

Getting started in wildlife filmmaking

My advice for getting started is that above all else you need a really strong and practical interest in nature. The technical side of this work is only one part of it and without the wildlife side you are unlikely to be able to find, approach or film your subjects. The good news is that this knowledge isn't expensive or especially difficult to come by, it just takes time and application. You'll need binoculars, you'll need to belong to wildlife conservation organisations, you'll need to read widely and above all you'll need to spend most of your spare time outdoors looking for wildlife. If you are also filming or photographing that's a bonus but it's not the most important thing.

Biology is a useful subject to have studied but a strong practical interest in wildlife is almost as good if you are filming. If you want to produce films a zoology degree is pretty much essential.

Then you need to demonstrate that you can operate a camera and shoot the necessary parts of a sequence. This is because most of the time you'll be working on your own and with unpredictable subjects.

You'll need to watch as many wildlife films as possible to analyse how their sequences are shot and edited. I usually do this with the sound turned down as it's easier to concentrate on the images. Look for how the cameraman has revealed the subject, how there are key turning points in the sequences without which they wouldn't have worked - sometimes these are lucky shots but often they are planned. Notice how the editor has built a sequence from the shots. Look for when interesting angles and camera positions have been pre-imagined and organised, sometimes with much more effort than meets the eye, and work out how they were done.

Novelty, beauty and great coverage of behaviour are what any audience is struck by. I'd suggest that you need to make a short film (5 minutes) to impress potential employers. Beg, borrow or steal a camera (Digital SLRs seem to offer the cheapest high-quality option at present), choose a subject which is easily accessible so you can maximise your filming time - ideally something quite tame (it doesn't matter how common the animal is as long as you can film it in an interesting way) and throw yourself at it. If you can't get hold of a video camera shoot a sequence of stills, like a storyboard.

Be critical of your work, edit it hard and show it to people you trust to give an opinion before you take it to producers. I'll happily watch and comment on your work if you do this.

The final step is to contact producers and Assistant Producers and take your film to show them. If you watch enough films you can easily work out the good ones from the credits. The BBC people are easy to contact as their email addresses

are usually firstname.secondname@bbc.co.uk Most of them work in BBC Bristol which is 0117 9732211.

They're a friendly bunch and will most often be happy to chat over a cup of coffee if you ask them for advice. They make most of the wildlife programmes on UK television but there are some independent production companies too like John Downer productions, Icon and Tigress, also in Bristol.

There are many general filmmaking courses and a few specialist courses.

Salford does a good

one http://www.els.salford.ac.uk/courses/pginfo.php?course_id=1800

and there are shorter ones run by people like Wildeye. <http://www.wildeye.co.uk/>

Avon Wildlife Trust runs a weekend course at Folly

Farm. <http://www.follyfarm.org/adult-learning>

As far as I know there are pretty much no staff filming jobs so all the cameramen are freelance. The BBC Natural History Unit has occasional bursaries traineeships but the competition for these is intense and they tend to go to quite experienced people.

Cameramen tend not to employ assistants although it's not unknown. Sometimes productions supply them which is the situation I am in with some of the Hebrides filming at present.

You'll need to stick with it as this is a long haul but be reassured by the thought that most other people will give up along the way.

Good luck!

John