

Wildlife Photography — Workbook

This workbook turns the course into reps you can run in your own backyard, local reserves, and on a safari. Each section maps to a course module: you will configure your long-lens setup, dial in animal-eye autofocus and exposure, practice ethical fieldcraft and behavior reading, and build a clean cull-and-edit routine. Fill the templates as you go so that by your third or fourth outing you have a repeatable, ethical, sharp-frame system.

Gear and the Long-Lens Setup

Lock in the telephoto, body, support, and field kit you will actually carry so your setup matches your subjects and distances.

Worksheet: My Wildlife Kit and Reach Plan

Fill this in for your specific gear and the subjects you want to shoot. Use it to spot reach gaps before you buy anything new.

Camera body and sensor (full-frame / APS-C / Micro Four Thirds)

Crop factor (1.0 / 1.5 / 1.6 / 2.0)

Telephoto lens and focal range

Effective reach (focal length x crop factor)

Teleconverter owned (none / 1.4x / 2x)

Primary support (handheld / monopod / tripod+gimbal / beanbag)

Image stabilization (IS / VR / OSS / IBIS) on?

Target subjects and typical distance (meters)

Reach gap: subjects too small at my current reach

Exercise: Reach-at-Distance Test

Photograph an object the size of your target animal (a stuffed toy, a decoy, a parked subject) at the distances you actually expect to shoot wildlife. Review how much of the frame it fills.

- At 4 to 8 meters (feeder bird distance), how well does your longest lens fill the frame?

- At 30 to 60 meters (meadow mammal distance), is the subject large enough or too small?

- What focal length or crop factor would you need to fill the frame at your hardest distance?

- Is your real limitation reach, light, or support, and what is the cheapest fix?

Checklist: Night-Before Pack and Care Check

- Every battery charged plus 2 to 4 spares (cold halves battery life)
- All memory cards formatted (fast UHS-II or CFexpress)
- Rain cover or plastic bag and elastic band in the bag
- Beanbag packed if shooting from a vehicle or hide
- Lens cloths, blower, and lens pen for dust and spray
- Muted, quiet clothing laid out (greens, browns, greys)
- Water, snacks, sun protection, and insect repellent
- Support (monopod / tripod+gimbal) chosen for the lens weight

Camera Settings for Wild Animals

Configure the autofocus, exposure, and metering you will reuse on every outing so settings are a fast decision, not a fumble.

Worksheet: My Wildlife Camera Configuration

Fill this in for your body, then save it to a custom mode slot (C1/U1/mode 1). Bring this sheet to your first three outings until the settings are memory.

Camera body and lens

AF mode (AF-C / AI Servo)

AF area default (Wide / Zone / Single)

Animal / Bird detection on?

Back-button focus: assigned button

Shutter button AF: disabled? (yes/no)

Drive mode and burst rate (fps)

Auto ISO ceiling (my tested noise limit)

Default exposure compensation for bright/dark subjects

Saved to custom mode slot (which one)

Exercise: Eye-AF vs Single-Point Drill

At a feeder or park, shoot a clean perched bird with animal-eye AF, then a bird half-hidden in a shrub. Switch to single-point on the eye for the cluttered shot. Review at 100 percent and count eye-sharp frames.

- Clean perch with eye-AF: how many eye-sharp frames out of the burst?

- Cluttered subject with eye-AF: did detection grab a branch instead of the eye?

- Cluttered subject with single-point on the eye: did the keeper rate improve?

- In what real situations will you preemptively switch to single-point?

Worksheet: Light and Exposure Decision Card

Record your go-to exposure approach for each light condition so you can react fast in the field. Refine the numbers with your own results.

Condition (golden hour / overcast / harsh midday / backlit / forest shade)

Metering mode (matrix / spot / center-weighted)

Exposure compensation to dial

Typical ISO range here

Aperture choice (wide for light / f/8 for depth)

White balance approach (RAW auto / shade / daylight)

Note on the catchlight: is the eye lit?

Checklist: Pre-Shoot Settings Check

- [] AF set to AF-C / AI Servo, not single-shot
- [] Animal or Bird detection enabled if supported
- [] Back-button focus confirmed (focus only on rear button)
- [] Shutter speed matched to the subject's motion (perched vs flight)
- [] Auto ISO ceiling set to my tested limit
- [] Exposure compensation considered for bright or dark subjects
- [] Shooting RAW for white-balance and recovery latitude
- [] Sports/wildlife configuration recalled from a custom mode slot

Fieldcraft, Ethics, and Animal Behavior

Build the ethical approach, behavior reading, and concealment habits that let you get close without disturbing wildlife.

Worksheet: Species Research Sheet

Complete this before an outing for one target species. Knowing the animal's rhythm and tells is what lets you anticipate the moment.

Target species (confirmed name)

Most active times of day / season

Diet and where it feeds, perches, or hunts

Pre-action tells (e.g. bird crouches before flight)

Legal / park minimum distance for this species

Protected status or nesting sensitivity (yes/no)

Best light and angle for this subject and location

Location and habitat where I expect to find it

Exercise: Disturbance-Signal Observation

Pick an approachable wild animal (park bird, squirrel, waterfowl). Observe only, through the lens, and practice reading whether your presence is changing its behavior. Back off the moment it shows alertness.

- What stress or alert signals did you see (head up, freeze, alarm call, moving away)?

- At what distance did the animal first notice or react to you?

- Did backing off and staying still let it relax and resume natural behavior?

- What approach (slow, low, indirect, zigzag) kept the animal most at ease?

Exercise: Behavior Anticipation Drill

Spend three short sessions watching one local species through the lens without forcing shots, learning its tells. On the fourth, use those tells to capture an action frame (flight, feeding, calling).

- Which pre-action tell proved most reliable for this species?

- Did pre-focusing and starting your burst on the tell catch the moment?

- How many action frames captured behavior versus a static stare?

- What will you watch for next time to anticipate even earlier?

Checklist: Ethical Fieldcraft Conduct

- Used the lens, not my feet, to close distance
- Approached slowly, low, and indirectly, never straight at the animal
- Stopped and backed off at the first sign of stress or alertness
- Wore muted, quiet clothing and avoided sudden movement
- Did not bait, feed, use call playback, or disturb nests/dens/young
- Obeyed all park rules and legal minimum distances
- Left no trace and prioritized the animal's welfare over the shot

Safari, Workflow, and Building a Portfolio

Plan a game drive, then run the cull-edit-curate routine that turns thousands of frames into an honest, natural portfolio.

Worksheet: Safari / Game-Drive Plan

Complete this before a trip or a big outing so your vehicle setup and shot priorities are ready before the first sighting.

Destination / park and target species

Lens and second body for the drive

Beanbag and dust-protection plan confirmed

Batteries and cards budgeted for the day

Brief for the guide (light behind us, good angle)

Shutter approach: vehicle still vs moving

Priority behaviors / moments to capture

Ethics reminders (distance, no harassment, share sightings)

Exercise: Two-Pass Cull Timed Run

After an outing, run the course's two-pass cull and time yourself. The goal is speed without second-guessing, confirming the eye is sharp at 100 percent.

- Total frames shot and minutes spent on pass one (rejects)?

- How many survivors remained, and how many made the final shortlist?

- Does your shortlist cover portraits, behavior, and a wider habitat frame?

- Where did you hesitate, and how will you speed that up next time?

Worksheet: Natural Edit Recipe

Record the develop steps you apply for an honest, true-to-life wildlife look, so your edits stay consistent and credible.

Lighting condition (golden hour / overcast / shade)

White balance approach (Kelvin or as-shot)

Highlight recovery amount (protect bright fur/feathers)

Shadow lift amount (reveal dark detail believably)

Noise reduction tool and amount (Denoise / PureRAW / Topaz)

Eye and detail sharpening amount

Default crop / room left in the look direction

Checklist: Portfolio and Responsible-Sharing Check

- Curated to my strongest 15 to 25 images, weakest cut
- Each frame has a sharp, catchlit eye and clean background
- Set shows variety: portraits, action, behavior, habitat context
- Species correctly identified (field guide / Merlin / iNaturalist)
- Captive, baited, or staged conditions honestly disclosed
- Precise locations of sensitive/rare species withheld
- Caption, credit, and disclosure embedded in metadata
- One weakest image flagged to replace on the next outing

Your Action Plan

1. Fill the kit and reach plan, run the reach-at-distance test, and identify your real limitation (reach, light, or support).
2. Build your wildlife camera configuration, save it to a custom mode slot, and confirm back-button focus works.
3. Run the eye-AF versus single-point drill at a feeder and learn what clutter defeats detection.
4. Complete a species research sheet for one local target before your next outing.
5. Practice the disturbance-signal observation: approach ethically and back off at the first sign of stress.
6. Run the behavior anticipation drill across several sessions until you can predict and capture an action frame.
7. Set up a backyard feeder with a clean perch, or visit a local hide, and shoot a full session.
8. Plan and shoot a game drive or big outing using the safari plan and a beanbag-steadied long lens.
9. Run a timed two-pass cull on that session and narrow to your strongest keepers.
10. Apply the natural edit recipe, then curate, caption honestly, and share a focused gallery of 15 to 25 images.

