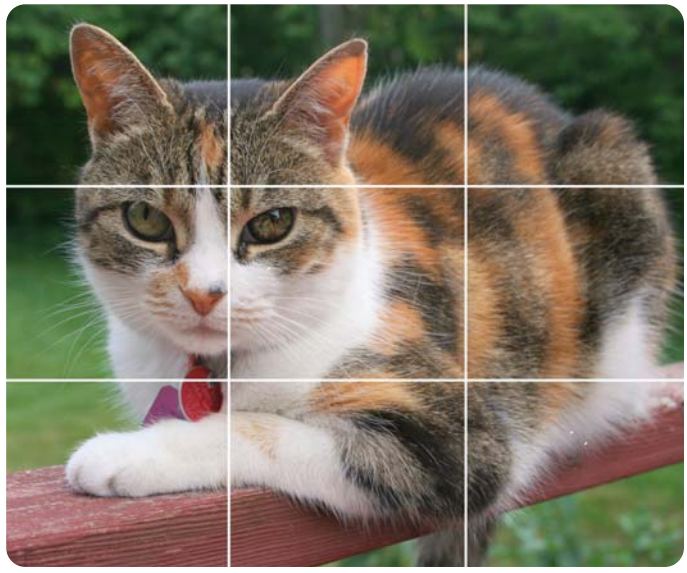
Be a Better Photographer — Part 1

BY JIM CORNISH

In 1994, Apple introduced the first consumer digital camera and virtually transformed photography overnight. Today, the ability to view film-quality images immediately and take numerous shots of the same subject at negligible costs are big draws to digital cameras. Add computer-based imaging software and suddenly a world once known only to professional photographers is open to everyone. With the Internet offering free or inexpensive image storage, it's now possible to share ones' photographs with family, friends and other photo enthusiasts around the world in just a matter of seconds.



Photos: Jim Cornish

This shot of a friend's cat shows the rule of thirds applied to a close up photograph. Notice how the cat's head is at one of the places the lines on the grid intersect.

Good Photographs Aren't Taken, They are Created

That statement is an old saying amongst professional photographers. Even though digital cameras are fully automated, getting that "great shot" is still about having the necessary equipment ready, knowing the capabilities and limitations of one's camera, knowing and applying the basics of composition and understanding light.

This two part article is a brief overview of what to keep in mind when using point-and-shoot (P&S) cameras. (Part 2 will be in the October issue of *Scouting Life* magazine.) The following explanations and tips will help give you a better understanding on how to take better pictures, enhance images lacking good colour or contrast and help your Scouts and Cubs earn their Photographer Badge.

Be Prepared!

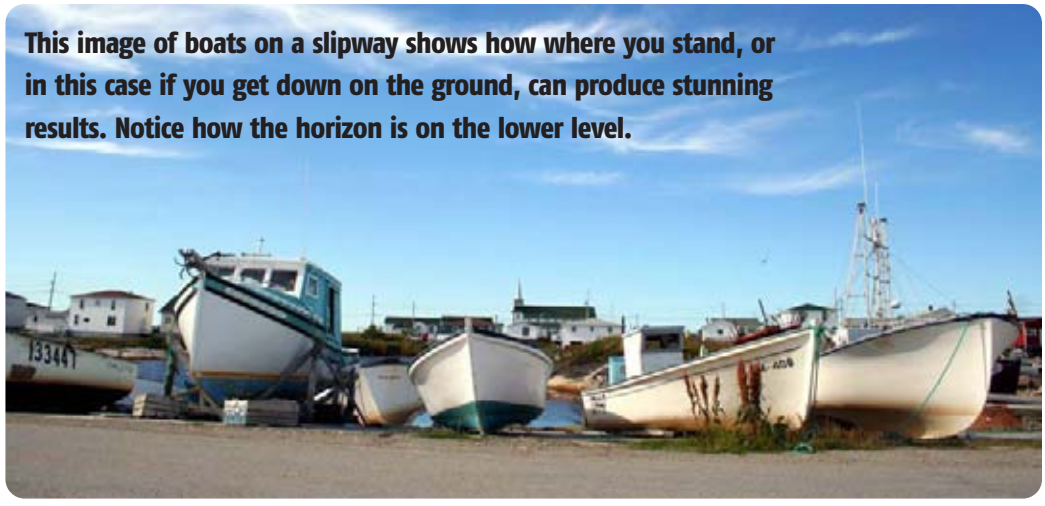
Digital cameras are energy hungry and even the best lithium batteries have a rather short lifespan. Some of their energy goes into firing the flash. Most of it, however, goes into operating the often overused and oversized LCD displays on the back of virtually all digital cameras. Then there are the image storage devices — as small as a postage stamp yet capable of holding hundreds of images.

Tips on Being Prepared

- Use rechargeable batteries.
- Recharge the batteries at the end of each day of shooting.
- Carry a set of regular batteries for back-up. (Rechargeables lose their power when stored unused for a long time.)
- Carry an extra memory card/stick for backup.
- Carry a lens cleaning kit, especially one with a fine-haired brush for removing dust. Clean the lens with the proper solution by first adding it to the lens tissue, and then moving the tissue in a circular motion around the lens.
- Back-up your digital images regularly by burning them onto a compact disc.

Know the Basics of Photography and Your Equipment

One of the advantages of P&S cameras is that they do all of the work for you. But, like most things technical and artistic, digital photography has a unique vocabulary. While many words are borrowed from film photography (aperture, f-stops, shutter speed, depth of field), some are not (pixels, noise, RAW,



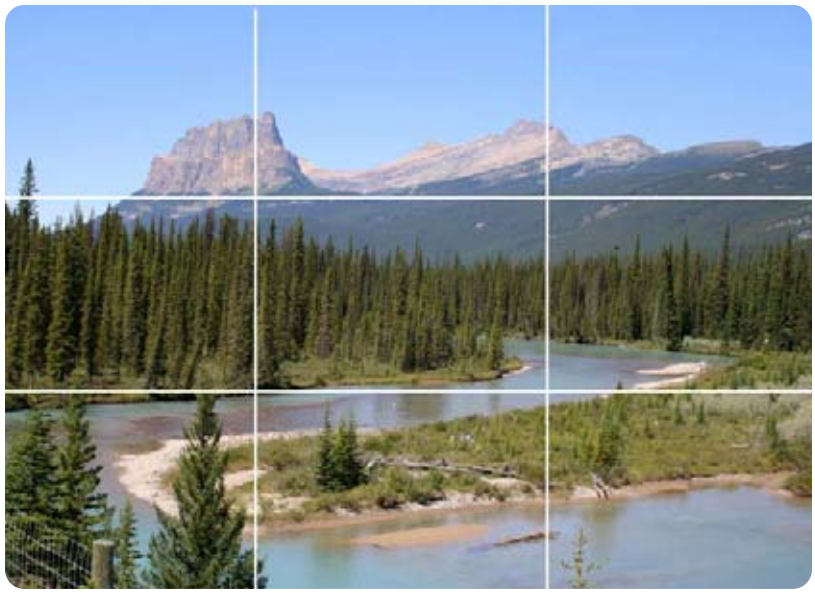
This image of boats on a slipway shows how where you stand, or in this case if you get down on the ground, can produce stunning results. Notice how the horizon is on the lower level.

LCD, histograms and leveling). Knowing how your camera works and how to control such basics as aperture (the amount of light entering the camera as measured using f-stops), shutter speed (measured in seconds and fractions of seconds, it's the time needed to capture an image) and the ever confusing depth-of-field (how much of the subject is focused in front of and behind the focal plane) will require you to read a few books and experiment by changing some of the camera's settings.

All digital cameras aren't created equal and the myriad of features on even a low-end P&S can be mesmerizing. Getting to know a digital camera and its capabilities takes time. Learning how to use them beyond the "Auto" setting takes even longer. After taking the camera out of its box, try the following tips.

Learning the Basics

- Read the camera's manual. (You'd be surprised how many people ignore it.)
- Select one feature of your camera and learn how to use it well before going on to the next.
- Know the minimum focusing distance.
- Know the maximum effective distance for the flash. Shooting anything outside the range will produce underexposed images.
- Know what each of the options on the selection button does and learn when and where to use them.
- Scroll through each of the menu options as displayed on the LCD. There are many useful features buried within this menu structure.
- Experiment. Take lots of pictures, even of one subject. The cost after buying the camera is negligible.
- Create your own "cheat sheet" for quick access to directions for features you seldom use. (Some manufacturers include these on pocket-sized cards.)
- Buy books and magazines on digital photography. Subscribe to on-line newsletters offering tips on taking better pictures and working with imaging software.
- *Practice, practice, practice.*



This is a picture of Castle Mountain in Banff National Park, Alberta. It shows the use of the rule of thirds in landscape photography by positioning the mountain on the left side of the screen and the horizon near the top horizontal line of the grid. Notice how the river serves as the S-curve/lead to guide the viewer to the mountains.

Composing the Shot

If the picture you just took doesn't reflect the reason you snapped it, then there is likely something wrong with its composition. When composing a photograph, keep three things in mind; theme (the universal message of the photograph), emphasis (the subject) and simplicity (nothing in the photo distracts from the subject to weaken the theme). These tips will help with composition.

- The "Rule of Thirds". This most basic rule is the widest used to compose perfect pictures. To apply it, imagine your viewfinder or LCD display divided by lines in a tic-tac-toe pattern. Place the important features in the photo on or near where the lines intersect. Place horizons near the top line if the foreground is the subject. Place the horizon on the bottom line if the background is the focus. Some digital cameras' menus contain a toggle setting to place a rule-of-thirds grid on the viewfinder or LCD to help when composing a shot.
- Use a S-curve/lead-in line in foregrounds to guide the viewer's eye through the picture. This can be done using streams, trails, roads or fences moving diagonally through the picture.
- Frame the scene using doorways, trees, branches and arches.
- Fill the frame. Get up close to compose a tight shot.
- Photograph children at their eye level.
- Use the viewfinder to take your picture and the LCD to decide whether it's the shot you want. Bracing the camera against your cheek helps steady the camera, eliminating blurred images. In low light, use a tripod. Human hands cannot hold a camera without shaking at speeds less than 1/60 of a second. If you have to use the LCD, brace your elbows against your hips to steady the camera. Shooting at arm's length often causes camera shake, resulting in a blurred image.
- Take a few shots of one scene with the camera oriented normally, and then turn it on its side for a portrait orientation. Use the LCD to view both shots.
- KISS. Keep the Shot Simple. Don't clutter the picture.

Next Month

Next month's issue will provide details on composing the four basic types of photographs – macro, close-up, portraits and landscapes. Combined with the resources from the April *Leader Magazine* article, *Get To Know Digital Photography*, you and your youth will be top photographers in no time.

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Scouting Life Photo Contest – for Youth Only!

Details to be revealed in the October issue of *Scouting Life*. Four categories, great prizes.

Adults, share your new found knowledge with the kids so they can put it into practise for the contest.