



10 ways to improve your image

Experts offer tips for capturing award-winning photos without the need for expensive equipment

BY LAURA WATILO BLAKE

Become a great outdoor photographer by watching the Weather Channel. That's just one of the many recommendations from professional photographer Ian Adams.

When photographing people, *Detroit Free Press* photographer Eric Seals suggests abandoning the "cheese factor" by capturing candid moments, rather than posing your subjects.

But the number one way to improve photographic prowess is by reading the camera's manual. "You just have to do it," Adams says. "It's a pain in the butt, but it's the only way you can understand what your camera can do."

It's not the equipment; 1
it's how you use it.

Today's digital cameras come with "more little buttons, dials, and thumbwheels than you can shake a stick at," says Adams. These buttons control everything from

frame speed and resolution to scene modes for low-light or action photography.

Instead of setting the camera on auto-automatic mode, try experimenting with the advanced settings. "[Don't] be intimidated by all the functions on the camera," says Art Weber, director of the National Center for Nature Photography near Toledo, Ohio. "Learn the basics—proper use of shutter speed, aperture, and ISO—and let the rest come with experience."

You may find you don't have to invest in expensive camera equipment and long telephoto lenses to shoot well. After all, you can take bad photos with an expensive 35mm digital SLR camera, and take great images with a point-and-shoot camera.

"Eighty percent of what I shoot is with a mid-range lens," says Mike Williams, who shoots a variety of subjects for the Ohio Department of Natural Resources. "Most people have that on their point-and-shoot cameras."



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Fill the frame **2**

Photographs can be improved by filling the entire photo with the subject, whether it's a flower, a person, or a landscape. Use your telephoto lens to zoom in, or just move closer to what you want to photograph.

When Williams wants to get up close and personal with wildlife, he heads to Ma-gee Marsh Wildlife Area in Oak Harbor, Ohio, where migrating birds stop to rest on their way to Canada during the month of May (see story on page 52).

"The birds are sometimes close enough to reach out and touch," he says. "It's incredible. You could definitely get that with a point and shoot. You can get close enough to fill the frame and get fantastic detail." Weber says a spray of leaves can represent an entire tree, or showing only part of an animal can increase the visual impact of an image.

Compose with care **3**

"Concentrate on composition," Weber says. "Because that is ultimately what makes the difference between a nice exposure and a great photo."

Composition is the visual process of organizing the subject and individual details of a scene into a balanced and pleasing arrangement. While composition is largely a matter of taste, the "Rule of Thirds" is often a good starting point. Photographer Darren Constantino explains the concept: "If you were to draw a tic tac toe board across your viewfinder, you'd want to place the main subject or subjects in the areas where the lines intersect."

But sometimes the rules are meant to be

broken. "You don't want to stick to rules all the time," he adds. "Centering the subject might be better. The rules are just guidelines."

Ultimately, the most effective composition successfully conveys a photographer's intended meaning and doesn't confuse the viewer.

Get caught up in the moment **4**

"When you are photographing people or wildlife, it's great to have a 'moment,'" Adams says. "It might be an expression or an animal doing something." Williams agrees. "I was on the boardwalk trail at Maumee Bay [State Park] one year and a couple of bucks were fighting on their hind legs with their antlers interlocked," he says. "Being able to find something like that is always interesting."

When photographing people, wait for the decisive moment that encapsulates what it's like to be in that situation. "If my son is outside playing with his friends, I will go out there shooting them playing and having fun," Seals says. "I try to get photos of him laughing, because it shows emotion and captures what it's like to be a kid."

Be patient **5**

The best images come to those who wait. "Anticipate what action will happen the best you can, and then shoot it," Seals says. "I'm never satisfied with one or two pictures. Work that scenario, until you know you have something very nice."

The same goes for sunset photos. "If you're taking sunset pictures, the light changes by the second," Constantino says. "But if you just wait it out, it may be worth your while."

Let there be light **6**

"Good light is critical," says Adams. "You can have a great subject and a strong composition, but if the light is just dull, you have dull photography." Any professional photographer will tell you to put the camera away at high noon and to try shooting photos early in the morning or late in the evening.

"When the light is straight overhead, it makes harsh, boring shadows," Williams explains. "People squint, the wildlife usually beds down, and the light isn't interesting." The low angle of the sun around dawn and dusk produces a warmer glow, casts long, interesting shadows, and also brings out textures—and animals.

"A whole lot of animals are fairly nocturnal, so you're most likely going to see them being active at sunrise and sunset," Williams adds. "And in the morning, there's plenty of fog or mist diffusing the light, making it beautiful stuff."

Where you position the sun in relation to the subject is also important. "The most boring place to put the sun is right behind you," Adams says. "That creates flat lighting."

Banish the flash **7**

The on-camera flash also has a tendency to create flat lighting. To use a camera in low-light situations, set it on a tripod and use a long exposure to record the image. Adams suggests starting with a 10-second exposure with the camera's ISO at 100 and the aperture set at f/8.

"That's a good starting point to get good shots of Christmas lights, for example," he says. "The trick is to take a number of different exposures, and figure out which one is best when you get them home and on your computer."

Get some perspective 8

The difference between a snapshot and a great photo can be as easy as changing the angle from which you photograph the subject, whether you crouch down low or climb up high. “Looking at subjects from different vantage points gives you lots and lots of options,” says Adams, who has crawled through a second-floor window to get a birds-eye view of a subject down below.

Be candid 9

“I like to do candid photography, which I much prefer over having people pose,” says Adams. “If I’m at a county fair, I’m going to walk around with my point-and-shoot camera, and I’m not going to advertise the fact that I’ve got it. I want my camera to be fairly inconspicuous.”

Even if you’re doing a family portrait, you can still capture an unguarded moment. “Get their mind off getting their picture taken,” Seals says. “Talk to them and just watch and wait for the right moment. Forget about them saying ‘cheese!’”

Know when to go 10

“I do a great deal of research before I go out and take photos,” Adams says. “When I visit places, I make a mental note about when they might look good under different circumstances—maybe a different time of year, or a different time of day, or a different type of weather. And I file that away.”

The weather and the four seasons have a dramatic impact on the images you can capture, which is why Adams recommends checking the forecast for the weather conditions and the exact time sunrise will occur before heading out to photograph landscape scenes at dawn.

“By far the best sunrises are when you have as much as 50 or 60 percent cloud cover,” Adams says. “But you’ll never know whether the lighting will cooperate and light up the bottom of the clouds, or when you’ll get one of those dull sunrises. To me, going out to take photographs is a combination of hard work and serendipity.”

Visit LakeErieLiving.com to learn how to enter Lake Erie Living’s photo contest.

THE BEST PLACES TO SHOOT AROUND LAKE ERIE

“You could just go in your backyard and shoot squirrels,” says photographer Mike Williams. “But if you want to do more exciting things, you need to know where you’ll find the wildlife.” He recommends the western basin of Lake Erie during this time of year, specifically Magee Marsh in Crane Creek State Park in Oak Harbor, Ohio, and Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge, located only a few miles west on Route 2.

“My particular favorite place for photographing sunrise, for its unrestricted view east into the sun, is right under the Marblehead lighthouse. It’s also my very favorite place to photograph ice on the lake in the winter.”—Ian Adams

“There are so many good places; it depends upon my mood and the time of year. In no particular order, [I like] Kelleys Island, Headland Dunes SNP, Point Pelee, Marblehead Lighthouse, and the Niagara Falls region.”—Art Weber

“My favorite place to shoot is Geneva-on-the-Lake, because it’s one of the closest lake points to my home; I’m familiar with it; and it has multiple places with public access (a state park, lodge, midway area, and a township park)”. —Darren Constantino



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