Be a Better Photographer — Part 2

BY JIM CORNISH

In the previous issue of *Scouting Life Magazine*, we introduced the concepts of getting to know your camera, composing the shot using the Rule of Thirds, getting close to your subject, and many other tips. Now it's time to discover other different types of pictures, using light correctly and benefits of imaging software.

Types of Photographs

There are four basic types of photographs — macros, close-ups, portraits and landscapes. Except for macros (extreme close-ups that require special lenses), all cameras are designed to handle the remaining three, despite the challenges of holding the camera steady and getting the light and composition just right. Below is a short description of each type of photograph and some tips on taking good shots.

Close-ups

We see most things from a distance. Cameras allow us to capture these things closely. Close-up photographs are taken near a camera's minimum focusing distance, somewhere around 30 centimetres on most Point & Shoot (P&S) cameras. Close-ups are most often used for plants and insects but can be used for abstract photography too. They are also the most challenging as they require a steady camera.

Tips for the Best Close-up Pictures

- Select the close-up button on the dial. (This makes the subject sharply focused while blurring the background.)
- Stay outside of the minimum focusing distance for a sharp image.
- Move the camera around to arrange the subject's lines along the diagonals of the image.
- Spray flowers with water mist to create the illusion of freshness.
- Experiment using natural light and a flash. If the flash makes the subject too bright, try covering it with a piece of wax paper or sheer material.
- Steady the camera using a tripod or by resting it on a beanbag.
- Use the self-timing feature to eliminate camera shake.

Landscapes

Landscapes capture those large, open, breath-taking scenes we so often admire. According to one photographer, great landscape photography is knowing where to stand — or as I once discovered, where to lie down.

Landscape shots that turn us green with envy are a product of more than a good camera, good techniques and a good location. Many are shot using polarizing and neutral density filters to manipulate the light and expensive feature-rich software to produce the final image.

Landscape Picture Tips

- Identify the elements of the scene that please you.
- Shoot landscapes during the early morning or late evening hours when the light is soft and the shadows strong.
- To reduce over and under exposures appearing in the same picture, shoot sunsets after the sun disappears beneath the horizon and sunrises before the sun appears above the horizon. If you do decide to shoot with the sun still visible, meter the light by first turning your camera away from the sun and then pressing the shutter button halfway. Now turn the camera to include the sun and press the button the rest of the way.

Caution! Never look into the sun, even through the viewfinder. Use the camera's LCD for composition.

- Use the "rule of thirds" to position key elements in eye-pleasing places.
- Include foreground to add interest to landscape shots.
- Keep the horizon straight.
- Revisit a landscape at different times of the day and year. The varying light will enable you to catch the landscape's changing mood.
- Take your time. Unlike a live subject, the scene isn't going anywhere.

Portraits

Portraits should capture the spirit. Depending on the type and purpose of the portrait, photographers either

Macro photography, showing the reproductive structures of a daffodil.

Photos: Jim Cornish

like to eliminate distracting backgrounds or include a background when the environment is meaningful to the subject.

Tips for Great Portrait Shots

- Use the portrait option on the camera. It creates a sharply focused foreground and blurs a distracting background.
- Shoot with the subject off center by placing him/her toward the opposite side of the frame they are facing. Use the "rule of thirds" grid for best positioning.
- Arrange the faces of three people so that an imaginary line connecting their noses forms a triangle, or have the shoulders of two people tucked in behind a single person in front of them.
- Use natural light to produce softness in the image.

Taking Great Pictures

Digital cameras are fully automatic. When the shutter release button is pressed half way down, the camera focuses and meters the light to determine the exposure and shutter speed. When the shutter button is pressed further, focus and exposure are locked and the picture taken. In most P&S models, this may take anywhere from a quarter to one full second. Unaware of this, many P&S users do not steady their cameras long enough. This produces blurred images or images that have closed eyes even through they were opened when the image was framed.

Taking Great Picture Tips

- Check the camera's users manual for shutter lag and adjust your picture taking accordingly.
- Use the camera's viewfinder. Placing the P&S against your cheekbone helps steady it, resulting in sharper images.
- Move around. Try different angles and locations.
- Wait for changes in the light, particularly on partially cloudy days.
- Shoot sunsets after the sun has disappeared beyond the horizon. Shooting directly into the sun may cause damage to the camera's light sensor.
- Change camera settings as you shift from landscape to close-up or portrait type shots.
- Take four or five shots of a group to increase the chances of capturing one with all eyes open.

It's All About the Light

Taking pictures is about capturing light, usually the light reflected by the subject. Too little light and the pictures appear dark. Too much light and pictures appear washed of colour. Too little and too much light in the same photo creates a poor quality image. Types of light in a digital photo can be broken down into light, highlights, shadows and dark. A great photo has a balance of all four.

Working With Light Tips

- Use the flash when scenes contain both shaded and sunlit objects. Forcing the flash (a button or menu setting on most cameras) will also eliminate shadows beneath cap brims, eyebrows, noses and chins. Forced flash works best on close shots, well within the range of the flash.
- Don't count on the built-in flash for lighting a dark room.
- Meter the camera to one side of the subject. Bright objects in the foreground will throw off the light meter reading and leave you with an underexposed image. Swing the camera to the right or left of the subject, press the shutter halfway down to get a meter reading. Recompose your shot and then press the shutter the rest of the way.

A close shot of frosted leaves taken in the soft light shortly after sunrise.

Imaging Software

Most cameras come with software created by the camera manufacturer. Their imaging software is good enough to get you started but not good enough to do a thorough job enhancing an image.

In my opinion, the best imaging software is produced by Adobe. Its Photoshop Suite ranges from $100 to $700 in price. All of Adobe's software is available on-line and free for a thirty day preview.

Sunset over Gander Lake, NL. Taken as a telephoto shot after the sun had set.

Unless you are a serious photographer and interested in selling your photographs, you might like to try some of the free programs available on-line. A favourite of mine is Picasa. It can be downloaded at (**picasa.google.com**) and installed on your own computer. Picasa is both an image organizer and an image processor. As part of the installation, it will give you the option to scan your entire computer or just the Documents folder and then organize your images. All of the image-editing options are available via clickable buttons. Changes to an image are controlled by slide bars, making it easy to learn and use. Most importantly, changes to the image are saved as a separate file, leaving the original untouched. The red-eye reduction option of Picasa works better than many other expensive software. The support option is based on FAQs.

Another editing option is Picnik (**www.picnik.com/**), an on-line editing application that allows users to quickly and easily edit, enhance, share and print photos from within a web browser. Its basic version is free and easy to use. No registration is required.

Learning From Others

One of the best ways to learn more about photography is to view the work of others. Most professional photographers and many talented amateurs, have on-line galleries filled with all kinds of images — portraits, landscapes and abstracts. Every image can be studied to learn how and what to photograph. These sites have a search option so you can pick any topic (flowers, sunsets, portraits, etc.) that interests you. Be careful though; while sites have strict guidelines on what kinds of images users are allowed to store, some search terms may result in images bordering inappropriate for children. I recommend:

Notice how the butterfly is oriented along the diagonal; a case of being in the right place at the right time.

Photos: Jim Cornish

BetterPhoto.com
www.betterphoto.com

FlickR
www.flickr.com/

A Final Thought

Photography is full of rules. And while all of them will help you create better photos, there is one final rule every professional insists be followed — all the rules of photography can be broken to explore the full potential of this expressive medium.

— Jim Cornish is an amateur photographer and naturalist, whose pictures have appeared in recent NL tourist promotion publications. A Fifth Grade teacher in Gander, NL, he enjoys encouraging youth to develop to their best potential.

Supporting Web Sites

PhotoNet
photo.net/learn/

1001 Uses for a Digital Camera
pegasus.cc.ucf.edu/%7Eucfcasio/qvuses.htm

Digital Kids Club
www.adobe.com/education/digkids/lessons/

BluePixel
www.bluepixel.net/

Digital Photography With Windows XP
www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/using/digitalphotography/default.mspx

Short Courses on Digital Photography
www.shortcourses.com/

Digital Photography School
digital-photography-school.com

Books on Digital Photography

There are many great books on digital photography on the market. A web search will result in hundreds of titles, many of them with conflicting reviews of the value of the book. The books listed below are ones I have in my library and were purchased after reviewing them in a bookstore.

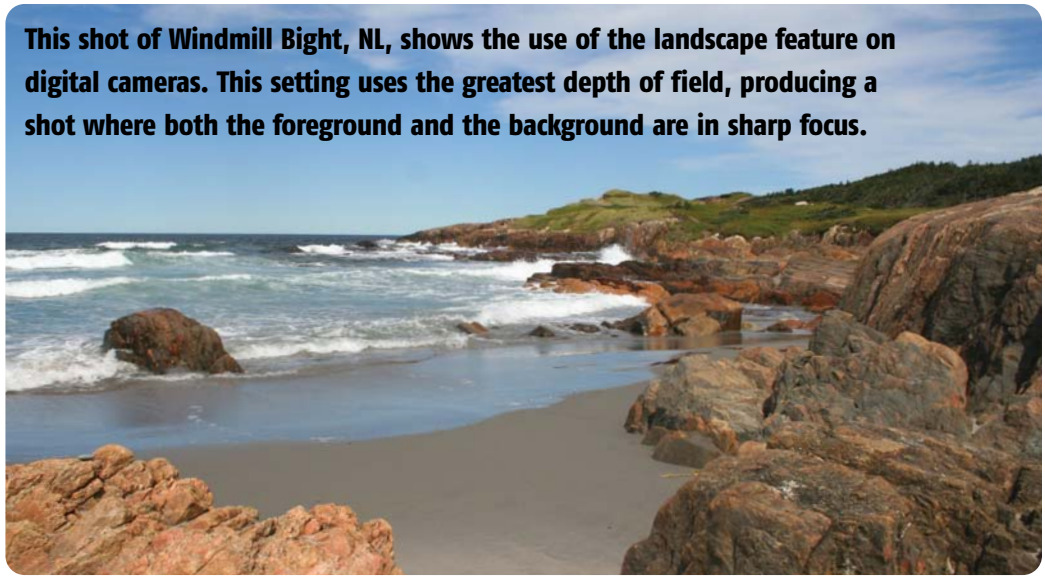
Fitzharris, Tim "National Audubon Society Guide to Landscape Photography", Firefly Books, 2007.

Patterson, Freeman "Photography and the Art of Seeing: A Visual Perception Workshop For Film And Digital Photography", Key Porter Books Ltd, 2004.

Patterson, Freeman "Photography Of Natural Things: A Nature & Environment Workshop For Film and Digital Photography", Key Porter Books Ltd, 2004.

Patterson, Freeman "Photography For The Joy Of It: An Introductory Workshop For Film And Digital Photography", Key Porter Books Ltd, 2007.

Hoddinott, Ross "The Digital Photographer's Guide to Filters", D&C Books, 2007.



This shot of Windmill Bight, NL, shows the use of the landscape feature on digital cameras. This setting uses the greatest depth of field, producing a shot where both the foreground and the background are in sharp focus.