

Trip the Light Fantastic

A pandemic lockdown helped one photographer discover his new neighbors.

Text & Photographs by Sean Crane

As a wildlife photography generalist, I've traveled the globe capturing images of all forms of life, big and small. Variety is key for me. Over the past two decades, I've used macro lenses, underwater gear, nocturnal lighting and many other techniques to get shots of a diverse mix of subjects. But in all that time I had never tried camera trapping—until March of 2020.

If there was one silver lining to the pandemic, it's that it finally pushed me to experiment with this approach. Without the ability to travel, camera trapping helped me stay inspired while staying put. Lucky for me, shortly before social distancing became a household term, my wife and I had traded years of living in New York City for a 5-acre property in Connecticut. Little did I suspect just how wildlife rich the confines of our new home would prove to be.

Ninety percent of wildlife photography, for me at least, is reactive: An animal appears, and I have a few seconds to get the shot. Camera trapping is the complete opposite. Rather than being reactive, it takes careful planning. You can spend hours perfecting the lighting, exposure and composition. Of course, no amount of planning matters without studying the terrain to try to predict exactly where an animal might show up. After months of trial and error, I now have a rich collection of images of mammals, birds and other visitors—all from my own backyard.

Triggered by the motion of a passing raccoon, a camera trap captures the most common night visitor to this Connecticut yard—where curious raccoons forage for nighttime treats.



PORTRAITS IN MOTION Black bears are the largest visitors to my yard, and sightings are surprisingly common day or night—but also highly unpredictable. It took me about two months of false starts—and several surveillance cams—to finally locate the spot where they consistently enter the yard, seemingly drawn to check for fruit under an apple tree. This cub (top left) was following its mother when they tripped the invisible camera beam while making their rounds.

I have two wireless camera traps in waterproof housings that I mount on tripods or directly on the ground. Motion triggers the remote flash units and shutter. Reducing flash output is perfect for freezing the action when speedy animals such as squirrels (left)—my most common daily visitors—dash through the frame.

It's the infrequent visitors that bring me the most satisfaction. I have yet to see a coyote in my yard, but my camera caught one wandering through at night (bottom left). Another pleasant and rare surprise is capturing birds. Birds in flight are almost always pure luck, caught when something else—often a squirrel or even a falling leaf—triggers the camera just as the bird happens to fly by. I suspect that was the case when this tufted titmouse (top right) zipped past the lens.

If birds are pure luck, it takes strategy to create dramatically lit images. One night I placed a flash on the ground behind a fallen ash tree and hung two more from branches to add a bit of front lighting—a setup that made a striking, backlit portrait of a young opossum (right).

To date, my traps have taken thousands of images, the vast majority false triggers caused by moving foliage. But amid all the rejects are a number of keepers that I value—and that I might never have captured had it not been for the lockdown. [W](#)

Wildlife photographer Sean Crane lives in Farmington, Connecticut.

