Digital Outdoors

What's changed—and what's not—photographing nature in the digital age.

Story and Photos By
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It seems nearly everyone owns a digital camera these days. And why not? Today's culture of instant everything demands we share photos within minutes of any event, such as a birthday cake being cut, or a butterfly landing on a flower.

The problem: Despite our digital triumph over time, truly great photographs still require patience. Especially when it comes to photographing nature, where today's digital revolution really hasn't changed the basics, according to experts.

Bright colors in nature can turn almost surreal through the digital eye. The bright-colored polypore mushroom known as *Pycnoporus cinnabarinus* glows like neon in digital format.

"What digital cameras can do is make their learning curve go faster," explained David Hammond, a professional nature photographer living in rural Johnson County. Hammond gives a thumbs-up to the lightning-fast results of digital cameras because it speed up the trial-and-error process while we learn photography skills. "But, for the most part, whatever you used to do with film you still have to do with digital."

The basics of photography—lighting, composition and focus—all remain timeless fundamentals, Hammond said. The trouble is, in some ways, digital cameras actually make it more difficult to abide by those basics. Here's why: Exaggerated image contrast—too bright or too dark—remains a technical issue within the digital image industry.

If lighting is everything, as some photographers maintain, the lack of subtlety in digital images can be frustrating.

Photographing on overcast days—opposed to bright sunlight—can soften harsh digital contrast.

"They're coming a long way in dealing with the contrast problem," offered Scott Kemmerer, a technical advisor at B&L Photo in Carbondale. "But the inherent problem with digital photography is still dealing with the contrast."

Subtle shading and transition between light and dark give quality photographs integrity, Kemmerer said. Unfortunately, too many amateur photographers become dazzled by the exaggerated colors—neon reds and blues—rendered by digital sensors. Kemmerer recommends seeking softer lighting during morning or evening outdoors, opposed to midday light, for richer (more film-like) results. And don't be fast and careless with your technique, despite the lightning-quick ability of digital cameras.

Since few digital cameras have peek-through viewfinders, photographers no longer bother to "anchor" the camera in front of their eye before shooting an image. That failure to steady and envision what's being photographed leads to less-than-sharp images, Hammond points out.

"Something happens when we put a camera up to our eye," Hammond said. "Not only do we concentrate more, it forces us to hold the camera still." Image stabilization features built into many modern digitals are helpful, Hammond said, but that short-cut leads to careless compositions and mistakes. A tripod is always a smart choice, regardless of the subject. And the use of flash, even during daylight, can fill in the shadows, which softens the harsh contrast between light and dark.

When it comes to beautiful images in nature we encounter during a hike, don't be in a hurry to record it on your digital camera before resuming the hike. We've all seen camera owners holding a digital camera in the air, glancing at the tiny video screen, then pushing the image button. Unfortunately, what the camera sees and what the holder of the camera sees can be disappointingly different images. Hammond says even trusty film can't capture the subtle variations of light and color we see.

"There's never been a film—or digital—camera that can match the genius of our human eye," Hammond added. So we must shoot within the technological limits.

Those of us still familiar with film cameras know they require different types of film for different situations—"fast" film exposes quickly with less light than "slow" film. One film type might be appropriate for a bright day at the Lake Michigan beach, while the other works best in a shadowy forest. Many digital cameras today offer variable exposure modes to mimic the various abilities of different film types.

Regarding the megapixel numbers touted by many manufacturers, how many megapixels does anyone really need? A few years ago, digital camera manufacturers boasted 3 megapixels as a selling point.

"Every camera now, at entry level, is a 7 megapixel," explained Michael Sarver, co-owner of B&L Photo. "It's way more than any amateur photographer really needs; but people tend to think they'll be able to take better pictures… if only they buy that digital camera that has more megapixels than the camera they bought 2 years ago."

Auto-focus features in digital cameras are great—unless the intended subject is overlooked. Even landscape compositions (below) suffer when specific points of focus are wrong.

Composition is critical in any photograph. Digital screens can lead to poor compositions when held at a comfortable viewing distance.

Improvements to digital cameras are happening all of the time, Sarver said. But the way digital cameras are marketed today leads consumers to believe they must upgrade repeatedly.

"If I were to tell you I'm using a great 35 mm film camera manufactured in 1971, you wouldn't blink," Sarver explained. "But that line of thinking isn't being promoted in the digital industry; it's almost as if digital cameras are being marketed as a disposable commodity."

Ultimately, the best camera in the world can't replace the virtues of patience and imagination. Hammond said he might reposition his tripod a few feet to the right or left, experimenting with slightly different nuances in composition in lighting, while photographing a scene in nature. Patience—and a love for the subject—make all of the difference.

"Photography, like any art, comes from your heart," Hammond said. "Shoot what you love."