

Emily Sexson -Education Specialist 1/9/17 – Photo Tips for the Zoo

You know those people who can never seem to put their phone down? Always have it out for one reason or another? I have to admit, I'm one of those people. Except typically, the only reason I ever have my phone out, besides the occasional phone call or text, is to take photos. I'm constantly taking pictures. If it's not with the camera on my phone, it's with my film or digital cameras. I have over 5,000 images on my phone alone and I can't even tell you how many I have in digital storage on both my work and home computers. Out of these thousands upon thousands of images, 95% of them are of animals.

In my current position as an Education Specialist at the zoo, I have been given the opportunity to combine two of my passions; photography and wildlife. When I received my first digital camera in high school I headed straight to the zoo. I couldn't think of a better place for photography. Today, many years have passed, but my instinct to head to the zoo for great photos has not waned. I've seen enough photographers out and about in the zoo, cameras ready, shutters in action, to know I'm not alone in this line of thinking. If you're not already taking advantage of the limitless photography opportunities at the zoo, I thought I'd share some tips and tricks that I have for capturing unique images in such a unique setting.

First and foremost, follow the zoo's safety guidelines. Respect boundaries and do not harass the animals to get a shot. This is not only for your safety, but for the safety of the animals as well. Harassing an animal in any way is typically the first way to lose an opportunity for a closer or better shot. Use a calm, quiet approach when photographing animals; they don't like being accosted any more than we do. While being a staff member can grant me access to restricted areas of the zoo, this is on special occasions and some of the best photos I've taken are actually from the public's viewpoint. There is no photo worth risking your or an animal's life for.

Another tip, know your subject. Where is this animal native to? Are they active during the day

or night? Will the weather prevent them from wanting to be outside? How quickly do they move, in fact how do they move at all? The more knowledge you have, the better prepared you will be, and the more chances you will have to get a great shot. For example, if I really wanted to capture a great image of the snow leopard, I wouldn't show up at noon in the middle of summer. I'd visit during the cooler months or during the morning or evening when temperatures are cooler and this particular cat is more likely to be out in their habitat.

I often joke that when I walk through the zoo and don't have my camera on me, the animals are doing backflips and other incredible feats, in the best lighting, and best positions, but when I have my camera in hand, no such luck. In reality, I'm just not practicing enough patience. A big part of photographing any live subject, be it African lion or two year old human, is patience. Silence, and patience, with camera in hand has rewarded me with some of my favorite images, not only at the zoo, but in any outdoor setting where there's a potential to photograph wildlife. I've spent a significant chunk of time in my life nestled into a spot just waiting for the right moment to occur, for the animal I'm hoping to capture to feel secure enough to hop or fly just a few feet closer. Time incredibly well spent and oh so rewarding.

Those are my three best tips for photography at the zoo; respect for the grounds and animals, know your subject, and patience. You'll notice I didn't include run out and buy the most top of the line camera you can find. While great equipment never hurts, you can get great photos with even the most simple of cameras. Anyone visiting Lee Richardson Zoo has the opportunity to photograph some of the most incredible and incredibly rare species. Once you have your image, share it! A great way to help preserve wildlife or help threatened species is by simply spreading awareness. By sharing your experience and knowledge, you help bring much needed attention to wildlife and wild places around the world that need our help. Next time you visit the zoo, pull out your camera, and capture a memory.