

WILDLIFE VIEWING BASICS by Roger Urbaniak

I have always enjoyed seeing birds and animals in their natural settings to the extent that simply recalling their sighting became a highlight of the outing that I was on at the time. Once I realized that I received this level of enjoyment, I began to hone my skills to help make their sightings more frequent. Hopefully you will find a few of my techniques useful if you wish to see more wildlife yourself.

MAKE A CONSCIOUS EFFORT TO LOOK & LISTEN FOR ANIMALS. It is easy to drive right or walk right past wildlife that is in plain sight and being observed by others. When you are hiking in known wilderness areas remind yourself to look for certain shapes or movement that does not fit in with the landscape. You may even hear leaves rustle, a twig snap, or some other noise made by an animal that tips you off. I have compared notes with friends after hiking to find that we saw quite different scenery on the same trip including animal sightings. If you know the area and certain wildlife might be present, concentrate on looking specifically for their form partially hidden in the landscape

FEEDING AREAS: Areas exist where wild animals are fed to keep them safe and away from farms and orchards. Often these areas can be located by browsing the internet and looking for location tips. One of my favorite viewing areas is roughly 3 miles west of Naches Washington where WDFW feeds elk and big horn sheep during winter months to keep them from browsing on nearby orchards. I have seen roughly 1500 wild elk being fed at one location and then drive 2 miles to see 100 big horn sheep fed at another. Certain dumps will attract black bear. Sometimes just asking your outdoor hunting or hiking friends for tips on where to view will put you in the right location.

MIGRATIONS. Many species of wildlife will migrate to locate food as the seasons change. Many of these migrations are predictable as to when they occur and are often posted online. We have followed the migration of Monarch Butterfly, swallows, elk, antelope, sandhill crane, hummingbirds, ducks and geese. When we drive to areas during migration it often presents an impressive sight. Seeing 250,000 Sandhill Crane in Nebraska, Thousands of butterflies on the same tree, hundreds of geese and swans feeding in farm fields TO get enough energy to complete their migration is impressive. Seeing a roadside sign asking you to slow down because 52 elk were killed last week on the highway during the next ten miles is another sure sign of a migration and also a good reason to be aware and look for them.

TRACKING AND OTHER SIGNS Tracks in the snow are the easiest way to identify the animals you might expect to find in an area. Tracks are also visible in mud and sand if you look for them, plus feces from animals will also tip you off of their presence. Tree rubs where deer and elk try to remove velvet or bears scratch as markers or sometimes to gather insects are also good clues.

GUIDED VIEWING: In some areas local guides are available to take you to where bears feed. Boat trips on the Skagit River will allow you to see and photograph hundreds of eagles during salmon migration. Whale watching excursions are available at several Washington and British Columbia locations. Zoos often provide natural settings for a number of species that you may wish to see and photograph. We visited the World Center of Birds of Prey in Idaho and found their exhibits impressive. The Cat House in Rosamond California is an exotic feline breeding compound and conservation center where you are likely to see endangered species up close that you will not see anywhere else.

FEEDING TIME: Some animals feed during the day, others, especially in urban areas are nocturnal and feed mostly during the night. Nocturnal animals can often be seen at first light or just as it is becoming dark. When summer heat dries out the grasses, deer and elk often feed in high country or along waterways where nearby grass is still green. I have often seen deer standing in water to reach browse. Animals will often break their normal feeding pattern in the fall or spring if a weather front is coming in and start feeding in broad daylight to get nourishment before suspected snow might cover their food.