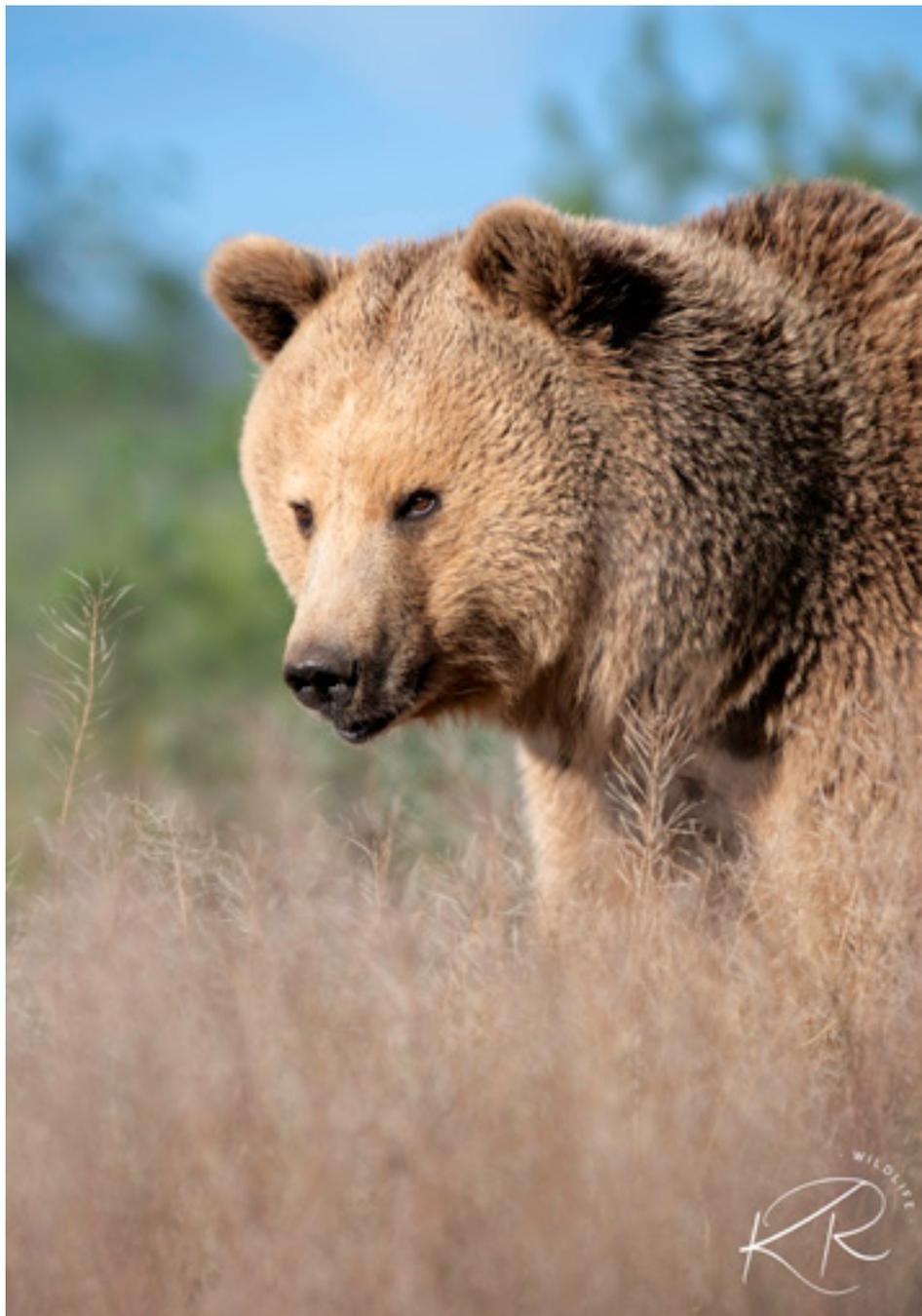
*Western Diamondback Rattlesnake, thru glass*

- Shoot in early morning or late afternoon because the light is warm, and the angle of light creates long shadows, depth and texture. The sun will catch the full face of the subject in sunlight and produce a beautiful catch light in the animal's eyes. Animals venture into the open just before dawn and just after dusk.
- Avoid midday light when the sun is high overhead. The colors and texture of an animal will appear washed out. An animal's eyes can be lost in the shadow of massive brows. In addition, animals often sleep during the heat of the day. Instead, use midday to scout the location.
- Shoot on a lightly overcast day. It provides even, non-directional light. Shoot when storms are brooding or after they have passed, because it stirs excitement in wildlife, resulting in some interesting behaviors.
- Position yourself in a spot that provides the most amount of natural vegetation in the composition, both foreground and background.
- Always be respectful of the animals by not making loud noises or banging on glass to get their attention.

### Shooting Through a Fence

The goal when shooting through a fence is to make the fence disappear in the photo. Follow these steps to be successful:

1. The animal must be away from the fence you are shooting through to make the fence disappear in photo. At least 6 feet away from the fence is a good guideline.
2. Place yourself and the lens as close as possible to the fence. There are usually two fences for public and animal safety: the one enclosing the animal's habitat and a second waist-high perimeter fence. Be at the perimeter fence.
3. Do your best to be at eye level to the animal. The farther away the animal is from you, the more it gives the illusion of being at eye level.
4. Use a wide aperture f-stop (f/4–f/6.3) to produce shallow depth of field.
5. Use at least 200 mm focal length. On average, 400 mm is about the right focal length for most habitats. Try vertical compositions when the focal length is not giving you a desirable composition.
6. Use a single/spot focus point. This will help the camera to not focus on the fence.
7. Set your shutter speed to freeze the animal's movement. A speed of 1/500s is generally a good guideline. When animals are running, increase shutter speed to 1/1000s.
8. Use continuous focus tracking.
9. Avoid shooting through areas of a fence that are in direct sun. You only need a 2-inch square



*Grizzly Bear, thru a fence*

- space in the shade, look for shade next to a post or under a tree branch.
10. Do not use flash. Flash will illuminate the fence in your photo.

**Sample Settings:** Aperture priority exposure mode, focal length 200-400 mm, f/4-f/6.3, ISO 800, at least 1/500s, single/spot focus point.

### Shooting Through Glass

The goal when shooting through glass is to not have reflections from the glass show up in your photo. For outdoor habitats with glass, the key is to put the lens hood directly onto the glass (slowly and carefully to not bump the glass). Avoid any stray light getting into the lens.



*Western Diamondback Rattlesnake (albino)—thru glass*



*Bengal Tiger—thru a fence*



*African Lion—thru a fence*

For indoor habitats behind glass, follow these steps to be successful:

1. Use a macro lens (60-100 mm) with a short minimum focus distance (less than 12 inches).
2. Use external flash for illuminating the subject and enabling higher f-stops. Pop up flash can work but is not ideal for this purpose.
3. Set shutter speed to synchronize with flash, either 1/200s or 1/250s depending on the camera model.
4. Use the external flash in-built bounce card or attach a diffuser to soften the light.
5. Place the lens hood directly on the glass.  
Position the flash to put light on the subject.
6. Take a picture and check the histogram. If the subject is too bright, increase the f-stop and/or ISO. If the subject is too dark, decrease the f-stop and/or ISO. Leave shutter speed set to synchronize with the flash.

Sample Settings for Indoor Habitats: Manual exposure mode, 60-100 mm macro lens, 1/200s or 1/250s, f/8 as a starting f-stop, ISO 400, single/spot focus point, external flash with diffuser.

### **Final Note**

No matter where you are on your journey, be patient and forgiving with yourself. Wildlife photography is not easy to master. What matters is that you discover animal behavior and continue to refine your technique to improve the outcome. More importantly, enjoy the personal connections; there is much to learn from the animal kingdom.

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*Marmoset—thru glass*

### **Kathleen Reeder**

Kathleen is the full-time owner of Kathleen Reeder Wildlife Photography. Her business goal is to give you the best wildlife photographic workshop experience possible through excellent instruction, personal guidance and great wildlife photo opportunities.

She leads photography workshops in the United States (Arizona, Alaska, Wyoming, Montana, and Minnesota), Canada, South Africa and Botswana. She frequently speaks about her wildlife photography techniques to photo clubs and provides instruction in her books, e-Training and through private instruction. She is also a Certified SmugMug Customizer, creating custom photo websites for photographers—a great way to share and sell your photographs.

Her business has received Trip Advisor's prestigious Traveler's Choice Award (previously called Certificate of Excellence) three years in a row with a 5 out of 5-STAR RATING.

Visit her website at: <https://kathleenreeder.com/>