

NATURE AND NATURE PHOTOGRAPHY – IN FIVE PARTS

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EQUIPMENT FOR CLOSE-UP NATURE PHOTOS

October 23, 2011

I get requests and messages from readers about photographing and photography equipment, especially from those of you who want to do macro and close-up nature work. This may well be more info than many of you want, so just skip over it. Here goes:

You can take close-up photos with almost any camera, probably with the one you already have. All you do have to get in close. Sounds easy, right? Not so easy. Chances are that what you will get when you first start out are snapshots, quick photos of whatever you are pointing at. The journey from snapshots to real macro and close-up photos is an ever descending spiral into more and better equipment and it will cost you not only money but even more time. Macro photography has to be learned, but if you love nature, it is a fun learning curve and very good exercise.

However, I must warn you that the move into photography equipment is a steep and slippery slope. Many introductory books point out that you don't need expensive equipment to do good close-up work but I have never met a good photographer, close-up or otherwise, who did not have at least decent equipment and who was not really into discussing just what is the best equipment and why. There is a minimum of equipment items you need.

So, yes, start with the equipment you have, but don't fool yourself that you will not want more and better equipment. I have never seen it happen yet. Perhaps because taste in composition and photos is so personal (as in: we don't go there unless invited), photographers that I have met talk of little else but lenses, camera bodies, and the like. For example:

You may have a camera and want to take close-up or macro photos. Well, do you have a tripod? Most macro photographers use a tripod and would not consider doing otherwise. And how good does that tripod have to be to actually assist you? And on that tripod do you have a ball (or other type) of head to mount your camera on? And can your camera snap on and off (quick-release) the ball head or do you have to manually screw it on and off each time, thus endangering the mounting screw-hole on the base of your camera? And do you have an L-Bracket so that you can quick-change your camera from horizontal to vertical view and back again. And so it goes.

That is how the descent into equipment works, by extension and degrees. It is like that old song "The knee bone is connected to the leg bone, is connected to the angle bone," etc. only here every piece of equipment logically requires an additional or adjacent piece of equipment, and there we go.

Yes, there are a few valiant souls out there who don't use tripods, who don't use L-brackets, who don't use this or that, but they are the few standouts to the rule that there is a minimum amount of photography equipment needed to take good close-up and macro photos. And I am not even talking about lenses; let's not go there... yet.

And the wise advice given over and over but seldom heeded is: If you think that you are going to

like close-up nature photography, get good equipment from the get-go and save yourself not only money but the suffering of using cheap (or no) equipment during your formative days with the technique, the time when you need all the help you can get.

I should know. For years I never heeded the advice to get a good tripod and a good ball head. I have a whole closet of cheap tripods, mostly aluminum and flimsy, that I can't even sell, and a box of even-worse heads, grips, etc. that I now understand are (and always were) almost impossible to use. And life without a quick-release clamp and an L-bracket? I can't imagine it.

With that in mind, what level of equipment do we need to give ourselves a real opportunity to focus on actually photographing our subjects? Although I am sure many reading this will differ (let's discuss), here is a list of what I feel I would have to have:

Cameras:

Both Nikon and Canon make fine cameras. I am a Nikon lover and proud of it, so you Canon fans will have to translate some of my remarks to your brand. Right now I feel the least expensive camera that does all the things I need for good close-up nature photography is the Nikon D7000, which sells for about \$1100. It has relatively good ISO levels, great megapixels, interchangeable lenses, a Depth-of-Field Preview button, and the ability to park the Mirror-Up when taking photos, all things that you need. It also has the ability to fire the camera remotely. Of course I would prefer an FX (full-frame) camera like the D700 which was and is one of the best bargains I have ever seen for doing this kind of work. I actually use the Nikon D3s and (when I am not being lazy because of the increased file size) the D3x.

Tripod:

I have to get in line with tradition and exhort you to get a solid (and lightweight if you can) tripod. I know we have to carry the darned things and we want it lightweight and carbon fiber, but carbon fiber and too light (such as the Gitzo 1228) are still too flimsy for the best work. I use heavier tripods as well, but have settled on the carbon-fiber Gitzo GT3631s as a compromise that I can both carry and that will be stable enough. It is solid.

Ball Heads

The same advice goes for buying a Ball Head that sits on the top of your tripod and allows you to flexibly move the camera into any position for a shot. Don't buy three or four cheap ball heads and then finally buy one good one. I only use the Swiss-Arca style quick release style and have had nothing but lots of trouble with the various Manfrotto quick-release plates, grips, etc., trouble like: they fail! I have a whole box of them that I can't get rid of.

Just go out and buy a Really Right Stuff BH-40 (or equivalent brand) and be done with it. They have good resale value if you decide photography is not your thing. And I suggest the screw-knob quick-release clamp over the lever-release clamp. I have never had the screw-knob release clamps fail as long as I screw it on tight and the lever-release looks to me that you could possibly release it by mistake, by catching it on a shirtsleeve or even by the dreaded 'operator error'. With the screw-knob style it takes time to unscrew it.

I have used the Markin's Q3 ball heads and like them because they are inexpensive, but they do not compare to the RRS BH-40, so I no longer suggest that size head except for smaller DSLRs like the Nikon D100, D200, D300, and D7000.

L-Bracket

Another must-have piece of equipment is the L-Bracket which attaches to the base and side of

your camera body. L-Brackets have an Arca-style quick-release plate molded to fit the bottom and left side of the camera and attach to the ¼" thread in the camera base. These are more or less permanently attached in my case.

L-Brackets allow the camera to be rotated 90-degrees from vertical to horizontal position and back in a few seconds. They snap into your Arca quick-release clamp on your ball head. I consider L-Brackets essential for macro work because switching back and forth between vertical and horizontal view happens all the time.

For me, the L-bracket is essential, because I like to shoot vertically most of the time, but have to switch in a moment to horizontal for a wider shot. I use Kirk Enterprise L-Bracket and plates. They are excellent, but RSS also makes good one.

Remote Shutter Release

'Remotes' are cords or devices that allow you to remotely trigger the shutter. They are required for good macro and especially for focus stacking where you want to disturb the camera and lens as little as possible while shooting a long sequence of photos.

There are all kinds of remotes with the Nikon MC-30 corded remote being perhaps the best known for the larger DSLRs. These cords plug into the 10-pin remote terminal on the camera and are about 2.5 feet long, which is too long for my work. I fold part of the cable in the middle and using electrical tape bind it so that the resulting cable is maybe two feet. I don't want it dangling too far down toward the ground when I am shooting. The Nikon-M30 is expensive, around \$50, and you can pick up remote cables for the Nikons on eBay for five or six dollars or less.

There are also cordless remotes. My Nikon D7000 has a remote about the size of your thumb that works great and the only danger is of losing the remote because it is so small.

At any rate for good macro results you need to have a reliable remote, in particular if you are stacking photos.

Lenses: I have published notes on macro lenses and could post them again if needed, but you will need a macro lens that is somewhere between 60mm and 200mm. There is lots posted on macro lenses, but let me know if you want me to write a blog on the best ones. The classic Nikon 105mm macro lenses are very usable.

So that, IMO, is the minimum equipment I need to do macro and close-up photography: camera, lens, tripod, ball-head, remote, and L-bracket.

Of course you may want some diffusers, reflectors, flash (I never use flash), and what not, but the above is what I need to head out into the woods and meadows. If you have any questions, please fire away.

NATURE: GETTING INTO IT

October 23, 2011

In my last blog I presented what I feel is the minimum equipment someone interested in the kind of close-up photography I do might need. Physical equipment or gear is not the only requirement for good photography. We also have to be able to "see" and that requires relaxing

into it just as it is. This blog goes into the spiritual 'equipment' it takes to know Mother Nature.

Looking out your windows at the birds visiting your feeder is a good start but probably not the way to really learn about nature. Watching from a distance may be great for landscapes and sunsets but for any real knowledge you have to actually get your whole body out there and into it – complete immersion. And there are two qualities you will need and they are time and patience, time for anything worthwhile to sink in and patience to be still enough to experience what is there.

For myself, since I am mostly old now, when I first go outside I like to find a nice spot (often in my own backyard), and just plop down and sit for a spell. And it does take time, time for me to unwind and become more aware, and time for the critters that went silent on my arrival to resume their business as usual.

In recent years I stopped mowing my back yard and just let it grow. I seldom walked on my mowed yard anyway or at least not often. My front yard stays mowed (the city demands it) but my backyard has become a home for countless insects, not to mention toads and even the occasional rabbit or two. And I also have a large area in that yard where I have let the milkweed take over and that patch alone is an incredible place for many insects, butterflies, moths, and spiders. They are having a big party out there.

After ten minutes or so (this is where the patience comes in) I tend to calm down and begin to “see” the life around me. Of course it is up and moving again but often I just don't see what was there all the time until I relax. I usually have my camera with me but things would be the same without it. Before long everything is going on again, often on the same plant or even the same leaf. All I have to do is observe.

And if I am looking for some critter in particular to photograph (I'm on a 'hunt'), that seldom works because I hurry right by everything else that is right there, that is happening now and usually don't find what I was looking for anyway. For me it is much better to use the “found” approach to photography, just taking lots of time and seeing what happens to be there right now rather than what I wish were there. I also find it good to keep in mind what the long-term benefits of nature watching are:

Watching nature gives me a second opinion on just how life works compared to what organized society offers. Society sends many mixed messages, trains of thought going in opposite directions, and enough blurring of the truth to breed confusion. Nature is 20-20 all the time but it may take a while for us to get used to it. Of course, nature can be “beautiful” in itself but the real beauty of nature is in what it brings out in me, in the reaction I have to what I see.

For example, it is very difficult to look carefully at nature and not be moved at things like (1) the preciousness of life, (2) the impermanence of it all, (3) the instant karma of cause and effect, (3) and the endlessness of it all. Compassion naturally arises in this situation.

If what I see does not invoke a reaction, does not bring forth some compassion from within me, then I usually need a stronger dose. Right now many of us only get what I am talking about here when someone close to us dies and puts us into a special frame of mind for a short time. I am suggesting that we develop that frame of mind a little at a time rather than only through the shock of a loss or tragedy. Trust me, it works, and it is good to be able to get into this frame of mind on a regular basis, to learn to “die daily” as the Christian saints point out. Nature is the

perfect teacher and even the Tibetan Buddhists point out that natural appearances, Mother Nature, displays all of the dharma, all of the time. They call it the "Lama of Appearances."

NATURE'S NATURE

October 24, 2011

I was fortunate to be introduced to the world of nature at an early age thanks to the kindness of a woman named Peggy Dodge, a graphic artist and a friend of the family. My mother and Mrs. Dodge would meet with a small group of local artists at the Dodge farm which was located in a rural area that included a small pond, meadows, and fields. Mom would take me along. Peggy Dodge also had a true love of nature and all its creatures, a love which she was kind enough to share with me when I visited. I was six years old.

From that age until I was about sixteen I studied nature with an intense passion pretty much all of the time. School was mostly lost on me for I was way too busy thinking and planning what I would do each afternoon out in nature when school was over for the day. I had my own mini-nature museum in my room where I kept all kinds of animals, insects, snakes, and you-name-it, including rattlesnakes, copperheads, skunks, spiders, boa constrictors, and anything I could manage to keep alive. I had insect collections, rock collections, leaf collections, fossil collections, shell collections, and so on. It would be true to say that any real education I got (at least what actually sank in) came from what I learned from observing nature. And it never occurred to me that everyone else was not getting this same education! I would like to pass on some of my enthusiasm for the world of nature.

Let me begin by pointing out that I realized quite early-on that there are real differences between natural law and human-made laws. Human laws are made by people and they can be bent, twisted, and even broken at times, and usually are. This is of course what lawyers do so well. Yet nature's laws cannot be broken. If we break them, they break us. No one defies the law of gravity with impunity. What goes up, comes down. What is born, eventually dies. We all mentally know this, at least in principle.

Because I grew up with my eyes glued on natural law, that was the law that I came to revere as the truth – the bottom line for me. Society's laws were far less consistent and frequently just plain confusing. But it is only in recent years that I have realized what a great teacher nature was for me back then and how lucky it is that I put my trust in what I saw in nature rather than only in the various rules and laws society wanted me to learn, which often seemed to contradict one another, and still do.

There is something wonderful about consistency, especially when one is young and trying to get a handle on life and, if nothing else, mother nature is consistent. Her laws are always the same and there is no way of getting around them -- no exceptions. What you see is what you get. There are no behind-the-scene or backroom deals being made. Nature demonstrates perfect equanimity. Everyone and everything is treated equally. This fact alone avoids the confusion that society's laws can instill in us. In nature, a rose actually is a rose, is a rose...

And nature keeps no secrets. She openly shares the facts of life and death with anyone who cares to observe. Unlike society, where death, dying, sickness, and all of the suffering-side of life is for the most part either sanitized or swept under the carpet, nature never blinks. It is all right there for us to see, if we will just take a peek. I am not saying here that what nature shows us is always a pretty sight, but with nature you never have to figure out what is real and what is not. It is obvious. For a little kid (or even an adult!) this can be an extreme act of kindness. What

society does not care to discuss with us, nature is only too ready to reveal. And nature has other messages for us as well, which I will mention in the next blog.

NATURE: PERMANENT IMPERMANENCE October 25, 2011

I can't say for those of you reading this but in my experience too much of the time the sheer business of life causes me to forget many of the more important things. I am ashamed to say that it takes some really sobering event (like the death of someone close) for me to snap me out of my busybody trance and take even a day or so of time to really consider life itself. And while I never expect or welcome such events, I do very much appreciate the time out at those special moments, time to consider the bigger picture, and the ability to remember deeply once again what is really important.

Nature on the other hand is a constant reminder of how impermanent this life we are all living is. I can never forget the time I was traveling through India and was saying goodbye to a great Tibetan meditation teacher, who said to me: "Tomorrow, or next life, Michael, whichever comes first." His words woke me up a bit and the message was much like the one that nature is consistently offering us: awareness of our own impermanence. None of us are about to live forever and I might keep that in mind once in a while.

Nature points out impermanence to us all the time. It is hard for me to take a walk along a country road in the early morning dew and see the thousands of earthworms and slugs trying to cross the tarmac before the fierce summer sun rises and fries them to a crisp. These creatures made a bad decision to cross the road just at that time and though sometimes I try to pick them up and carry them to the grass on the roadside, it is almost impossible to save them all. I just can't do it. And some of them are crawling in the direction of travel of the road itself, so they will never make it! This is just one instance of the kind of impermanence nature demonstrates. It is all around us. We won't look. It is too painful, but why can't we look?

And, as mentioned earlier, nature never blinks. We blink. Nature shows us precisely how cause and effect works, what the Asians call 'karma', action and the results of that action. And the equanimity of it all! No one breaks the law of gravity, neither person nor creature. All are treated to the same result if we break that law. Nature brooks no lawyers.

And as we get closer to nature, as we take time to actually look, we see that every form of life, every sentient being, is not unlike ourselves. Every creature out there wants to be happy (to just live) and no creature that I have ever seen wants to willingly suffer unless it's the human being. We each seek happiness and we try real hard to avoid suffering. Every sentient being feels the same way. We have that kinship with all sentient beings.

Nature reminds us that life is in fact impermanent and that all life is indeed precious, and that those who have life don't want to lose it. And in nature it is easy to see that our every act has consequences, real results that we would be well advised to keep in mind. And all of the above is ongoing, in fact seemingly endless. Nature is not about to change and the only actual change we can expect will be our own attitude, how 'we' receive or take what is given, how we accept what is already there. Nature is the perfect teacher when it comes to attitude adjustment. She proves that we might well adjust our attitude to her laws and, how if we do not, we will pay a very dear price. And I have forgotten perhaps the most important message that nature teaches

us, and that is about love and compassion. It does exist in nature and I will point out where in the final blog of this series tomorrow.

THE ROOT OF COMPASSION

October 26, 2011

In what I have written so far there is seemingly no compassion in Mother Nature. She is merciless, inexorably precise about what she exacts from us, and when. There are no sentimental tears shed by Mother Nature. She is indeed a harsh mistress. But she does have one soft spot and it is important for each of us to discover and remember what that is and where to find it.

If we look for compassion and kindness in nature it is seemingly nowhere to be found unless we could agree that her laws themselves are kind in the long run. She treats all beings equally. Is equity itself a kindness? Yet she does have a compassionate side.

It would seem that love and compassion are only to be found in the relationship between a mother and her children. True love and real compassion (and a willingness to do anything for another being) is pretty much limited to the way a mother feels about her child and what she is willing to do for that child. And you see this all through nature, not just with human moms. The love of a mother for her child is the one bright spot in what otherwise may appear as the torrent of nature's nature.

It would seem from observation that most natural creatures live in perpetual terror of being killed and eaten while at the same time hunting, killing, and eating something else themselves. I know this is not 100% true but, in general, nature is not a peaceful place at all, and most sentient beings do not live in serenity. My point is that perhaps the only place in nature that we find true love and compassion is in the relationship of a mother to her offspring. This is a rule that is remarkably constant throughout all natural realms – the love of mother and child. Can you even imagine if it were not there? How could life go on? It would not. So much depends on this fact.

And it is interesting to me that all of the religions of the world appear to be working very hard to have us treat each other as a mother naturally treats her child, to get us to go beyond just family love (the love family members share) and extend that same love to others, to those outside of our immediate family. The Buddhists would have us extend that love to all sentient beings, and not just to humans. Christians say "Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you" and the Buddhists would agree with that, but they would add: and you make the first move! Reach out with love and kindness.

In nature compassion is always local, limited to that very special relationship between a mother and her children. Fathers share in that too, of course, but it is with mother and child that true love and compassion seem to be most pure and present. In this way Nature is a great teacher. She does not obscure or perfume the way things are. Truth is revealed for what it is in nature – straight up. In nature we can see impermanence clearly, not obscured or sanitized as it is most of the time in society. It is clear through examining nature that life is indeed precious, and is not something guaranteed to go on forever. And it is clear that our choices, our every action, bring consequences. And the situation that nature presents is not only the way things are right now but the way things will continue to be on into the future. The way things are is the way things have always been and will always be. It is up to each of us to respond to these very clear facts,

something that in most societies we never have a chance to do. Instead, most of us tend to ignore all of this and willingly prefer to remain ignorant, to ignore the obvious.

The only light in this otherwise fierce darkness is, as I pointed out, the very real love, care, and compassion that a mother has for her child. Thank heaven for that! Mother love has been a beacon of light for all of us virtually forever. There is nothing else like it on earth. We all celebrate Mother's Day but Father's Day kind of just slips by. It is not the same. I like to joke at my house that all the kids responds to Mother's Day and that it gets a whole 24-hours but the celebration for Father's Day is lasts only a few minutes.

The Buddhists have patiently tried to tell us for centuries that every person we meet, even every sentient being has been our mother in some past lifetime and that every last sentient being has also been our child. Perhaps this is an attempt to make clear to us that we should treat each other with the same kindness, endless love, and compassion a mother will show her child. This may be the bridge we as a human race have been forever unable to cross, the key not only to Mother Nature but to our own nature, the two being the same anyway!

The question is how can we do this? How can we learn to treat each other with the kindness that our own mother has shown us?

Well, the Christian, Buddhist, and other religions have been trying for thousands of years to show us how, to point out the way, and they all seem to agree that it involves treating ALL sentient beings as a mother treats a child, with that same endless care, kindness, and compassion, a universal remedy that is much easier to say than to act out in real life.

And it would seem that this will not happen until the kind of compassion arises in each us for all sentient life that we find in how a mother loves her child. And last, it seems that many of us don't get really serious about all this unless something upsetting happens to us. There is another way. Exposing ourselves to the truth of nature a little at a time can help to make that possible by gradually softening our obscurations and giving us opportunities to feel compassion for all beings, not just our friends. Our greatest teachers (saints, priests, lamas, etc.) have shown us what this might look like, but not enough of us have been able to have that realization.

May that kind of compassion awaken in all of us and may we share that kind of realization with one another. May we extend this to all sentient beings who, like us, only seek to be happy and not to suffer.