



A marbled godwit forages in the shallow water of low tide at Elkhorn Slough, Moss Landing, California. Nikon D300, Nikkor 200-400mm f/4.

GETTING LOW

by Sean Crane

There are many ways to improve your wildlife photography, and most involve time and practice. There is one way, however, that you can dramatically and immediately improve many of your shots. And you can do it with very little effort.

Just get down on the ground.

All the way down.

I'm not talking about crouching or getting on your knees. That, of course, helps too, to get on eye level with many creatures, but to truly up your game, go belly down on the dirt, grass, ice, sand, or whatever other terra firma nature sends your way. It can take a little more time... kind of. It can be uncomfortable... sort of. You can get dirty... sometimes. You can get great shots... almost always.

The obvious benefit here is the angle of view. An eye level portrait of an animal is almost always preferable to one where you are looking down. This isn't to say that shooting from above doesn't have its place. It most certainly does and there are many very creative wildlife images taken from on high. But for

RIGHT: Nine-banded armadillo, Merritt Island, Florida. Getting the camera on the ground distances the background for subject isolation.

BELOW RIGHT: Polar Bear, Seal River, Manitoba, Canada. With the camera resting on the ice, an eye to eye intimacy is achieved. BELOW

LEFT: Mud turtle, Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge, Delaware. Smaller animals are especially good subjects for ground level portraits.

ARMADILLO: Nikon D300, Nikkor 200-400 f/4; POLAR BEAR: Nikon D300, Nikkor 200-400 f/4; TURTLE: Nikon D300, Nikkor 200-400 f/4



intimacy, it's hard to beat the eye-to-eye contact that can be achieved when man and beast are on the same level. This becomes even more evident with small creatures like turtles, frogs, grounded birds, and smaller mammals. It's one of the reasons that I much preferred my trip to Uganda than my trip to Tanzania. In Uganda I was in several national parks that allow walking safaris. In northern Tanzania, I was always shooting out of the pop-top of a standard safari vehicle. Almost all my shots from Tanzania are from that same level of view (the same level of view that everyone else on safari gets). Were I to go back to Tanzania, I would probably try a few of the parks in the southern part of the country like Selous and Ruaha that allow open, lower-to-the-ground vehicles and game walks. I'd still recommend the great parks of the north like the incomparable Serengeti, but I'd try to plan for a few opportunities that mix it up.

I had a similar angle of view dilemma when planning my trip to photograph polar bears. The majority of the trips in the bear Mecca of Churchill, Manitoba, Canada are reliant upon tundra buggies — large, converted vehicles that place the photographer some 15 feet above the action. I didn't want the same snapshots of bears that everyone else on these trips gets. I wanted to get on the bear's level. A little research led me to Churchill Wild and Seal River Lodge, which, as far as I can tell, offers the only walking polar bear safaris in Canada. You'll pay more than you would for the average tundra buggy tour, but it is well worth it if you want your photos to



transcend the norm. Plus, there's nothing quite like the thrill of being on the ground with one of earth's most viscous predators a scant stone's throw away.

Once you start practicing ground level shots, you'll notice another benefit — depth of field — or more accurately, the lack thereof. Try shooting a turtle on grass from four feet off the ground. You'll see that grass clearly, and distractingly, in-focus beneath the turtle. But take that same photo with the camera placed on the ground, and the grass fades away, turning into a creamy blur of beautiful bokeh. The turtle now pops into focus and the distracting el-

ements are eliminated. This happens because the background is now further from the subject — no longer the grass beneath the turtle, but now whatever is behind the turtle, be it distant trees, the sky or more out-of-focus grass. If the ground between you and the turtle is uneven or covered in grass or weeds, the photo will be even better, with a nice out of focus foreground beneath the turtle.

With wide-angle lenses, you won't get as much blur and subject isolation as you will with telephoto lenses, but you will get views of the world usually reserved for ants and worms — and

ants and worms enjoy a pretty dramatic view of the world. Use the distortion created by wider angles to your advantage, especially when you can get close to your subject. I love shooting animals like seals head on from the ground, exaggerating the scale and proportion of their bodies and effectively capturing the environment in which they live.

Shooting from the ground is sometimes easier said than done. It is often wet, cold, or covered in the aforementioned ants. While photographing bearded piglets in Borneo, I was so excited to get down on the ground to get the shot that I failed to notice the army

of fire ants that inevitably found their way beneath my untucked tee shirt. Needless to say, it's always a good idea to look around before getting down. Carrying a towel is also a good idea, especially when shooting on a beach, or other sandy area. And speaking of beaches, always be aware of the waves and rising tide if you're shooting at the shoreline.

Most modern D-SLRs have some sort of live view function which can also be helpful when the ground doesn't allow you to comfortably get your eye to the viewfinder. Right angle finders are also useful, allowing you to work from your knees while the camera is on the ground. These can sometimes be difficult to work with, however, and ultimately I prefer working belly down on the ground whenever possible — and the right angle finder rarely comes out of my bag.

Another consideration when shooting from the ground is the use of

flash. An on-camera flash can prove deadly by blowing out foreground elements like stray blades of grass. If possible, move the flash off the camera and try to raise it above anything in the foreground that might be distracting. I usually don't raise the flash too high off the ground, but just enough so that the light has a clear shot toward my subject.

Even if you don't shoot wildlife, the same rules apply — whether you're shooting your two-year old, your dog, a soccer ball on the ground, or whatever else you care to freeze in 1/125th of a second of time. This isn't to say that you should take all your photos from the ground, but mix it up every now and again and avoid photographing everything from the height your eyes are from the ground. Even everyday subjects will be transformed into unusual and creative expressions and the simple task of getting low could be the difference between a mundane snapshot and an award-winning image.



ABOVE: *Juvenile Elephant Seal, central California Coast. A wide angle view from ground level can help to depict environment.* **RIGHT:** *Black-tailed jackrabbit, Anza-Borrego State Park, California. Sometimes the tricky part is getting on the ground before the animal darts off.*

SEAL: Nikon D700, Nikkor 17-35 f/2.8. JACKRABBIT: Nikon D300, Nikkor 200-400 f/4

For more of Sean Crane's images, go to www.seancrane.com.