

Portraits

by Brooke Pyke

Want to learn how to capture the unique personality and characteristics of your favorite marine animals? This is something I do daily here on the Ningaloo Reef in Western Australia, and I hope I can share some of my photographic experience with you.

WHAT IS A PORTRAIT?

The classical definition of a portrait goes something like this: “A portrait is a painting, photograph, sculpture, or other artistic representation of a person, in which the face and its expressions are predominant. The intent is to display the likeness, personality, and even the mood of the person.” - Wikipedia

With wildlife portrait photography we aim to achieve the same outcomes. But unlike humans, wild animals won't just sit for you in front of your lens patiently while you adjust your settings and lighting. You need to be prepared to get your photo as soon as the moment presents itself. Capturing a good photograph of an animal takes mostly time, but also a lot of patience. You want to not only capture a nice photo of your subject, but also capture it in a way that shows something that is unique about that particular animal. You want to aim to have it facing or looking and moving toward the lens, by doing this you will likely capture its personality and characteristics.



Bottlenose Dolphin, Ningaloo Reef. ISO 200 f8 1/400s

All images were taken with a Canon R6, Canon 8-15mm Fisheye Lens, Nauticam Housing, Nauticam Fisheye Glass Dome, ambient lighting, no strobes.

CHOOSING YOUR GEAR

For most cases when shooting marine life portraits, you will need a wide-angle or fisheye lens. As most animals are quite large, you want to be able to get close while also fitting as much of the animal in frame as you can (unless you are shooting macro critters, then choose a macro lens). I shoot with a Canon 8-15mm Fisheye lens which is amazing for

these kinds of shots.

Another important thing about shooting with a wide lens is that it will limit the amount of water particles between your lens and subject. Thus your photos will look sharper and clearer even with lower visibility. You want to aim to get as close as you can to your subject to get the clearest and sharpest photo, but this is where it gets tricky. Generally, most animals don't want their photo taken, so keep



Me photographing a Whale Shark on the Ningaloo Reef. Photo by Oliver Clarke

reading to find out my tricks for dealing with this. In terms of choosing a camera, this greatly depends on your budget. But something with full manual control is a must, as well as interchangeable lenses. Small point-and-shoot cameras can be very limiting.

CHOOSING YOUR SETTINGS

One thing that really daunts people shooting manual for the first time is how to choose your camera settings. Advice will vary depending on who you ask, but let me share my techniques with you.

Shutter Speed

First of all, when shooting moving subjects, shutter speed is super important to achieve a sharp image. As a minimum, I always have my camera



Sea Lion, Jurien Bay. ISO 400 f6.3 1/1000s

set to 1/200sec – or faster if I can, depending on available light. For most shots I have my shutter speed on 1/400-1/500sec. But if it's a cloudy day, or there is limited light at depth, I will lower it. The faster the animal moves, the faster your shutter speed needs to be.

See the photo of a sea lion, I had to set my shutter at 1/1000s to get a sharp photo as it was moving very quickly. It is important to note that all my photos are taken with ambient lighting. If using

strobes, most cameras cannot shoot over 1/200s.

Aperture

Choosing your aperture is also important as this will determine your depth of field and whether your lens will focus easily on something close to the lens while blurring out the background creating a soft focus, or focusing on an entire animal that is a bit further away. Choosing your aperture depends

on what kind of effect you're after, are you wanting the whole animal in focus? If so choose an aperture with a higher number (this makes the lens aperture smaller). Maybe you're shooting a subject that is very close to your lens and you want just the face of the animal in focus. Then choose an aperture with a lower number (this makes the aperture wider).

For most of my photos of marine life my aperture will be somewhere between f/4 and f/9. But keep in mind that when you change your aperture this also affects the amount of light in your photo. Whenever the ISO, shutter, or aperture changes, so must one or more of the other settings (Shutter, Aperture, and ISO are the 3 sides of the triangle that determine the exposure of an image).

ISO

In really simple terms, ISO is a setting that will lighten or darken your image. Changing the ISO means you change your camera's sensitivity to light. And this relates to either film or a digital camera sensor.

The lower the ISO number the less sensitive it is to light, the higher the ISO the more sensitive it is.

But some people ask "then why not just use a high ISO always and then you have more freedom with having a fast shutter speed?" Having a high ISO creates some problems of its own.

When your ISO is high for example 800 or more you will start to see what's called 'noise'. This is the grainy and horrible effect you can sometimes see in photos. For example, have you ever tried using your phone camera in really low light and noticed how it looks really grainy? This is what you want to avoid.

Always try to have your ISO on the lowest you can to avoid this. I usually have mine somewhere



Leopard Shark, Ningaloo Reef. ISO 320 f8 1/800s

between 100 to 320. On a really dark cloudy day I sometimes bump it to 500 but only when I have to and not doing so would compromise my shutter speed.

White Balance & RAW Files

When shooting with ambient and artificial light, I always have my white balance set to automatic. Also, I only shoot in RAW format (if you don't know

what this means do some googling, but always always shoot in RAW, not jpeg).

Shooting in RAW means that the white balance can be manually manipulated in post-production with Adobe Lightroom better than what your camera can do on its own.

Color grading is a skill that can take a while to master, but learning to do so will mean you get the most out of your photos. I process all my RAW files using Adobe Lightroom Classic.

FRAMING YOUR SHOTS

My biggest tips on how to frame and compose your shots are: Get level with your subjects and shoot across. Shoot either front on to your subject or at a slightly front/side on with the face and eyes in focus. If the subject is angled away from the camera, it makes it look like it's avoiding you and the photo won't be as engaging.

Many animals have some kind of feature that distinguishes them from others. Aim to capture and show the beauty of what's unique about it as well as its character or any special behavior.

For example, look at the photo of this manta ray. One of the most noticeable features on a manta are their huge mouths and long cephalic lobes. With this photo, I wanted to capture the manta ray feeding front on so you could see not only the eyes and face but also the huge gaping mouth and elegant wings. All these features are what make them so unique and different from other rays. If I had photographed the manta top down, the image would not be as interesting nor show off the most eye-catching parts of it.

GETTING THE SHOT

As I mentioned before, the most tricky part of wildlife photography

is getting close to an animal and catching the desired photo without it spooking. All my photography on the Ningaloo is done by freediving, as our reefs are very shallow. But also I find that without the noise and bubbles of a scuba regulator, I am able to approach closer to marine life while remaining relatively silent. Also, it's easier to move fast without the added weight of all the gear, so I can quickly get myself in position. Getting in the right position involves a lot of prediction about where an animal will move next and waiting in its path quietly so that it will approach the camera and not turn away too soon.

Doing this really depends on what animal you're photographing. For example, I wouldn't position myself in the way of a humpback whale or whale shark as they may actually bump into you. But for animals like mantas who are very agile, as long as you remain still and low, they will simply glide over you or move around you without being bothered by your presence. Learning the way animals interact and how to predict their next move takes experience and time in the water with them. Also remember that while photographing them, don't stress them or block their exit. Always allow them room to move away from you if they want to avoid you. Approach slowly, stay calm, and get them to trust you.



Reef Manta Ray, Ningaloo Reef. ISO 500 f8 1/400s

FORMING YOUR IDEAS AND MAKING THEM A REALITY

Finding the animals you want to photograph can be hard, and it's a lot about luck but also knowledge of habitat use and seasonal populations. The more time you spend in the ocean the more encounters you will have and also deepen your understanding of where to find particular species. But when you do finally find the critter you're looking for, you may not have a lot of time to think of the photo you aim to create. So I often have preconceived ideas of shots in my mind that I want to get. So when I eventually find the animal I want for that image, I can focus on capturing that idea, getting myself in the correct position for it, and adjusting my camera settings as needed.

For example, the photo above of the leopard shark is a shot I was wanting to get for ages. The image I had in mind was the sunbeams shining from above the shark, white sand below and the reef making the background. On a snorkel, by chance this leopard swam into the reef and it was the perfect conditions to get the shot I wanted. I swam alongside the shark as it cruised through the coral making sure the sun was on the other side of it. Once it swam past a nice section of coral I dived down so I was level with it and shooting across

with a slight upwards angle I got this photo. This image was made using only ambient light, no strobes. One of the great things about shooting over white sand is some light bounce up onto the subjects so they aren't in complete shadow, illuminating them from below.

KNOW YOUR CAMERA

Things often happen quickly when interacting with wildlife, so you don't want to be wasting time trying to figure out your camera settings. practice with it on land and in the water and know how to change your shutter, ISO, and aperture almost without looking. A huge part of a successful photo is making sure it is correctly exposed, sharp, and with the subject in focus. Always be ready and have your camera settings set for the light and depth you're going to be shooting at. So if suddenly you get an opportunity for a good photo you don't have to change too many things.

I have base settings that my camera is always set on which I can quickly do minor adjustments too easily without taking too much time. Take advantage of the custom modes on your camera if they have them. This means you can save up to 3 options that you often use. For example, I have a custom mode set for shallow water on a sunny day, and another for



Hawksbill Turtle, Ningaloo Reef. ISO 320 f6.3 1/400s

cloudy days with low light. If the sun suddenly goes behind a cloud while I'm photographing customers with a whale shark, I don't have to change all the settings I can just flip the dial over from Custom mode 1 to Custom mode 2. It's worth having an in-depth look at your camera's manual to familiarise yourself with all the options your camera has.

PRACTISE MAKES PERFECT

To get good at anything, it really comes down to time and dedication. With any profession, it's also about investing in quality equipment. If you

want to get professional photos, there aren't many shortcuts around it. Buy a good full-frame camera setup with quality lenses. Get a camera you can grow with as you gain experience. Being capable to shoot in full manual mode will take you a long way, Shooting in automatic underwater mode is a good start, but you won't progress or be able to control the results of your photos.

Take the time to learn the art of photography, what makes a good photo good? I can easily take nice photos of a whale shark, but what is it that makes certain shots stand out over others? Explore it, try as many



techniques as you can, read online tutorials, and take photography classes or workshops. Immerse yourself in the underwater world and spend as much time out in the field as you can. To this day I remain self-taught, I have no formal training. Having the internet is a great resource for learning and it's a great place to start. Real hands-on experience in the field is where you will learn to bring everything together to get the shots you imagine. Also, don't be afraid to reach out to other photographers and ask for advice. We have all been on this journey at some point and have asked the same questions of one another.

Thanks for reading! I hope I have shared some valuable information with you about marine life portraits.

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