

The worst photograph I've ever taken

By Torrey Ritter

When I was in my 20s, I started really getting into photography. In 2007, I had just bought a new digital camera and was spending my days trying to sneak up on various wildlife species, hoping for that one epic shot. One spring day, I decided to hike, climb, and scramble up into a maze of rocky cliffs in a favorite Bitterroot Mountains canyon. At the top of a particularly narrow pathway leading into a cathedral of towering granite spires and cliffs, I pulled myself onto a precarious ledge. There, before me just 20 yards away, was a nanny mountain goat, perhaps with parasites or a disease causing hair loss, with a brand-new kid by her side.

Startled by my appearance, the nanny leapt up and scrambled up to a spot, shown in the photo at right, just above her baby. The kid, understandably freaked out, began wailing and bleating and desperately trying to climb up after its mom. But the rocks were too steep, and the tiny goat repeatedly tumbled down after each attempt.

This is the point where I should have immediately recognized the stress and fear I was causing these animals. I should have turned around and left the site as quickly as possible. But I had my new camera and got caught up in the moment. The nanny goat against the giant cliffs was just the stupendous shot I had been dreaming of. So I sat there for a minute or two framing dozens of shots, seemingly oblivious to the cries of the tiny mountain goat and the obvious stress to its mother.

When I got to the bottom of the cliffs and finally realized what I'd just done, I was furious and frustrated with myself. Out of context, I got the shot I wanted, a majestic mountain goat looking out over its domain. But in reality, what I'd photographed was an extremely stressed-out animal desperately trying to escape a threat without leaving its young to struggle on the cliff ledge below. It is in fact a truly horrible photograph, the

worst I've ever taken. But it taught me a valuable lesson.

No wildlife photography is worthwhile if getting the shot causes an animal undue anxiety or harm. That's not only because we should strive to leave wildlife alone as much as possible, especially during sensitive times like breeding seasons, but also because a photo resulting from stressing an animal is deceitful. It may look like the photographer snuck up on the animal and captured a candid, natural moment unnoticed by the subject. But it is really just an image of an animal trying to get away from or otherwise being pressured by an intruding human being. It's completely unnatural.

I deleted all the photos I took of that mountain goat and its kid except this one. It's a reminder that if I am not portraying a totally natural moment, one where the subject animal is not reacting to my presence, then I am creating a falsehood.

As wildlife photography increases in popularity alongside the explosion of social media and the pursuit of likes and views, the notion of wildlife photography as a "non-consumptive" form of outdoor recreation can become completely false. Stressing animals consumes their time, energy, and resources. Even a long shot taken with a telephoto lens can upset an animal if it sees, hears, or smells someone's presence.

We all have a responsibility to choose our photographic moments carefully and get the heck out of there if we come too close to an animal, especially when it's with its young. No photo is worth taking if in doing so we harm, if even slightly, the very wildlife we all value and hope to immortalize with our camera.

Don't be a 2007 Torrey. If you accidentally get too close, grab a mental image of the rare moment you came across and then leave as quickly as possible. You'll feel better for it, and undoubtedly the animal will too. 🐐

Torrey Ritter is FWP's regional nongame wildlife biologist in Missoula.

