The Shot That Isn't Worth Taking

Wildlife photography has always lived in an interesting space between observation and interaction.

At its best, it allows us to witness the natural world without changing what is happening in front of us. A bird feeds its chick, a leopard moves silently through the grass, a snake disappears beneath a rock, and we are simply lucky enough to be there with a camera.

But there are moments when photography stops being observation and starts becoming interference.

That was one of the biggest themes that came through during our recent panel discussion on wildlife photography ethics, looking at everything from mammals and birds to reptiles and other often misunderstood creatures.

And if there is one thing worth saying upfront, it is this: ethics can sometimes be subjective.

Ask ten wildlife photographers how close is "too close" and you may get ten slightly different answers. One animal may tolerate a vehicle nearby while another becomes visibly stressed. A bird calling back once during a survey is very different from repeatedly using playback simply to drag it into the open for a photograph. Handling a reptile as part of legitimate research, relocation or rescue is very different from picking one up purely because it will make better content.

Context matters.

But there are also situations where there really is not much grey area at all.

Deliberately disturbing nests, forcing animals into particular positions, restraining wildlife for photographs, repeatedly flushing birds, chasing animals with vehicles, manipulating reptiles or amphibians purely for content, baiting wildlife irresponsibly, removing animals from shelter, or putting an animal under unnecessary stress to manufacture a photograph should not suddenly become acceptable because there is a camera involved.

A photograph is never more important than the animal in it.

That sounds wonderfully simple until you are standing in the field watching somebody do something you believe is wrong.

So what should you actually do?

The first thing is not to turn the situation into a confrontation for the sake of confrontation. Wildlife ethics can become incredibly emotional, particularly when people feel strongly about the animal involved. If somebody is behaving irresponsibly, shouting at them, threatening them or creating an online mob is unlikely to improve the situation and may make things considerably worse.

If it is safe and appropriate, sometimes a calm conversation is enough.

Not everybody causing disturbance realises they are doing it. New photographers may genuinely not recognise stress behaviour. Someone approaching a nesting bird may simply not understand the consequences. Education should therefore always have a place in conservation.

A simple, respectful comment such as explaining that the animal appears stressed or suggesting that everyone gives it more space can sometimes solve the problem immediately.

But ignorance and deliberate behaviour are not the same thing.

If you witness something more serious, particularly cruelty, intentional disturbance, illegal handling, interference with protected wildlife or repeated unethical behaviour, documenting what happened can be important.

Record the location, date, time and exactly what you witnessed. Photographs or video can be useful where it is safe and lawful to take them, but stick to facts. Avoid embellishing the story because you are angry.

Then report it through the appropriate channels.

Depending on the circumstances, that may mean notifying the reserve or property management, conservation authority, relevant wildlife organisation, rehabilitation organisation, SPCA or another appropriate body. If the behaviour involves a photographer or content creator, reporting the material to the platform can also be worthwhile, particularly when the content encourages others to repeat harmful behaviour.

What we should be careful about is immediately posting somebody's name and photograph across social media.

Public outrage feels powerful, but it can very quickly become trial by Instagram.

A short clip rarely provides every piece of context, and incorrectly accusing somebody can cause enormous damage. Genuine wrongdoing deserves to be dealt with properly, not buried beneath rumours, assumptions and hundreds of angry comments.

There is another responsibility we often overlook too.

We choose what we celebrate.

Every like, share and comment helps determine which wildlife content travels further. Dramatic photographs created through questionable methods can unintentionally teach younger photographers that getting extraordinary images requires increasingly extraordinary interference.

Perhaps one of the simplest things we can do is stop rewarding that.

Celebrate patience. Celebrate natural behaviour. Celebrate photographers who walk away when an animal is uncomfortable. Celebrate the story behind an image when the story is simply that somebody waited quietly for three hours and nature eventually did something wonderful.

Because ethical wildlife photography is not about creating a list of rules long enough to cover every possible situation.

It is about developing a mindset.

If getting the photograph means deliberately changing an animal's behaviour, causing unnecessary stress or putting its welfare at risk, the question should never be, “Can I still get the shot?”

It should be whether the shot is worth taking at all.

And sometimes the most ethical photograph you will ever take is the one you decide not to.