One of the amazing aspects of Arizona is that you don't have to go far to observe wildlife. In fact, the diverse species that inhabit Arizona can often be found as close as one’s own yard. Julie Curtis is proof of this. She took best in show in Arizona Wildlife Views’ 2019 photo contest with her image of two Harris’s antelope squirrels. While Curtis describes the moment when she was preparing to take a photo of one Harris’s antelope squirrel and a second popped into view as a combination of “luck and timing,” there was also a lot of advance planning and staging on her part.

Curtis has an outdoor studio in her front yard where she snaps photographs of wildlife including cottontails, jackrabbits and numerous species of birds. From an open window inside her house in Golden Valley, Curtis takes advantage of scenery and local wildlife to feed her passion for photography.

During this time of social distancing and recommendations for recreating safely, Curtis serves as a great example that one doesn’t need to go far — or even leave his or her yard — to take amazing wildlife photos. Curtis created the photo studio outside her front living room window in 2009. She uses different rocks, old wood, trees, a bird of paradise plant in her front yard where she snaps photographs of wildlife including cottontails, jackrabbits and numerous species of birds. From an open window inside her house in Golden Valley, Curtis takes advantage of scenery and local wildlife to feed her passion for photography.

During this time of social distancing and recommendations for recreating safely, Curtis serves as a great example that one doesn’t need to go far — or even leave his or her yard — to take amazing wildlife photos. Curtis created the photo studio outside her front living room window in 2009. She uses different rocks, old wood, trees, a bird of paradise plant
when it’s blooming and a nearby yucca to provide varying backgrounds. She also will dig up wildflowers and other plants in the yard and replant near the window to create diverse photo opportunities.

“You’ll find you need to change it out frequently to avoid hundreds of photos with the same background,” Curtis says. “This month I will plant a couple desert trees as close as possible to the window for closer, eye-level shots. The busy season is coming soon, and wildlife will be abundant here.”

Tools of the trade include a tripod with a ball head, an extra battery that’s always out of view. Fresh water is provided for “her crew” hidden behind the window for closer, eye-level shots. The busy season is coming soon, and wildlife will be abundant here.”

Curtis puts small piles of wild bird seed behind the plant that’s being used to photograph birds, but ensures that it’s always out of view. Fresh water is provided for “her crew” hidden behind a shrub, and hummingbird feeders are hung nearby.

“My photos never have any human traces such as landscape lighting, planters, concrete, etc.,” she says.

Curtis also notes that the window she sits in faces south — while it’s the wrong direction for light, she’s learned to work with it. She positions the props facing east for the morning light and switches directions for the latter part of the day. In addition, a large mesquite tree provides filtered light over the outdoor studio throughout the summer.

“arizona Wildlife Views’ annual photo contest will kick off in June, and this year we’re partnering with Arizona Highways to provide an easier way to submit photographs. Check azgfd.gov for the announcement about the official open date, and as always, the entries must be submitted by the second Friday in August (Aug. 14) at 5 p.m.

One best in show and 11 winners will be showcased in the 2021 calendar, which is published in the November–December issue. Photos must be taken in Arizona settings. The photos are evaluated on creativity, photographic quality, effectiveness in conveying the unique character of the subject, and whether or not submitted images meet the basic size and formatting requirements. Winners and honorable mentions will be announced in November.

For those who feel inspired by Julie Curtis’s approach when creating a wildlife photo studio, keep in mind that photographs are not eligible if they include people or man-made objects that are recognizable.

Get outdoors, get inspired and get creative with wildlife photography approaches. You never know what may venture into your yard in Arizona.

Tips from a Pro

This time of year offers plenty of opportunities to take photographs of birds and animals. When you’re outside with a camera, make it a point to practice your composition skills. As you look at the subject, look at its surroundings too. Some of the best images have the fewest elements. Watch for branches, rocks and other objects that obstruct the view or distract from the subject and recompose to eliminate those.

Also, control the depth of field to focus attention where you want it. Wildlife photography is not like shooting a landscape, where you want everything in focus. Here, often you want the background to blur.

Use larger apertures (a smaller F-stop number) and closer focusing distances to produce a more shallow depth of field. This technique will make your wildlife subject the center of attention, just as it should be. — George Andrejko, photographer, Arizona Game and Fish Department

Submit your best shots

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