

How to Get the Shot

Revealing the Secrets
Behind Unforgettable Photography

Blog #107: Swimming with the Fishes



Swimming with the Fishes

I was shooting photography of the hippopotamus at the Lincoln Park Zoo, and as I was walking away, I heard a splash. The hippo has slid into the pond with the fishes. It was a comical sight. The enormous animal in a pond of large fishes seemed out of place. All of this was in full view of the visitors to the zoo. The zoo has installed a huge window to view the activities in the pond. The addition of the enormous addition was a treat to everyone watching. The unusual thing was that the fishes weren't acting startled with the added visitor. They just resumed swimming as usual. It was a fun photo.

As I zoomed in for the photo, I was waiting for a balance between the hippo and the fishes, I was intrigued by a strange routine unfolding before my eyes. The hippo remained at the bottom of the pond for a few minutes. Just before he came up for a new breath of air, he started to slowly ascend to the surface. He spent a long moment inhaling air, and then returned to the bottom of the pond. Watching this occur over and over, it became a game to time the shot of the hippo with his face in focus and in light on his way to the surface. I'd get a shot or two, and then would have to wait for the whole process to repeat again. Surface. Wait. Descend. Wait. Roam on the bottom. Wait. Time to ascend again for another breath.

Of course, the hippo could decide he'd have enough swimming at any point and get out of the pond, so there was a timing pressure that this photo opportunity could end any time. More photos!

The fun thing about photographing animals is that they will do unexpected things. But they will also repeat patterns. If you can observe their behavior, you can sometimes anticipate these patterns. I've captured photos of polar bears in the zoo breaking through the water after I've seen them circle the tank and end up in the same position on their next trip around the exhibit. I used to wonder why the lions perched on a rock that was a perfect photo opportunity, until someone told me that the specific rock I was talking about was one the zoo heated, and presto, there was an incentive for the animals to return to a choice photo position.

There are also opportunities you can plan your photo session around. Regular feeding times can create opportunities when animals are active. Early morning and weekdays provide a quieter time to photograph animals when there are less visitors around to distract the animals. Some zoos have live animal demonstrations or educational programs, and while this can result in photos that don't reflect natural surroundings, sometimes by zooming in on these events, you can capture an animal in a memorable reaction.



Feeding Time: Are you the Crocodile or the Mouse?

I've come back to the same hippopotamus exhibit many other times hoping for the hippopotamus version of *Ester Williams* to return more synchronized swimming, but I fear this may have been a rare performance.

TAKEAWAYS

1. Shoot first. Get the shot in front of you
2. If you have the luxury of time, evaluate the setting. Is there a pattern? Is the subject repeating activities? If you wait a moment, will a better image present itself?
3. Be ready for unusual shots when they present themselves. Keep extra batteries on hand and charged. There is nothing worse than being in the presence of a great shot and finding your equipment is not ready to go.