

Tips for Photographers, Birders, and Wildlife Viewers on Guided Trips



Photo by Terry Johnson.

If you are spending hundreds or thousands of dollars for a guided photography, birding, or wildlife viewing trip you no doubt want to get the most for your money. Whether you are on a routine professional photography assignment, or a once-in-a-lifetime vacation, you can get the best results by following a few simple tips. Here's a twelve-step plan for guided wildlife viewing and photography.

1. **Adopt realistic expectations.** National Geographic and Animal Planet create the perception that wildlife is easily approached and dramatic shots are readily obtained. Some guide companies encourage that belief with their advertising materials. Keep in mind that the photos and footage you see in the magazines and on TV required months or years to acquire. Usually it is unrealistic to expect the same results on a day trip or even over several days. The more time you spend on site, the better your chances of getting the truly memorable views and marketable pictures.
2. **Do your homework.** Know where you are going and what to look for to photograph. Re-read all the safety and equipment information your outfitter or tour operator sends to you. Ask questions before your trip starts—your guide would rather answer questions on the phone or by email than see you come unprepared or poorly equipped.



Harbor seals and pup on an ice floe in Prince William Sound. Photo by Dave Partee.

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3. **Bring adequate field gear.** You don't have to look like an L.L. Bean catalog model, but bring good quality clothing, boots, raingear, and whatever else the local conditions dictate. It's false economy to buy cheap field gear and risk spoiling an expensive trip—and possibly priceless photo opportunities. In Alaska waterproof boots usually are a necessity. Include a good rucksack with capacity for your gear plus extra clothing, lunch, drinking water, and other necessities. If your trip puts you on the water, take a waterproof rucksack or a dry-bag insert and rain/spray covers for cameras.



Recreational photographers enjoy the view of walrus at Round Island. Photo by Terry Johnson.

4. **Start your physical conditioning early.** A wildlife photography expedition is almost certain to involve hiking, climbing, wading, or other activities that may be outside your normal daily routine. Well before the trip, start walking a few miles each day, at least part of that distance up stairs or steep trails. Carry a pack containing weight at least equal to the photo gear you plan to take into the field. Many a promising trip has been curtailed or scaled down because clients arrived seriously out of condition and unable to get to the best photographic sites. If you have a limiting health or physical condition, alert your tour operators ahead of time so that they can plan the safest, most comfortable, and most productive trip possible.

5. **Clearly express your objectives and expectations.** If you only want great shots of certain kinds of animals or birds, tell your guide so that they can concentrate on getting you the shots you want and skip peripheral attractions.
6. The previous point notwithstanding, **broaden your perspective** and examine all the other mammals, birds, plants, people, and landscapes in the region you will visit. Consider this: the very bear or walrus you are stalking may have been snapped dozens of times before and it's unlikely that you will get a distinctively different image. Sure, you need shots of those key species for your portfolio, presentation, or assignment, and by all means get them, but also take the opportunity to shoot subjects that may not have received so much attention.
7. **Work with the weather.** Many photographers think that if the sky isn't sunny, the weather is "bad." In Alaska you're sure to spend at least part of your trip in the rain, and you may be lucky if it's just falling and not blowing horizontally into your face and lenses. Gray, wet, even stormy weather provides not only an honest context for your wildlife images, but also lends itself to dramatic compositions. Come prepared with appropriate covers for your equipment and a strategy for working in inclement conditions. Remember: "There's no bad weather, only bad equipment."
8. **Listen to your guide.** You may have photographed wildlife all over the world but you probably haven't been to this particular location before, so consider carefully your guide's advice. Your guide is here day after day, year after year, and knows how to find the best opportunities. Most guides are at least amateur photographers, many have formal training, and some are highly accomplished.



Orca and calf in Prince William Sound, Alaska. Photo by Dave Partee.

9. **Guides are not porters.** Chances are your guide is already carrying binoculars or a spotting scope, a radio, extra food and water, first-aid supplies, and extra clothing for himself and probably for you. If you take bulky and heavy equipment into the field, plan on schlepping it yourself, or bring your own porter (spouses often are imposed upon to fill this role) unless the tour operator specifies that porters are provided.
10. **Develop a broader interest in the animals, and the environment in its entirety** rather than simply as photographic images. You'll have a more fulfilling experience and stories to go with your pictures, and you'll learn things that will help you get the best shots. Many photographers spend most of their time in the field tending their equipment, and when the shoot is over they disengage from the location and occupy their time reading novels or talking about other places they have visited. They may get good photos, but they miss opportunities to take a longer look at the animals and learn more about them.

Take the time to sit and observe the animals, especially their behavior. Ask questions. Read the local natural history books and other materials that most tour operators carry. This information helps you get the most out of your trip, and can provide conversation topics. Most guides are naturalists, and care intensely about the animals and the place. They appreciate clients who show an interest, and will work harder for them.

11. **Offer to help.** Work on a trip is planned so that the guide or other staff can do it all, but there is no harm in helping. It establishes a bond between client and guide. Guides likely are just as tired as you are at the end of the day but they still have hours of work to do. If you offer to help load the vehicles, make the salad, or whatever you can do, it makes the guide's life a little easier and gives you a role in the success of the operation. The guide may decline your offer to help, but will appreciate it nevertheless.



Passengers on a wildlife and glacier cruise take pictures near Columbia Glacier in Prince William Sound, Alaska. Photo by Dave Partee.

12. **Let your guide know** when you are having a good time and getting what you want from your trip. A generous tip or bonus, of course, is a sincere expression of appreciation, but it's always good to let guides know what they did right, and what you liked about your day or your trip. Guides like to know that their efforts are appreciated. Guides almost always see and know more than they reveal on any given day, and guiding is tiring work. Remember, all the time you are involved in your equipment, or simply putting one foot in front of the other on the trail, the guide is actively scanning for animals or other targets. If a client shows appreciation, the guide will be motivated to work a little harder.

The flip side is that constructive suggestions usually are welcome if they can be implemented under the existing conditions, but in general complaints are not. Any situation that cannot be remedied in the field should not be discussed in the field. A review at the end of the trip or a follow-up call or email may be helpful, but be sensitive to the realities of logistics in remote locations.

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Red fox. Photo by Terry Johnson.

One final thought: **If you have a good trip, pass the word.** Small mom-and-pop guiding operations face major obstacles in marketing their services, and word-of-mouth advertising is the best kind.

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For information on undergraduate and graduate opportunities in marine biology, fisheries, oceanography, and other marine-related fields at the University of Alaska Fairbanks School of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences, visit <http://www.sfos.uaf.edu/>.



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