

SPOTLIGHTING

Photograph seldom-seen creatures by venturing out after dark

Text and photos by Sean Crane



Most wildlife photographers will tell you that the best time to photograph animals is in the golden light of dawn or dusk. Of course, this doesn't do you any good if you're after a kinkajou — or a bandicoot, for that matter — or any of the many creatures that come out only after the sun goes in. Forget about most tree frogs, owls, or possums. If you want to photograph these night stalkers, strap on a good headlamp and head out for an evening of spotlighting.

With proper technique and a little patience, finding wildlife at night can be a lot eas-

ier than you might think. With a headlamp or flashlight held near eye level, a quick scan of your environment can reveal two flashes of light staring back at you. What you're seeing is the tapetum lucidum of a nocturnal animal, a reflective layer in the eye that improves vision in low light conditions. This eye shine can betray even the most secretive beast — at least for an instant. If the animal disappears before you can get the shot, try turning your flash off and waiting for a few minutes. Most animals will return to their routine if undisturbed.

Spotlighting is considerably easier if you have a partner.



OPENING SPREAD: *Red Eye Tree Frog, Tortuguero National Park, Costa Rica. ABOVE: Spectral Tarsiers, Tangkoko National Park, Sulawesi, Indonesia. LEFT: Kinkajou, Pavones, Costa Rica.*

TREE FROG: Nikon D200, Nikkor 70-200 f/2.8, 2 SB-800 Flash Units. TARSIERS: Nikon D300, Nikkor 200-400 f/4, SB-900 Flash. KINKAJOU: Nikon D200, Nikkor 70-200 f/2.8, SB-800 Flash.

That way you have someone to illuminate your subject while you concentrate on focusing and shooting. Going it alone isn't impossible, but you'll have to position a headlamp on the top of your head at just the right angle so that it's pointing at exactly what you're seeing when you look through the viewfinder. This can take quite a bit of trial and error. Not good if you've encountered an animal that doesn't like to sit and pose. Likewise, a lack of suf-

ficient illumination from your flashlight can cause auto focus to search without ever finding focus. If this is the case, you'll need to switch to manual focus to get the shot. On the plus side, because flash freezes the action, a tripod isn't necessary, unless to make it easier to handle very large lenses.

The eye shine that you see with your flashlight will also be recorded in your images unless you're able to move very close to the ani-

mal, or you're able to move your flash off your camera via a sync cord or remote sensor. Depending on the animal, eye shine can be any color, including yellow, green, pink or blue. At times, it can create an interesting photographic effect — the demonic glare — but more often than not it's best to eliminate eye shine in camera, or, when that's not possible, in any image-editing program.

Most reptiles and amphib-



ABOVE: Oriental Scops Owls, Madhya Pradesh, India. LEFT: Polka Dot Tree Frog, Madidi National Park, Bolivia. RIGHT: Maned Wolf, Hyacinth Valley, Piaui State, Brazil.

OWLS: Nikon D300, Nikkor 200-400 f/4, SB-900 Flash. FROG: Nikon D300, Nikkor 70-200 f/2.8, Two SB-800 Flash Unites, Canon 500d Close Up Lens Filter. WOLF: Nikon D700, Nikkor 17-35 f/2.8, Two SB-900 Flash Units.

ians don't exhibit any eye shine at all. This can make them more difficult to spot. For frogs, you'll have to rely on your ears as much as your eyes. Once found, however, frogs can be very cooperative. As long as you approach slowly, they often allow you to get within a couple of feet, and in some cases, they continue croaking as if you weren't there. Two flash units attached to a bracket are recommended in such situations: one flash directly above the camera and the other to either side. This reduces harsh shadows, creating a more pleasant effect. When shooting at close range, it is also advisable to use a diffuser cap over your flash to soften the light. You'll have the luxury of using low ISO settings or films and you'll also be able to increase depth of field by using small apertures. Conversely, for animals very far away, you'll want to open up the aperture and use a high ISO

setting to extend your flash's range as far as possible.

A dual flash setup can also be used to eliminate shadows cast on mammals, but be aware of branches and twigs in the foreground that can get blown out by the flash. In thick-forest situations, it's best to use one flash close to the camera to tunnel the light directly to your subject without hitting any of these distracting elements.

In addition to being aware of what environmental elements to avoid, you should also be aware of what to include. For close-range subjects, position yourself so that foliage is directly behind and close to the animal. The light from your flash and flashlight will illuminate the background, as well as the animal, and give a sense of place. If, on the other hand, you prefer to isolate the animal against a black backdrop, be sure that background ele-

ments are further away and out of your flash's range.

As always, be respectful of wildlife. Once you get the shot, move on. Too much flash can temporarily blind an animal making it susceptible to predators. Also be aware that some national parks and wildlife refuges have restrictions on spotlighting due to the sensitivity of resident night dwellers. The good news is you don't have to travel far or go to any special reserve to find good subjects. Nocturnal wildlife is all around us, including owls that live in the hollows of suburban trees, and chirping frogs that can be found seasonally in any backyard pond. As for that kinkajou and bandicoot, you'll have to travel considerably further.

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





LEFT: *Night monkey, Pampas region, Bolivia. BOTTOM: Bush Baby (Galago), Laikipia, Kenya.*

MONKEY: Nikon D300, Nikkor 70-200 f/2.8, SB-800 Flash Unit. BUSH BABY: Nikon D300, Nikkor 200-400 f/4, SB-900 Flash Unit.

RIGHT: *Short-nosed echidna, Flinders Ranges National Park, Kangaroo Island, Australia. BELOW: Crab-eating foxes, Pantanal, Brazil.*

ECHIDNA: Nikon D200, Nikkor 17-35 f/2.8, SB-800 Flash Unit. FOX: Nikon D700, Nikkor 70-200 f/2.8, SB-900 Flash Unit.

