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Mother's love

A Day at the Zoo

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If you don't have the time, money or inclination to go on a photographic safari take your spouse, children and grandparents to the zoo—you'll see lions, tigers and bears. Zoos are a great place to photograph exotic animals and birds and

can offer wonderful opportunities to introduce your children to nature, geography, ecology and the preservation of endangered wildlife and of course photography. Most zoos are user-friendly with accommodations for strollers and wheelchairs and have plenty of rest areas, snack bars and family restaurants.

In Advance

If possible look up the zoo on the Internet, check the hours of operation and see if there are any special events planned—if so, you may want to take advantage of the activities or you may decide to pick a less active day. Look for a list of lecture schedules and feeding times as these create a great deal of activities. Also look for discount coupons.

Light

Before you go there are a few things to consider. If possible, pick an overcast day, which should provide uniform lighting on the subject. Overcast days are great for any photography that doesn't



Elephant play time

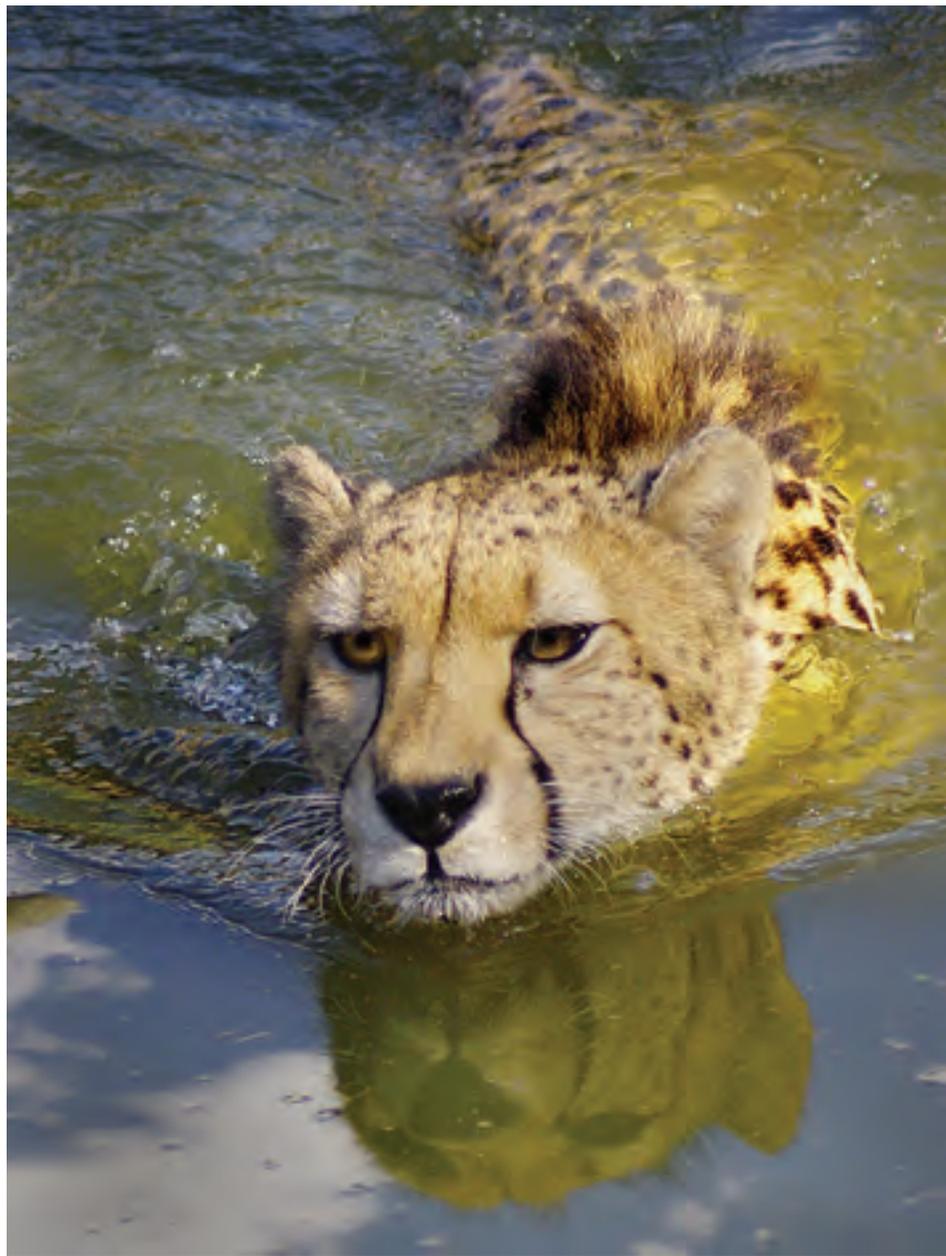


Boat-billed Heron

include the sky—it's like your subject is in giant lightbox. An experienced photographer once told me, "If you can see the shadow of your hand on the ground it's not a good day to photograph flowers." This idea also applies when photographing



Pygmy Hippopotamus

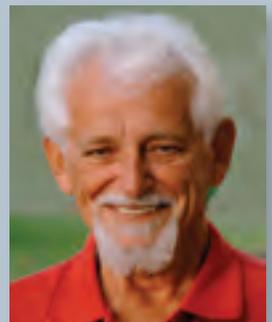


Swimming Cheetah

birds and animals. Choose a day with moderate temperatures as most animals hide or turn their backs from the bright sun or curl up to keep warm if it's too cold. Try arriving early—zoos hide food in the open outdoor habitat areas, which encourages animals to come out and be active, later in the day animals tend to be inactive or are napping.

Equipment

Any camera will do as I have seen some great photos recently from point and shoot cameras and an excellent memorable photo taken from a cell phone camera, but remember the more pixels the better especially if severe cropping is going to be required. A tripod may not be a necessity because for digital cameras and lenses with vibration reduction, handholding works well. A telephoto zoom is excellent for outside



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White Tiger

enclosures and bird portraits if the zoo has a free flight aviary. While at the zoo keep the camera set at shutter priority with a shutter speed of 180th of a second with a ISO of 400 and with a 90/300mm zoom lens and an external diffused flash unit, the reason for the shutter speed of 180 is that this is the maximum shutter speed that will link with my flash. Use auto focus and spot metering and basically use the camera as if it were a point and shoot, this enables you to concentrate on the subject and give very little thought to the camera or the settings. As most subjects at the zoo are in constant motion the difference between getting a great shot or a mediocre shot, is it takes only a fraction of a second to catch a certain gesture, action, or look, so don't worry about the camera (*Keep Your Eye On The Subject*). All of the photos in this article were hand held and taken between 9:30 AM and 2:00 PM.

Arrival

When you arrive get a map of the zoo and a list of events scheduled for that day...like zoo shows, keeper talks and a feeding schedules. Take a few minutes to study the map and events list—many times the attendants will bring the animals or birds out within arms length, which is great for close-ups. You may even see a bird of pray raptor fly over.

Many zoos have a free flight bird aviary that allows you to get right in with the birds—remember to try to keep the background simple



Gray beard,
Chimpanzee



Eagle eyes



Rainbow Lorikeet

and out of focus with a wide aperture. Be patient: quick movements will frighten or distract the birds. Petting and aquatic hands-on areas are a great opportunity to shoot candid photographs of children. Pick out the areas that will interest you (and your family); most modern zoos are extremely large and you may not be able to see it in one day. Zoo volunteers can be very helpful with all kind of information about specific animals, newborns etc. I discovered all female orangutans are on birth control pills so they can control who has the babies and when they are born. In addition some zoos offer behind the scenes special events that allow you to get close to the animals, while some zoos offer safari and or jungle boat trips. All of the images in this article were taken at Lowry Park Zoo in Tampa, Florida.

Photographing

In addition to the animals keep an eye out for unusual plants and flowers. Many zoos have designated theme areas such as African, Asian, and Australian, which are decorated with plants, flowers and unusual buildings that can be quite interesting and picturesque. Try to photograph the subject at eye level as most outdoor enclosures are lower and try to catch the animals head looking up as the eyes are the most important features. Get as close as possible and isolate your subject or keep it to a small group of about three. Indoor aquariums can be great locations for silhouette



Rango

images using a wide-angle lens wide open at about a 60th of a second.

Whether you are an amateur or advanced photographer, a zoo offers a wide variety of photographic opportunities in a short amount of time. Keep it simple, keep it fun. Remember don't think about the camera—set it and forget it. About 95% of all the images I shoot are grab shots. The Photographic Society of America (PSA) states that images taken at the zoo may be entered in the nature competitions as long as *the hand of man* is not visible; note they are not eligible in the Wildlife section. Don't be too critical of your photos—the nice thing about photography is that you never master it you just get better and better with practice. ■

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