

# Wild at the Zoo!

An Urban Safari for Photographers

Chane Cullens

[Chane@CCullens.com](mailto:Chane@CCullens.com)

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New Haven Camera Club

Download  
[CCullens.com/zoo](https://CCullens.com/zoo)



# Today's Roadmap

1

**Understand** key techniques for zoo photography.

2

**Learn** how to capture photos suitable for nature or other competitions in a zoo setting.

3

**Gain confidence** in photographing animals in captivity and in the wild.

# Zoo Photography

Nature Competition

Why Zoos are Unique

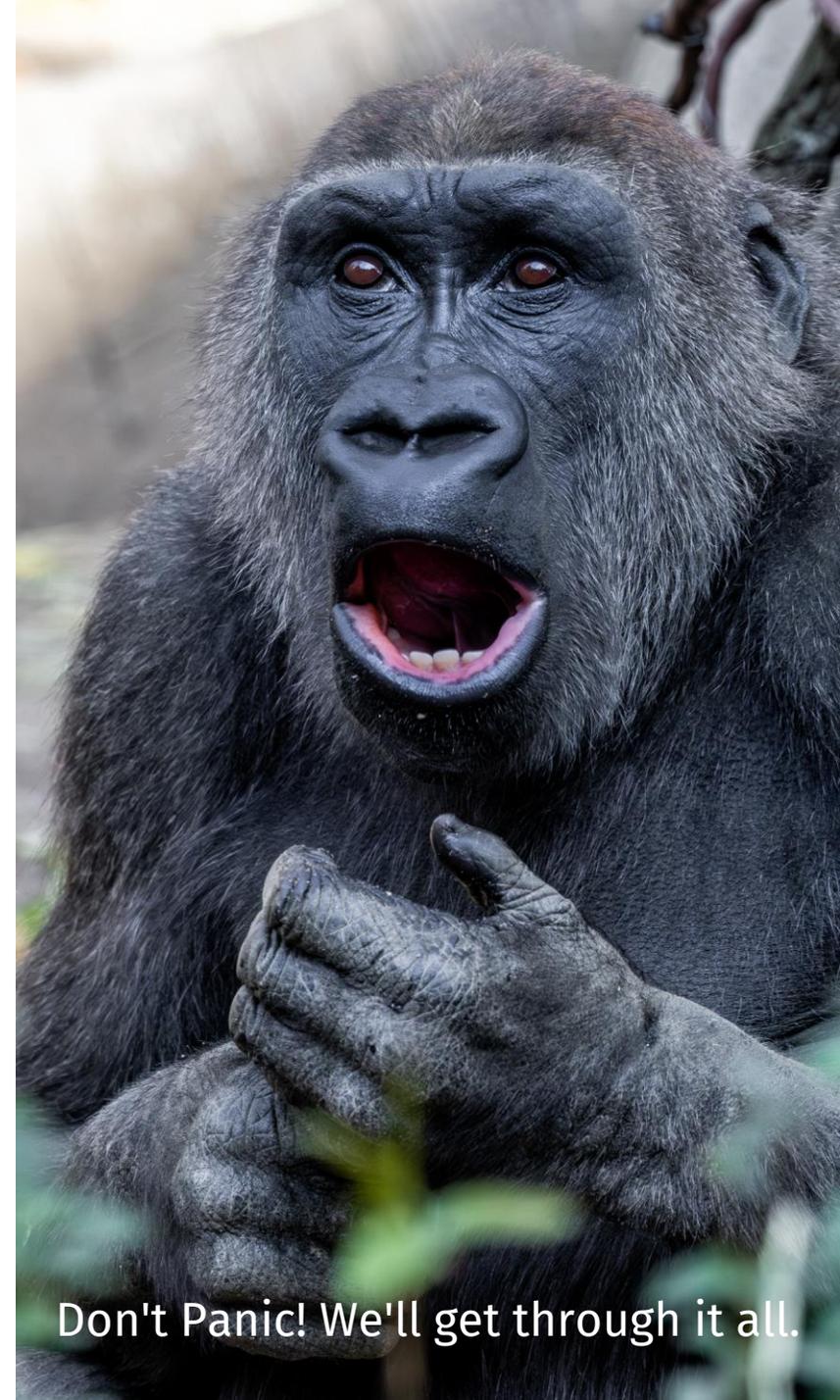
Pre-Game Plan

Obstacle Course

Creating Impact

Camera Settings

Q&A



Don't Panic! We'll get through it all.

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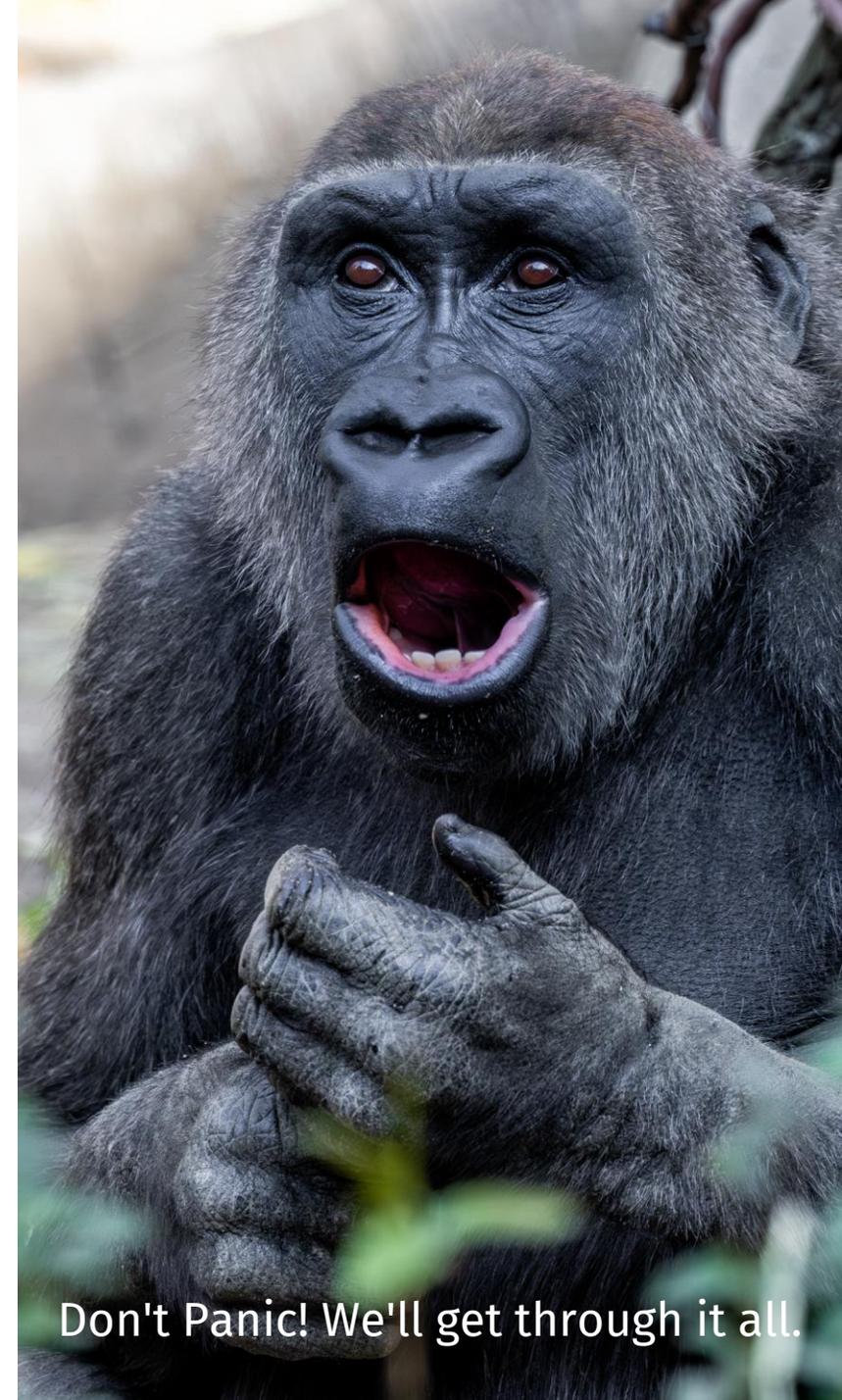
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**Zoo  
Photos  
Win Local  
and NECCC  
Awards**



# Zoo Photos Expand Beyond Nature Category



NECCC 1<sup>st</sup> Place - Monochrome Portrait category



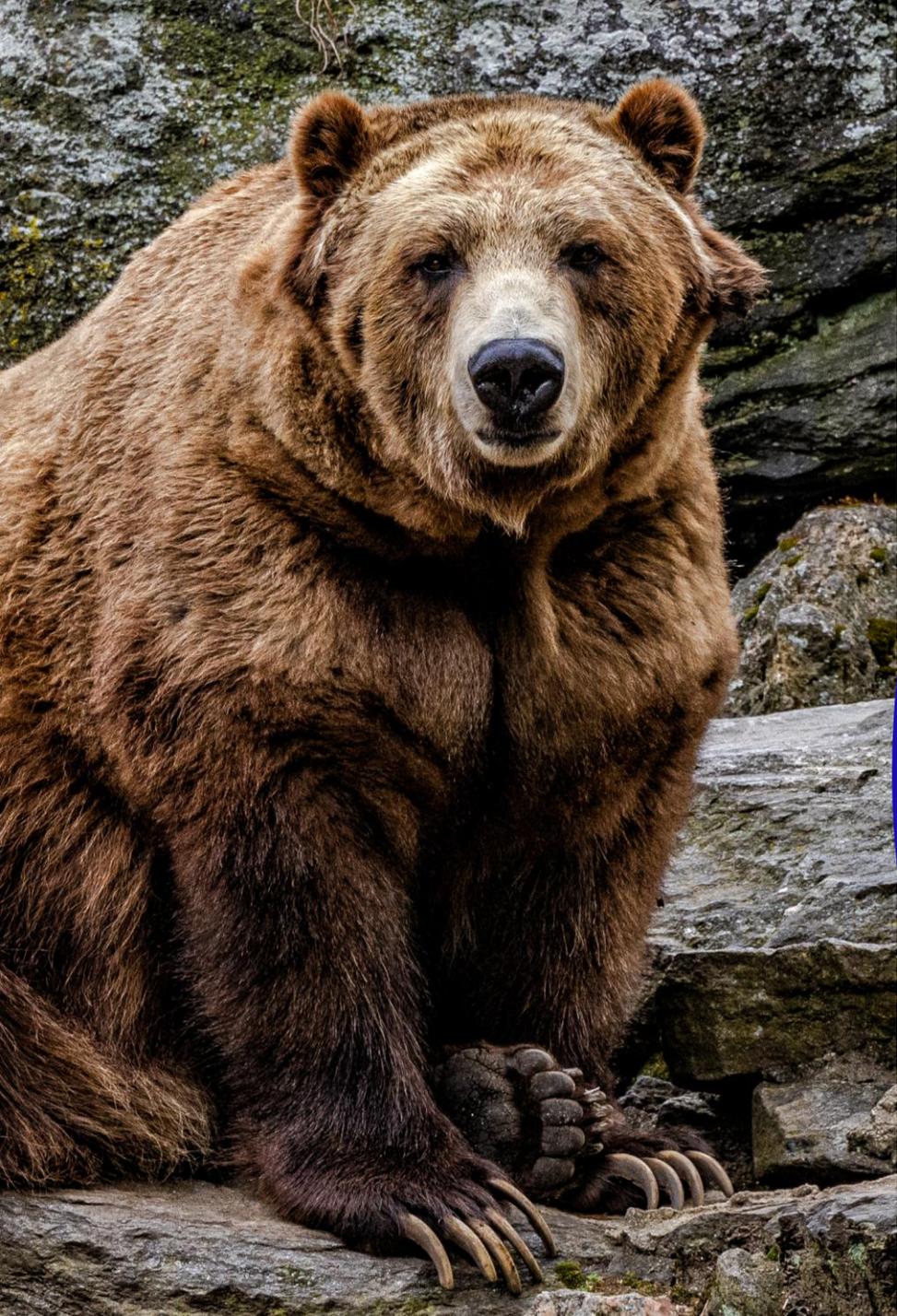
CAP 1<sup>st</sup> - Place Portrait category



2<sup>nd</sup> Place - Assigned Subject - "I'm so Blue". *A Meal Cures the Blues*



1<sup>st</sup> Place - Nature  
*Swimming Amidst  
Nature's Kaleidoscope  
of Fall*



# Navigating Nature Rules

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Nature rules vary widely with every camera club and competition type.

Understanding the rules is a key part of entering Nature photos.

What are your club's Nature rules?

# Flagpole

# Photographers

# Camera Club

# Nature Rules

Depicts our world without any sign of human-made artifacts.

Editing must maintain a natural look, and adding elements is not allowed. Also, borders are not allowed.

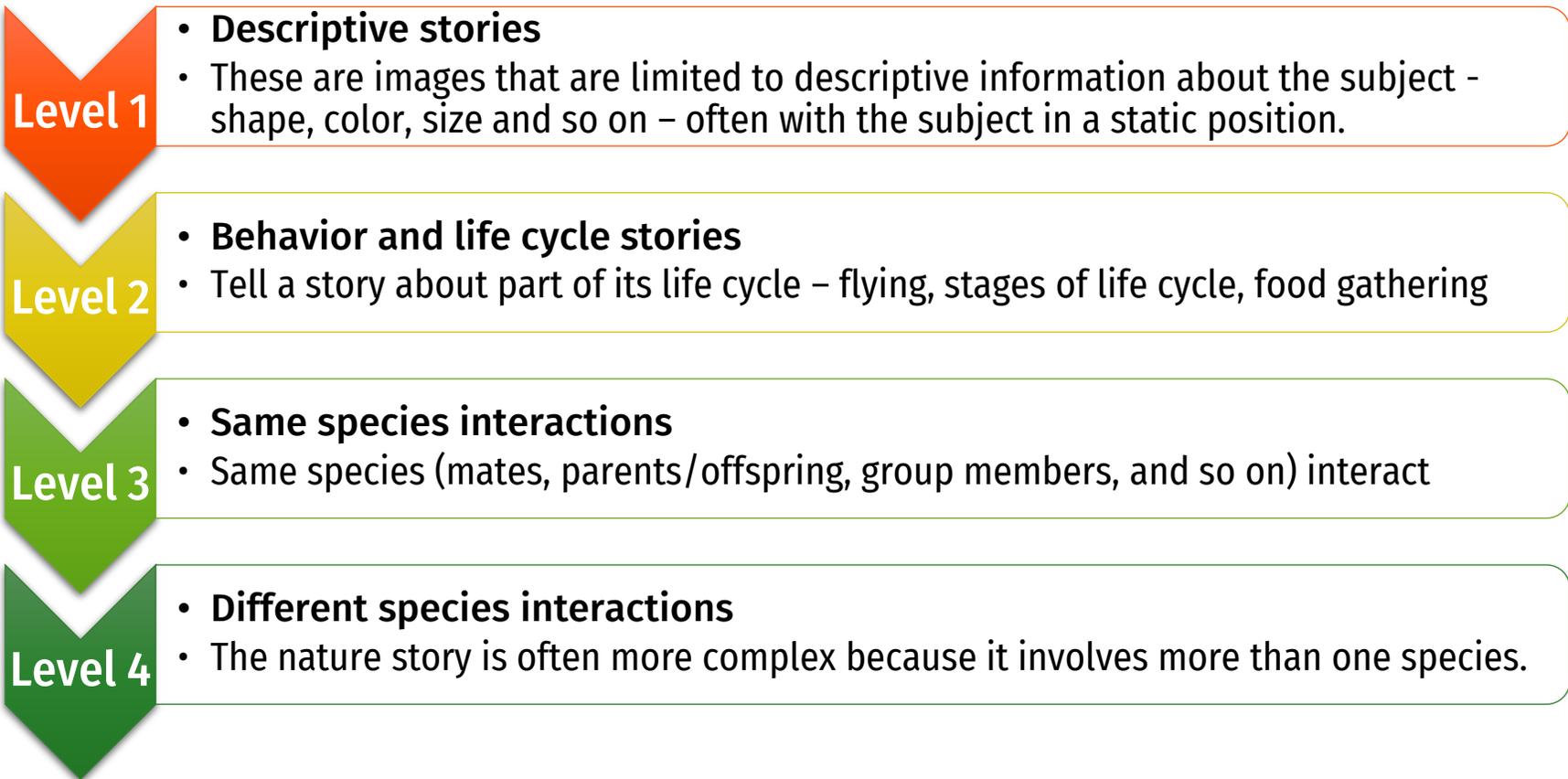
Banded or tagged animals are allowed. However, tame or wild domesticated animals are not allowed.

In addition to the rules for all categories. For example, captured by you, edited by you ...

# The 4 Levels of Storytelling by PSA

## Nature Images Must Tell a Story

The Levels of storytelling described below are intended only as a guide to help judges distinguish between weak and strong nature stories



High technical standards are expected at all levels.

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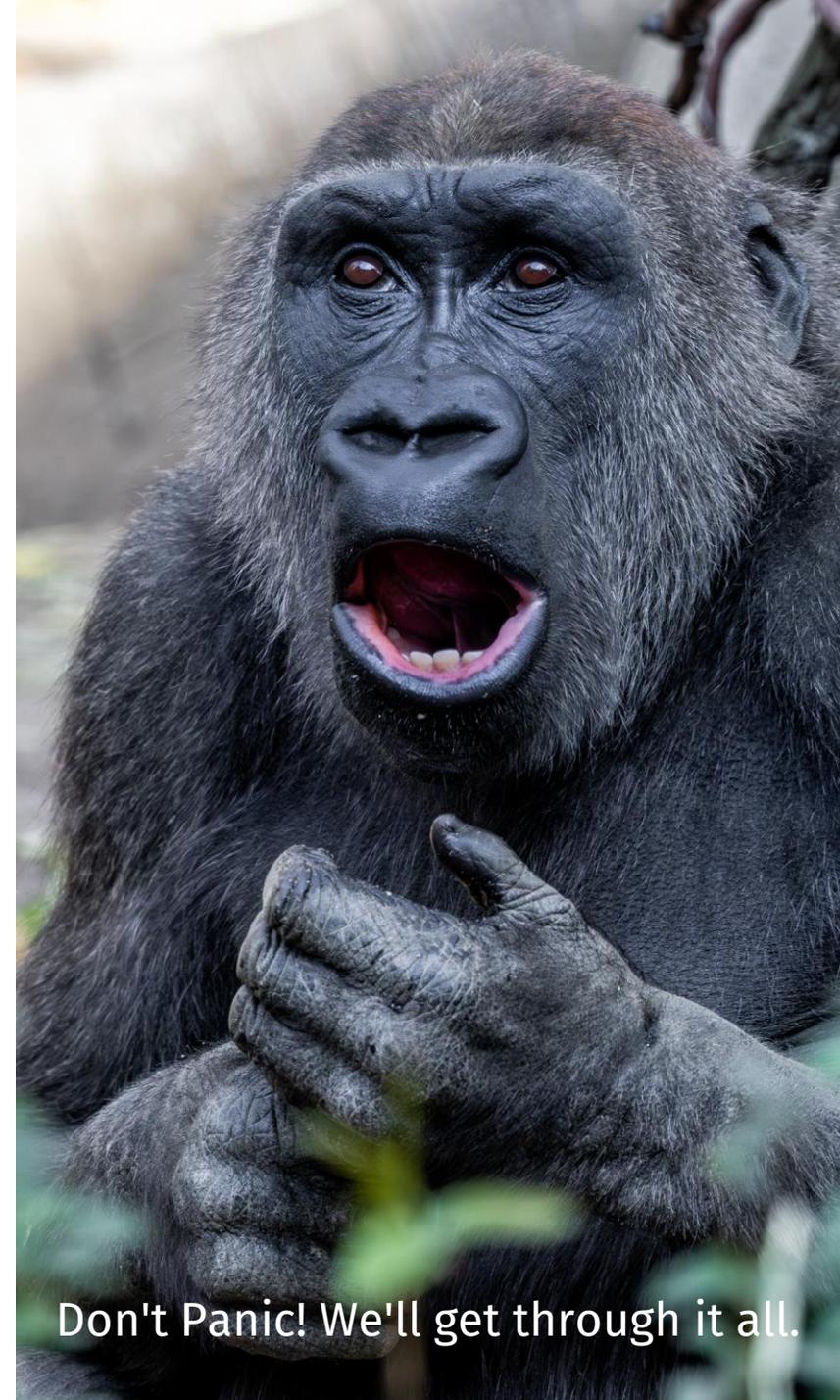
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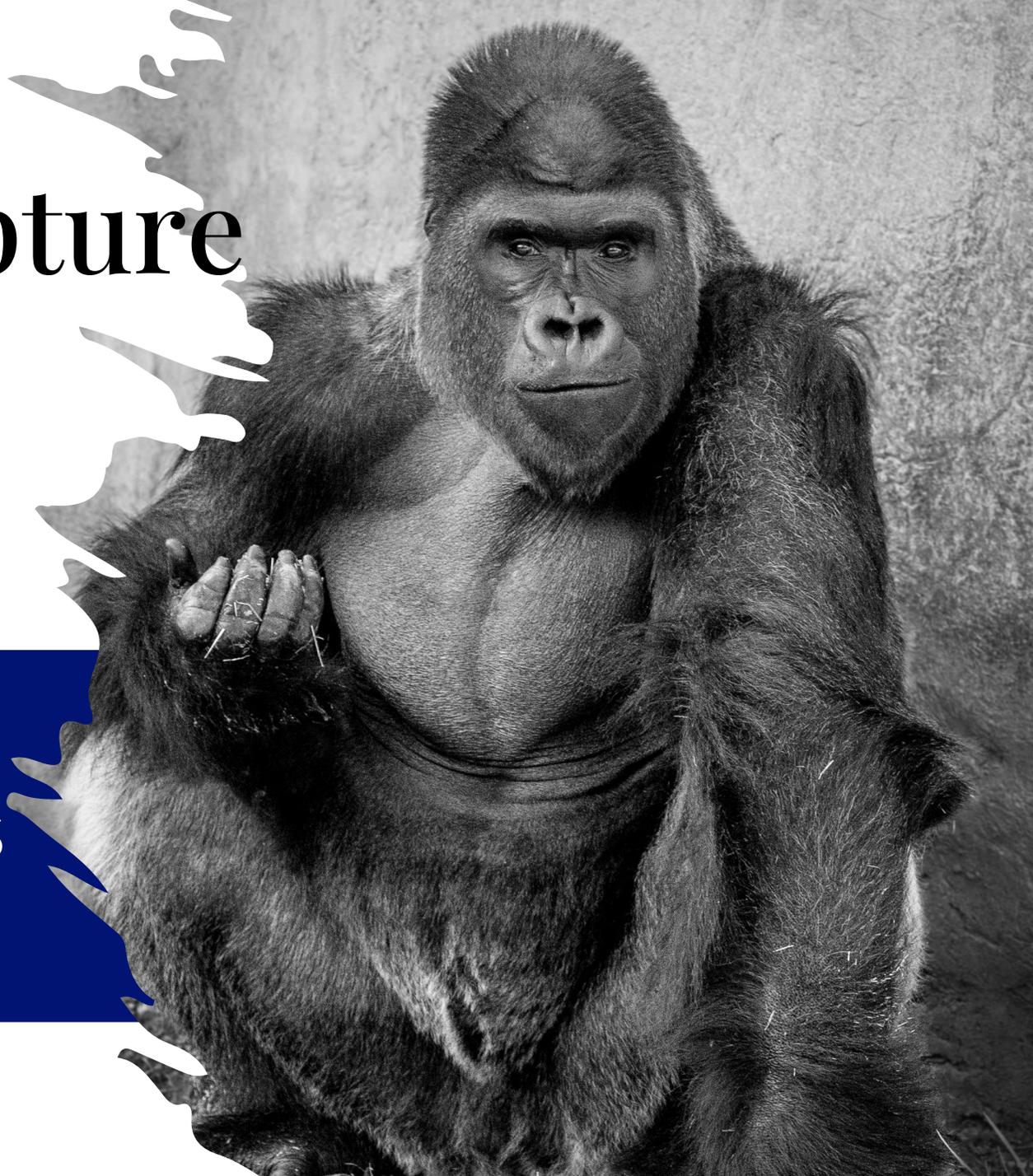


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# Zoos Are a Unique Opportunity to Capture Amazing Photos

**Around  
the  
World  
Safari**

- In One Day
- Lots of Animals
- Inexpensive



# Zoo Visits - The Reality of the Numbers

You've had a great photo day if 1% are competition photos!

Captured 3,754 photos in one day at Bronx Zoo

Continues for a mile

Edited 27 (0.72%)

Used 9 (0.24%)

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Chane's  
Photo  
Zoo  
Adventures

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International - Johannesburg (2015), Sydney (2015, 2018), India (2018), Singapore (2019).

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USA (West/South) - Dallas (2017), Fort Worth (2018), Phoenix (2019), Oregon (2016, 2018, 2025).

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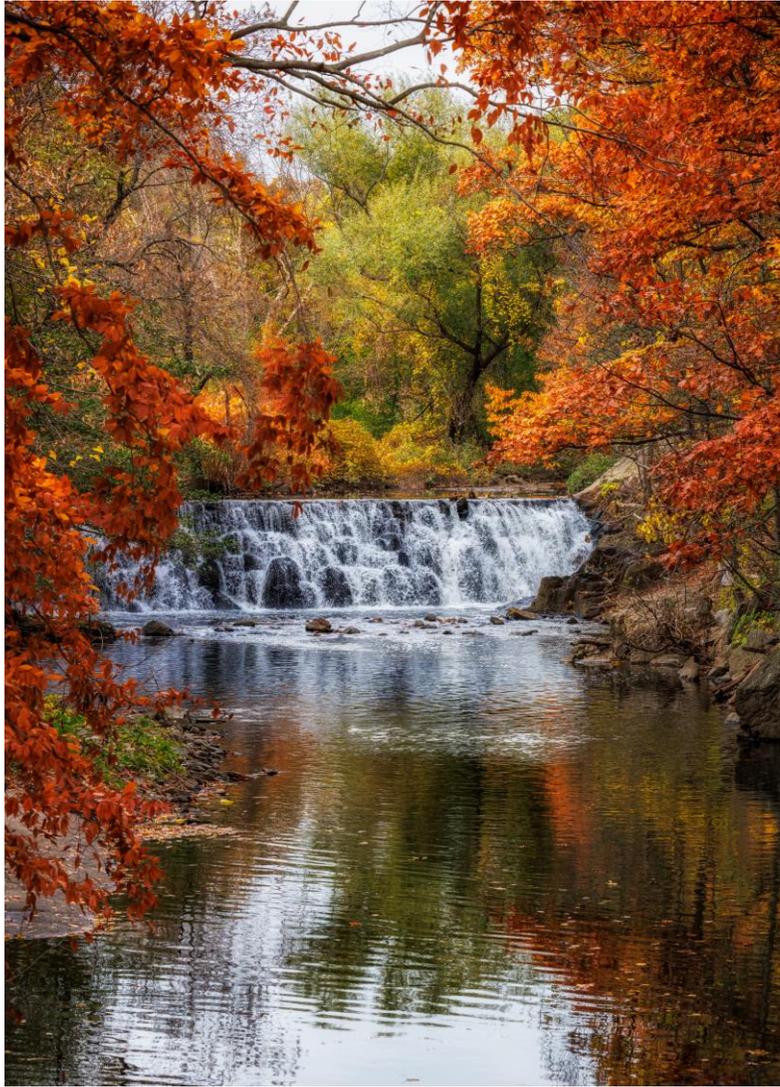
USA (East) - Bronx (2017, 2021, 2023, 2025), Beardsley (2025).

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# Outdoor and Indoor Opportunities





Also  
Non-Nature  
Photo  
Opportunities

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# What

## Research Zoo Activities

- Check the daily schedule for specific animal encounters or educational tours.

## Target Feeding Times

- Identify when animals are being fed, as this is often when they are most active and visible for photos.

## Master the Map

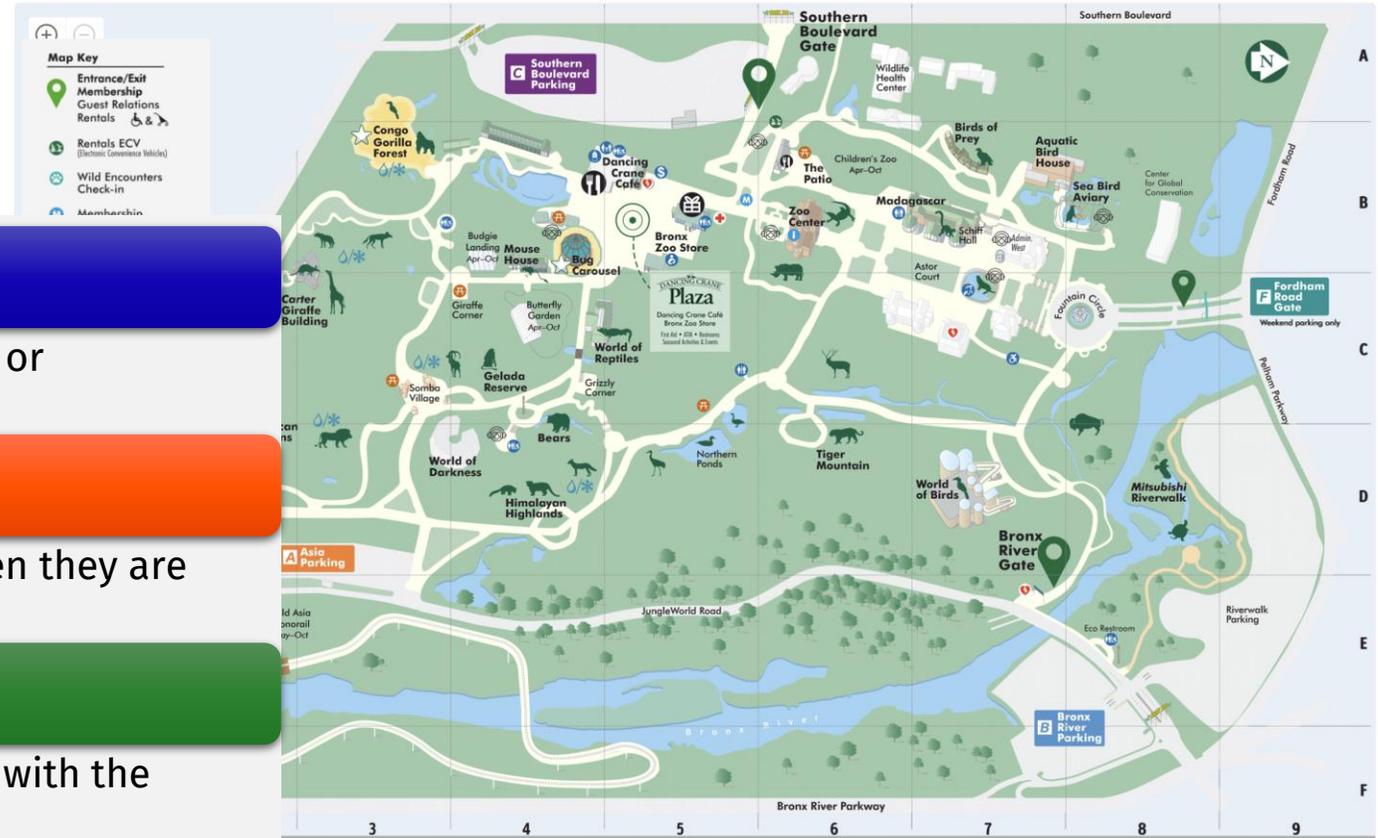
- Study the layout ahead of time to prioritize the exhibits with the animals on your "must-see" list.

## Skip the Lines

- Buy your tickets online to maximize your time behind the lens rather than in a queue.

## Home Base

- Identify a central location as a mid-day meetup point to exchange ideas.



# When?

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- During Off-Peak Times
  - Go weekdays and early mornings.
  - Avoid special days, summer and school breaks.
- The Bonus
  - Check your local library for discount passes.



Wednesday, November 17, 2021, at 11:30 am.  
Bronx Zoo parking lot is nearly empty!

# Dress for the Elements



## Layer Up

Wear layers that are easy to remove, as you will be moving between outdoor paths and humid, heated indoor exhibits.



## Check the Forecast

Overcast days act as a natural diffuser, but if rain is predicted, consider rescheduling since animals often hide.



## Footwear Matters

Expect to walk several miles; prioritize comfort over style to stay focused on your shots.



# The "Lean & Mean" Gear Bag

## Limit Your Lens

Bring at most one extra lens to keep your kit lightweight and mobile.

## Leave the Extras

No tripods and no flash. These are often prohibited and act as physical obstacles in crowded areas.

## Power Up

Bring extra batteries, especially on cooler days, as cold temperatures can drain them faster.

## Storage

Some of us think 1,000s of photos is normal.

## Personal Essentials

Don't forget water and snacks to maintain your energy levels.

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# The Obstacle Course

Backgrounds

Cages

Fences

Glass

Lighting

People

Restricted  
Views

Safety

# Watch Your Backgrounds



Sharp edge implies non-nature and  
distracts viewer



# Making Wire Vanish

What matters is the physical size of the aperture opening (entrance pupil), not just the f-number. A larger entrance pupil makes the fence blur away because the lens can effectively “see around” the wire. This is why 200mm f/4 can outperform a 50mm f/1.8.

Get camera close to fence

Better when the animal is far from the fence

Focus on the animal

Use longer focal length, zoom in!

Try an aperture width wider than the wire

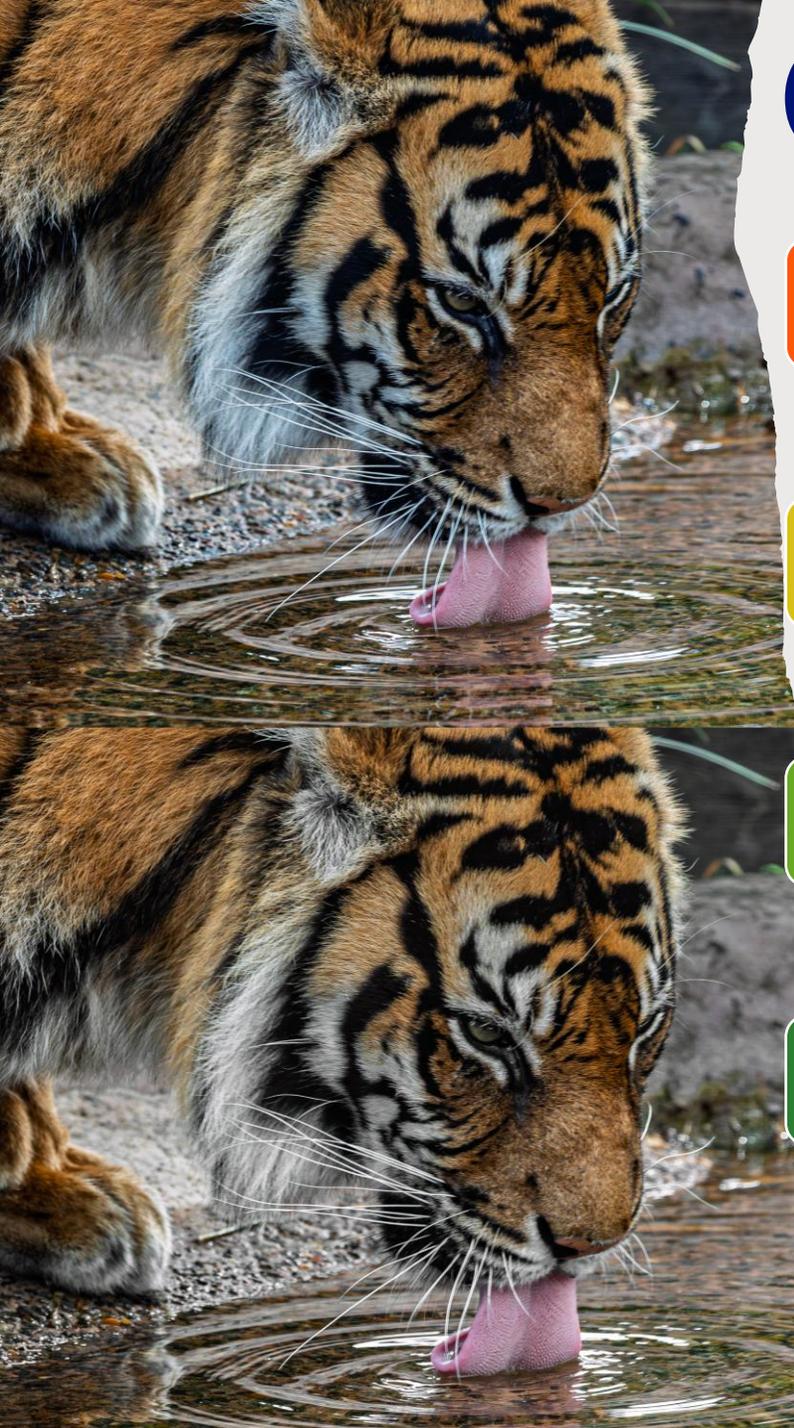


# Overcoming Fences

Prepare. I arrived 10 minutes before watch the cheetah "Run" event.

Practiced, practiced ... on a dog inside the fence.

Camera settings: ISO 1250, f/5.6, 1/8000, 200 mm, Servo tracking focus



# Conquering Glass Walls

## Align your lens

- Position your camera so the lens is perfectly parallel with the glass to minimize optical distortion.

## Minimize the gap

- Get your lens as close to the glass as possible to reduce unwanted reflections and glare.

## Shield the lens

- Place a dark coat, scarf, or lens hood against the glass around the lens to block out ambient light and further eliminate glare.

## Correct in post-processing:

- Adjust your color settings after the shoot to remove any blue or green color cast caused by the glass.

← Bottom photo has blue tint removed.

# Lighting

## Outdoor Lighting

- **Choose overcast weather days:** Clouds act as a giant natural diffuser.
- **Handle harsh sun:** Seek out animals located in the shade.
  - Adjust your exposure compensation to between **-2/3 and -1.0**.
- **Utilize "Semi-Golden" hours:** Arrive when the zoo opens or stay until it closes.

## Indoor Lighting

- **Maximize your ISO:** Increase ISO settings to handle lower light levels indoors.
- **Shoot in RAW:** Use RAW format for post-processing white balance correction.
- **Avoid flash:** Do not use a flash when shooting in indoor exhibits.

# People

## The Good

- Friends add enjoyment.



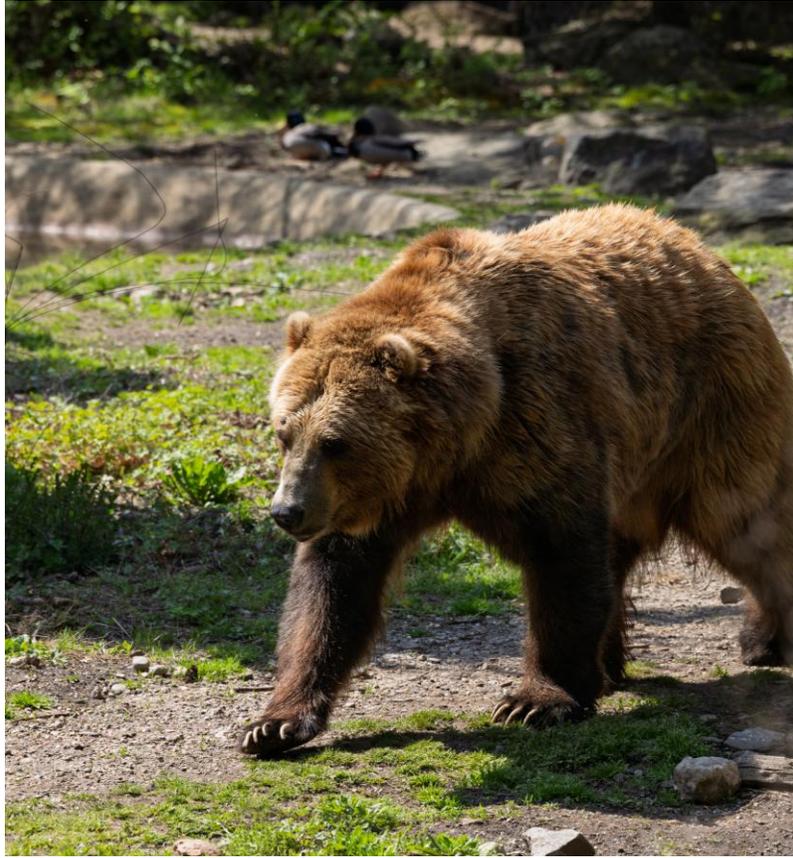
## The Bad

- Crowd limits your view.



## The Ugly

- Be respectful.

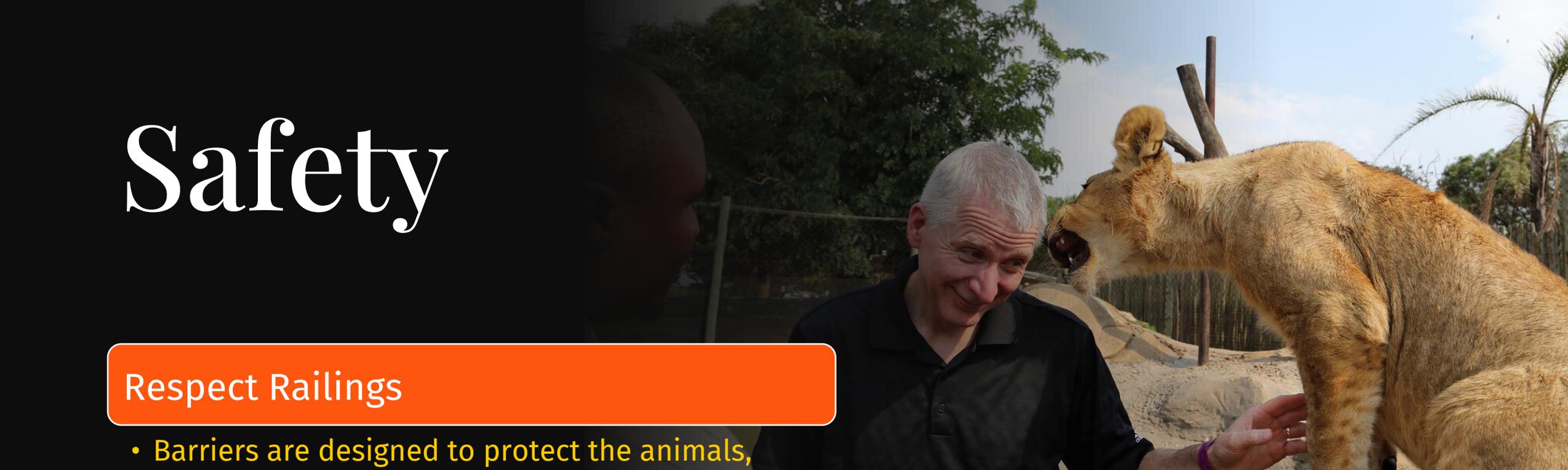


# Restricted Views

Find every viewpoint. Watch for patterns. Be patient.

A brown bear is sitting on a rock, looking towards the camera. The bear is surrounded by large, grey rocks.

# Safety



## Respect Railings

- Barriers are designed to protect the animals, your gear, and your physical safety.

## Keep Paths Clear

- Be mindful of your equipment to ensure you and your gear do not become trip hazards for others.

## Prioritize Welfare

- Respect animal health by never offering outside food and no flashes to avoid startling them.
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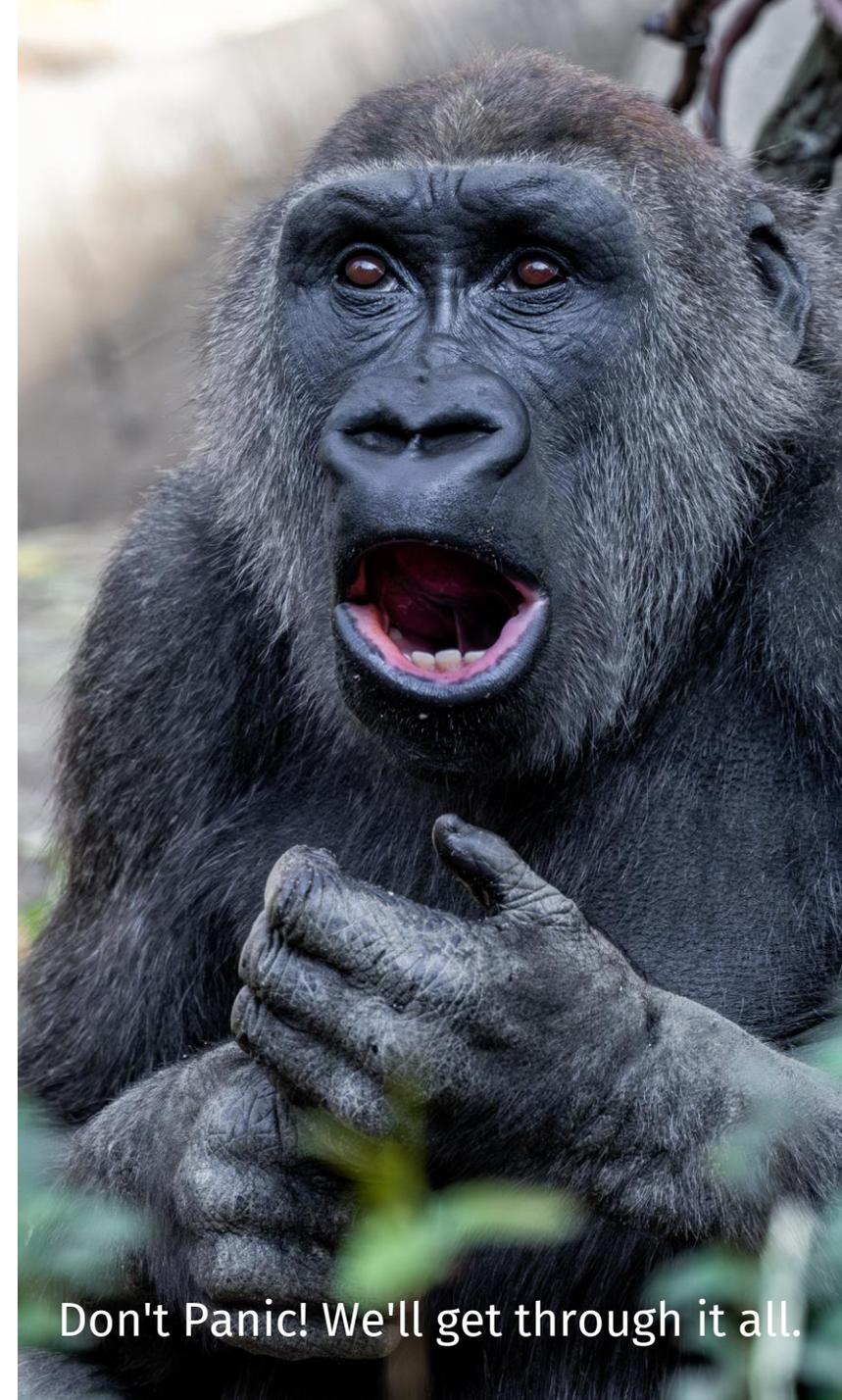
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# The Four Legs of Impact

Impactful photos evoke laughter, sadness, anger, pride, or wonder.

Think of  
**IMPACT**  
as a stool supported by these four legs:



## Photo Structural Integrity

- 4 legs **Solid:** Hard to knock over
- 3 legs **Stable:** Still very strong
- 2 legs **Weak:** Hard to stand up
- 1 leg **Critical:** Easily falls over
- 0 legs It's a snapshot

**Storytelling**  
Evokes emotion

**Creativity**  
Offers a fresh view

**Composition**  
Guides the eye

**Technical**  
Skillfully crafted



# Creating Impact

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A photo **of something** aims to represent it.

A photo **about something** aims to tell a story.

Stories add impact!

When you want a donut, but get kale instead!



# Visual Storytelling

Compose To Tell a Story

# Capturing the Moment

## Lighting is Key

- Overcast days also provide excellent lighting conditions.
- The best times to shoot are typically early morning or late afternoon when the light is soft and diffused.

## Focus on the Eyes

- Capturing sharp, expressive eyes is crucial for creating a connection with the viewer.
- If possible, utilize your camera's autofocus system to lock onto the animal's eyes.

## Capture Animal Behavior

- Strive to capture animals exhibiting natural behaviors such as eating, playing, or interacting with each other.
- These photos tell a story and provide a glimpse into the animal's world.

## Don't Overlook the Details

- Capture unique textures, patterns, and colors by focusing on specific details like fur, feathers, or scales.
- Close-up shots can add variety and interest.

# Animal Behavior Isn't Always Predictable

Just when you think things are going well...





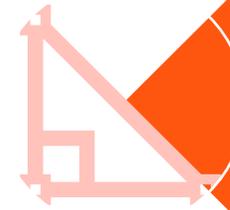
## Composition - Get Close and Personal

Use your feet, zoom in or crop to get close-up shots.

Fill the frame with your subject to capture intricate details.

Create a sense of intimacy and connection with the animals.

# Find Unique Perspectives



Explore different angles and viewpoints to capture unique compositions.



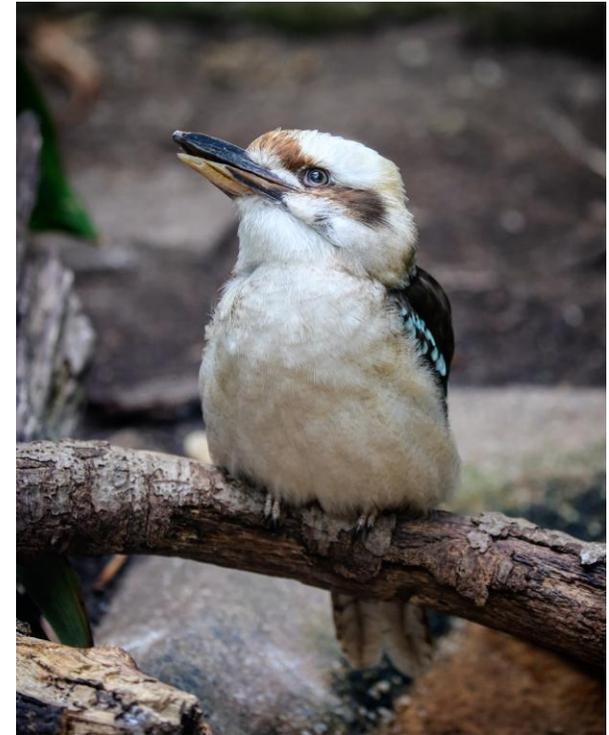
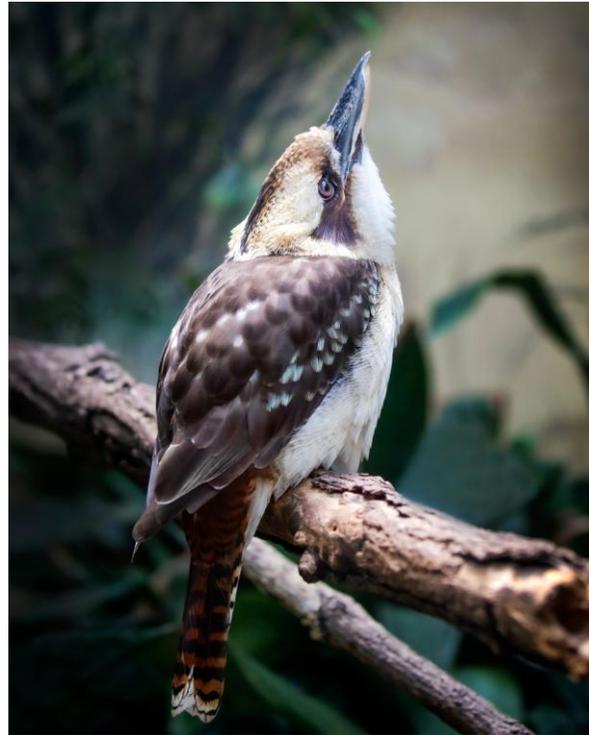
Try shooting from above, below, or through foliage to add depth and interest to your photos.



Camera at their eye level.

# Work the Scene

Do a whole photo shoot on one subject.





# The 360° View

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Don't forget to look behind you! And behind your subject!

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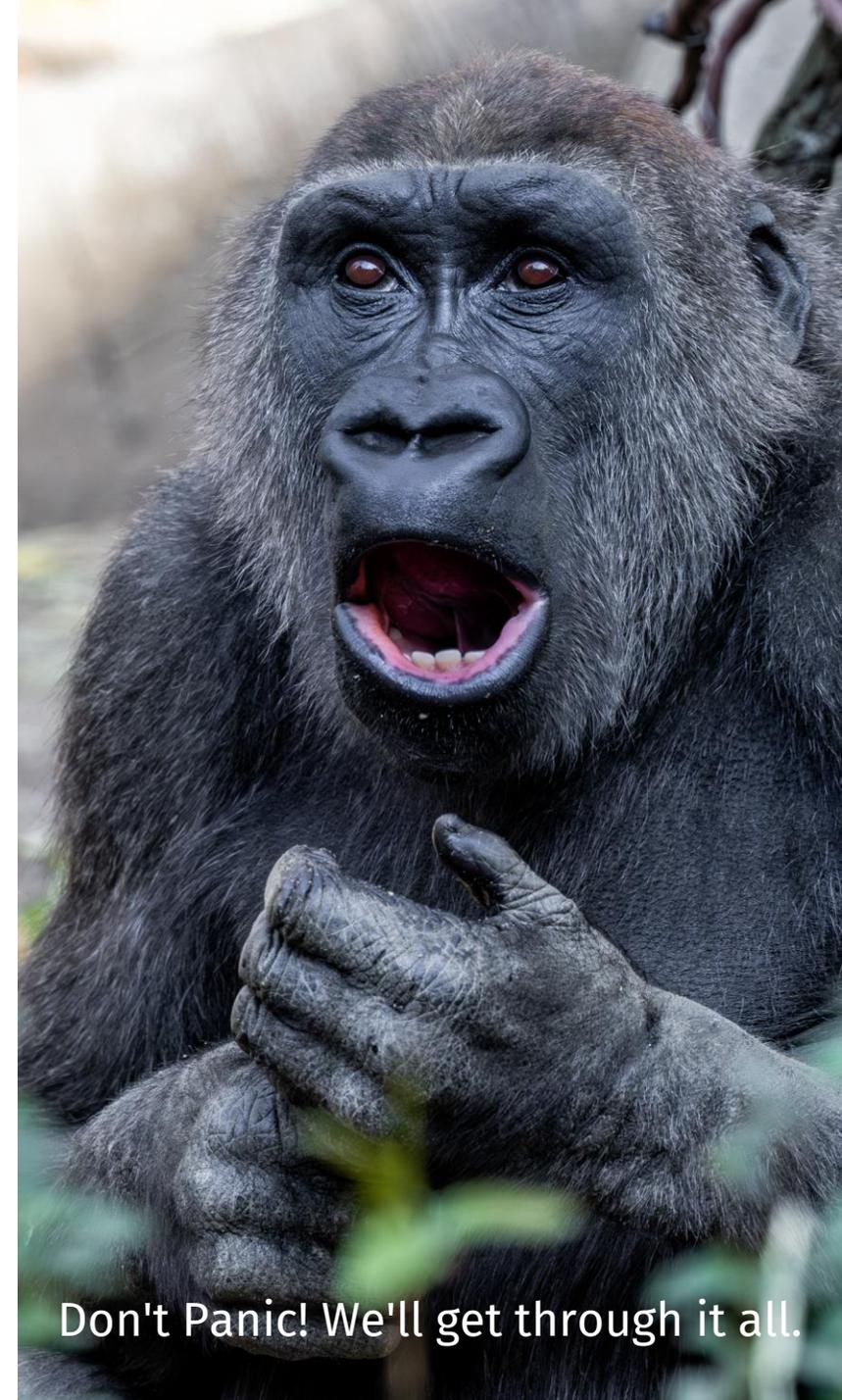
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# Dialing in the Settings

Use **Aperture Priority** mode for simplicity in the zoo's ever-changing environment.

## Aperture

To minimize the background distractions  
f/3 to f/7 for small to medium focus depth

## Shutter speed

To freeze animals' movement  
Walking 1/250, Running 1/1000, Flying 1/2000

## ISO

As high as needed to meet your shutter speed requirement

# Nailing the Focus

Eyes in Focus

Eyes draw viewers' attention

Continuous Tracking

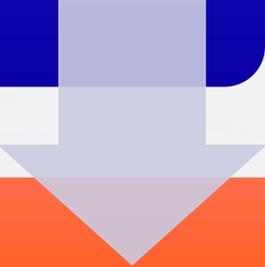
Use Servo Tracking functionality

Leverage Eye Tracking

Very handy Eye Tracking + Servo Tracking

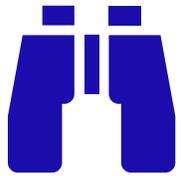
# Shooting Mode

High speed continuous



Storage for 1,000+ photos

# Choosing the Right Glass



## Zoom lens

Provides flexibility without changing lens



## 100mm or greater

Allows greater freedom of finding a vantage point



## f/4ish

Increases background blur

Chane's Favorites: 100-500mm f/4.5-7.1 or 70-200mm f/2.8

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A group of people, mostly photographers, are gathered on a paved path in a wooded area. In the center, a man in a light blue shirt and khaki pants is speaking and gesturing with his right hand. He is holding a camera with a large lens. To his left, a woman in a white shirt and dark pants is also holding a camera. In the foreground, a woman with a large black backpack and glasses is looking towards the speaker. To the right, another woman in a grey hat and dark jacket is looking at the speaker. In the far right foreground, a woman with blonde hair and glasses is also looking towards the speaker. The background shows a dense forest with tall trees and green foliage. The overall scene suggests a nature walk or a photography workshop.

# Questions & Answers