

# Improving Outdoors

Interested in developing your outdoor image collection? Pro nature shooter *Michael Snedic* discusses what he considers are a few key elements to starting up, and then improving your techniques.

**A**s a professional nature photographer I'm often asked whether magazine-quality images can only be achieved using professional cameras and lenses. If a photo shows people or wildlife displaying interesting behaviour, or if a landscape is bathed with stunning light, it won't matter what camera equipment you've used. Photos taken on more expensive equipment might produce sharper images, but having professional gear isn't a prerequisite for getting better photos. I've seen many great photos taken by photographers with pro equipment, but also good shots taken by shooters using consumer-level cameras and lenses.

## Key Factors

Creating an interesting outdoor photo is really dependent on a number of factors. These include having an eye for composition, choosing the correct settings on your camera, finding suitable lighting and then lots of patience. When shooting outdoors, whether you're taking pictures of people around a market in Africa, a sunrise over Byron Bay, or a flock of ducks at a local pond, you need to concentrate on the **composition of your photo**. Some photographers have set 'rules' about

composition, but so much of what makes an interesting photo is determined by the individual photographer at the scene and the time. By putting your camera to your eye when you're taking a photo with an SLR, or using the screen on a compact digital camera, you can move around and try different angles and positions, until the photo 'feels' right. By this I mean finding a composition that looks well balanced and pleasing to the eye. Always take into account any **distracting objects in the foreground or background**, remembering that a scene

you see in three dimensions, will appear in two dimensions on a computer screen or print. There's nothing worse than a distant telegraph pole or tree sprouting up from behind a person's head! If the scene you're photographing is very busy or cluttered, you may want to focus on one particular subject and blur out the foreground or background by using a shallow depth of field (ie; a wide aperture like *f/2.8* or *f/4*).

Lighting is also an essential part of creating a good photo. *Early morning or late afternoon is usually the best time to shoot*

*outdoors* because it creates soft, even light for your image. But this isn't always possible and you may have to make do with harsh or poor lighting. That's OK because sometimes that type of light can be quite dramatic. But be alert for quickly changing conditions.

When you're using an SLR (single lens reflex) camera, **a dedicated flash with a diffuser will often take away shadows and create even lighting** over the subject you intend to shoot. If you have a compact camera, the camera's inbuilt pop-up flash will suffice. For stationary subjects, a couple

of light reflectors will give you very even lighting. If you don't have commercial light reflectors with you, a car's windscreen reflector (the ones that stop the sun heating up your car's interior) can be used effectively as a cheap alternative.

## Take Your Time

When I'm looking at competition-winning photos I always read the caption explaining how that photo was taken. Often, the photographer has researched his or her subject in depth and spent days, weeks or

**ABOVE** Buttress roots, Bunya Mountains, Queensland. It had been raining earlier in the morning and the moss around the buttress roots of this tree looked superb. To capture all the buttress roots on camera, I used a wide-angle lens and set my tripod as low as possible. Nikon D200, *f/2.8*, Sigma 10-20mm lens, tripod, cable release.



## How To: *Improve Exterior Images*

months trying to capture a perfect shot. Hundreds of shots may have been taken from every different angle, but eventually one stunning image is captured. I'm not suggesting you spend huge amounts of time trying to get that perfect image, but being patient and waiting for the appropriate moment to take your photo will inevitably lead to better shots.

### Is Film Viable?

The debate still continues as to whether film cameras are redundant in this digital age. If you've always used film and you're happy to continue doing so, I don't see any problem with this. In most cases, the basic principles of photography are the same with film and digital. Once you've developed the roll of film you've exposed, you can easily have it scanned. You can then treat the photos the same as a digital capture and do whatever post-processing you feel is necessary. There are also many accomplished photographers out there who enjoy photography wholeheartedly, but who aren't interested in spending hours behind a computer.

**RIGHT** Mossman Gorge, Far North Queensland. In order to get exactly the composition I wanted, I put my tripod straight into the water and composed. Sometimes you have to think 'outside the square' and work with the conditions you have at the time. Nikon D200, Sigma 10-20mm lens, tripod, cable release.



### Buying The Right Camera

When you're planning to buy either a digital SLR or compact camera it can be very confusing as to which brand, model and style is a good choice. Beginners and experienced photographers alike are spoiled for choice and there are so many different features to choose from. My suggestion is to firstly work out whether you want a compact or an SLR. This will depend on how serious you are about your photography, what your budget is, and whether you're willing to carry around an SLR with extra lenses, flashes, and kit.

Once you've worked this out, the next step is to visit a reputable camera store and ask to see different brands and models. With some prior research and suitable questioning of sales staff you should be able to work out the right type of camera for your needs. Research your preferred brand and model and look for different reviews on those models on the internet, in magazines, and in newspapers. Once you see a model with consistently favourable reviews (and after you've checked the reliability of the review and its independence from manufacturers), it's time to buy.

### A WEATHER WARNING

Outdoor photography means just that - photographing in, and coping with, all the elements. No matter where you are, the weather can change quickly. Even though some compacts and SLRs are classed as weather and water resistant, it's best not to tempt fate by shooting in harsh conditions. If a sand storm develops when you're shooting at the pyramids in Egypt, the best thing to do is put your equipment away and come back when calm weather returns. Remember to use a soft brush and/or blower to remove any sand or dust which might have gathered on your equipment before you use it again. Similarly, if a downpour happens when you're on top of a mountain, return your equipment to your camera bag or backpack. Many photographers' backpacks today come with 'all-weather' coverings which protect the contents of your bag. Water can not only damage your camera, but also cause misting in your lens.



**ABOVE** A view over Pacific Ocean at Norfolk Island. I wanted to stabilise my camera and lens, but I didn't have a tripod, so I had to compromise. The only place I could rest my camera was on top of a 4WD parked nearby. It took a bit of manoeuvring to find the correct angle and once this was achieved I took a number of different shots using various apertures. Nikon D200, 24-85mm lens, cable release.

### RAW or JPEG - A Personal View

One of the questions I'm repeatedly asked is whether to shoot in JPEG or RAW mode when using a digital camera. There's no direct answer to this as it depends on what you're aiming to do with your photos. If your aim is to store your images on a computer, email them or print them, then shooting in JPEG is fine. The quality is quite high and you can take a lot more photos on the camera's memory card. If, however, you plan to publish your photos and want the highest possible quality, then shooting in RAW is highly recommended. A RAW file is like a digital 'negative', but it allows so much more scope when post-processing your images. There's no quality loss, but the downside is that the files are much larger so your memory card will store far fewer photos. I always use RAW, especially as large capacity memory cards are so affordable these days.

### Important Features

If you're buying a compact camera, in my view one with a decent optical zoom is better. Optical zoom allows you to zoom in on a subject without losing image quality. Many compacts can be handheld even when using a zoom at full length, due to the camera's inbuilt image stabiliser. Some manufacturers advertise massive zoom capabilities, with added digital zoom, but care must be taken here as digital zooms create loss of image quality. The added advantage of having a compact camera with a decent zoom is that it's light and portable.

An SLR camera, on the other hand, requires separate lenses. If you're predominantly a landscape shooter, then I recommend a good quality wide-angle lens. Fixed lenses are great, but there are also many high-quality wide-angle zooms on the market which produce quality images, yet allow for flexibility when composing your photo. For those interested in travel photography, I'd recommend using one wide-angle/zoom lens, such as an 18-200mm. This gives you great flexibility; you can shoot wide-angle images or zoom into your subject without the hassle of carting around numerous lenses. If your main interest is wildlife, then a telephoto or zoom lens with a long focal length is essential.


### Are Tripods Useful?

In short, I believe a tripod is an essential piece of equipment for an outdoor photographer. Unless your subject is moving around, a tripod helps to stabilise the scene you're photographing. You might wish to shoot the same scene using different aperture settings and depth of field, to achieve different effects. A tripod will guarantee your photo will be composed identically in each shot you take.

For travel photography it's best to find a small, lightweight tripod which is easy to carry long distances and which folds away to a compact size. However, when you're using heavy lenses, a solid, steady tripod with a sturdy head is essential for sharp photos. Using a cable release or remote control also helps reduce any movement created by pressing the shutter manually.

### Why Enjoying It Matters!

It really makes no difference what type of equipment you use, just as long as you're enjoying your photography and getting the most out of that equipment. Some photographers aim to capture world-class images with the best possible equipment money can buy, while others are quite content to make do with a compact camera or consumer SLR. In the end any photographer wants to capture the best possible images within his or her means and capabilities. For those wanting to improve their techniques and knowledge, photography courses are a great way to learn hands-on techniques from professional photographers who can answer questions specific to your needs. There are also many photography handbooks available that explain basic techniques, step by step. Photography magazines like *AP* are also a great way to keep you up-to-date with the latest equipment and trends, as well as showcasing different photographer's photos and explanations of how they took them.

Outdoor photography creates an endless number of opportunities and it can be a very enjoyable process. The main reason for getting out there may be to capture that special photo, but it also presents a great chance to see the natural sights of Australia and the world. The opportunities are endless and the experiences can be extremely rewarding. 



**ABOVE** Kakadu National Park silhouette. This photo was taken with a Canon film SLR dating back to 1980. I used Fuji Sensia slide film, which was later scanned. There were plenty of dead, silhouetted trees to take photos of, but it was this one with a single bird (a Brown Falcon) in its branches that caught my eye. The sun was setting very quickly and I only had minutes to capture this shot. As I was in a boat, there wasn't time to race back to land so I quickly pushed my tripod over the edge of the boat and into the mud. Mud normally isn't the most stable of surfaces, but in this instance it allowed enough stability to take the photo. I was able to take a few shots that would have otherwise been blurry, due to handholding the camera in poor lighting conditions. Canon A1, tripod in mud over side of boat, cable release.

*Michael Snedic is a professional nature photographer, writer and presenter of photography workshops in south-east Queensland. He is also co-author of a new coffee table-style book, Australian Journey - Wildlife. For more information, please visit [www.michaelsnedic.com](http://www.michaelsnedic.com) or [www.trekaboutphotography.com](http://www.trekaboutphotography.com)*