

True Confessions of a Nature Photographer (continued)

Editor's Note: When I read Andy's fascinating story, I realized that I wanted to know more about the nuts and bolts (well -- blinds and lenses) of how he does it. Unfortunately, my questions and Andy's answers would have filled up the entire newsletter. Luckily, the existence of a website gives us a chance to publish them in this format.

1.) How do you cope with the possible effect of your human scent scaring away wildlife when you are in your blind?

It probably does. I have yet been able to see Moose, Deer, or Coyote from the blind, even though I've sat in perfect habitats and saw fresh tracks and scat all around the area. That said, I really think it depends on how compelled by whatever food or mating behavior is on the animal's mind at the time and how cautious by nature it is. Adolescent animals notoriously tend to be far less distrustful of whatever dubious intentions we humans appear to have in store for them. If they're still walking around in a couple of years they probably have rightly learned to be much more guarded.

2.) How close do you have to get for those frame-filling close-up shots of Moose and Loons?

Most of my Moose images, (and all my Loon images) were taken from my kayak. The most typical range is between 20 and 50 feet for Loons and 100 feet or more for Moose, although extreme close-ups at 20 feet have also been possible for Moose occasionally.

Late Spring and early Summer are good times to photograph Moose because they spend so much of their days in shallow ponds feeding on the aquatic vegetation, such as water lilies. After meager pickings of bark, twigs and evergreen needles during the long winter, they are more than eager to replenish their massive bodies by consuming vast quantities of these plants, which are particularly rich in the nutrients they need such as sodium and potassium. Kayaks are the perfect vehicle to approach Moose because they present such a low profile in the water and tend to not be associated with anything immediately recognizable as threatening. But get out of your kayak and stand up, and you will see just how quickly a Moose can disappear! In terms of approaching as close as possible, you obviously don't want to vigorously paddle straight out to where the Moose is. It helps to appear as

though you just happen to be out foraging around the pond just as the animal is. It helps to think “patience” at this point. Angling the kayak to take advantage of any slight breeze that could serendipitously move you closer can gradually decrease your distance without spooking the animal, but it’s important to know that some individuals just have a wider personal space requirement than others. Its body language will usually tell you if the animal is getting nervous, and is very easy to interpret—it will stop feeding, look at you and move away, sometimes quickly. That’s when the opportunity now turns into more of an “environmental shot” from a distance with the big lens, like a 500mm (which magnification-wise is equivalent to a 10 X pair of binoculars). You can’t handhold it, but I adapted a center post from an old tripod to work like a short monopod in the cockpit of my kayak, and this keeps everything pretty steady in most cases.

3.) *Do you do your own film processing and/or printing?*

I’ve pretty much made a complete transition to digital now. I shot with slide film for years but never did any of the film processing. Developing transparency film (known as E6 processing) is really a relatively routine procedure that is so much easier to just have professional labs handle, but I have done my own printing for years now. This I do believe is an important part of the creative process of the image that should be done exclusively by the artist. Even when I shot with film, I used to scan the slide using a high resolution film scanner to create a digital file of the image. Then I would use Adobe Photoshop to adjust the color, tone, and contrast, much like a conventional photographic print would be in a chemical darkroom. Ansel Adams always claimed that the finished print came to life for him in the darkroom by employing the right expertise. It is similar in the digital darkroom. All the same techniques (and more) are available, and one is only limited by their own imaginations in terms of creative departures. As a nature photographer, however, I feel duty-bound to represent my subjects realistically and free of any deliberate manipulation. I know many photographers tend to be a little heavy-handed with the color saturation tool. Bright colors do attract attention it is true, but a viewer has to recognize common elements within the scene, like the sky or water, as accurate in order to validate the genuineness of the entire print.

4.) *Most people nowadays have digital cameras. I have seen some good photos taken by professionals with digital cameras but not as good as yours. Do you ever use a digital camera and do you have any advice for those who do?*

In terms of the question of which system is better, digital or film, it’s kind of like the issue of global warming. The science is clear in that there really is little doubt

among the experts that digital unmistakably exceeds film as a far more versatile and powerful tool for the purposes of photographic capture, but there are naysayers, traditionalists, and cautious conservatives within the ranks. The truth is, it would be very difficult for any professional photographer to stay competitive in a very competitive field without using digital equipment today. Coming from a 35 mm film knowledge-base, however, has given me a sound understanding of the basics of photography. My advice to those who have just arrived to this brave new world of digital photography would be to leave the comfortable domain of the program mode setting of your camera as soon as possible. Graduating to the aperture priority setting is a good start. Then try the manual mode. This gets you to thinking and practicing one of the trickiest things to get right on a technical level, and that's how to correctly expose a scene given the available light. Bring the owners manual with you each time you go out to shoot, and go out a lot. Don't worry, now you don't have to think in the back of your mind that every click of the camera just cost you half a buck!

5.) Did you buy your blind or make it yourself?

I purchased both of my blinds from Leonard Rue Enterprise, a catalog company that specializes in outdoor photographic equipment. They're about \$200.00. The ones I'm used to using have a lightweight metal frame sewn into the fabric that gives it its shape when you open it up. They also make a smaller one that is essentially camouflaged cloth that is designed to wrap around you with an opening for your lens. Using this type of system has its advantages in that it is very pocket able, but allows for zero fidgeting when you're in the company of wildlife. The reason I have 2 of them is that it allows me to set up one of them (the older more weather worn one) in a place where wildlife can get accustomed to it over the course of several weeks. The other one I usually keep in my yard near my birds feeders in order to photograph whatever native species happen by.

6.) Any advice on coping with bugs?

Since a lot of my field work takes place in the Spring, black flies can be a nuisance for sure, but quite honestly, most of the time it's not a huge factor. I don't like to use insect repellent mainly because of the odor, and at other times when I'm out in open water in my kayak I can stay fairly bug free. But any respectable black fly worth her own weight in human blood can always find the slightest opening in any type of protective covering it seems, especially an old blind. I'm usually not the kind of person who enjoys squashing bugs, but when several dozen get caught inside with me, it's either me or them!

7. Would you insert a tiny explanation of f stop, like the percent of the aperture that is open to allow light to enter?

There are photographers who can describe the physics behind every operation of the camera, and there certainly is a mathematical formula that applies to what is referred to in photography as f stops, but I am unfortunately not one of those photographers. What is essential to know, however, is that a small f stop number like f2.8 is one full stop faster than f5.6, two full stops faster than f8, three full stops faster than f11, and four stops faster than f16. The smaller the f stop number (like f2.8) the bigger the lens opening, the more light you are exposing to the film or sensor, and as a result—the faster your shutter speed will be. How does this all relate to taking a picture? It's not a particularly easy concept to grasp right away, which is why most people just keep their cameras set on program mode with little symbols like mountains, flowers, or moving cars located on the camera to represent the subjects they want to photograph (landscapes, close-ups, or fast moving subjects respectively). The creative possibilities expand considerably when you understand how to use these principles to your advantage. A larger f stop (like f22) may slow down your shutter speed to allow that same measure of light to reach the film plane for a proper exposure (not good for photographing Hummingbirds!), but the depth of field increases significantly. This means that you just might be able to get those blooming Lilacs in focus along with the beautiful white church in the background. Conversely, at f2.8 that smiling baby will stand out nicely from an unfocused background that gives just the right hint of location without too much distraction. I know it's counter intuitive, but just remember: Small f numbers (f1.4, f2.8, f5.6) = big lens opening, fast exposure but shallow depth of field.
Large f numbers (f8, f11, f16 and beyond) = small lens opening, slower exposure but longer depth of field.

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