

Exposure for Nature Images

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One of the key elements in making a good image capture is trying our best to get the exposure correct at the time of capture. By now most of us have come to realize that while there is some leeway in post processing a raw file, the old idea of "fix it in Photoshop" isn't the way to approach good photography. At point of capture we are trying our best to deal with four critical elements: exposure, focus/depth of field, shutter speed, and composition.

We need to come as close as possible to getting all of these right at the start. Everything but composition is interrelated, so messing up one often means messing up the entire image. A good exposure of a blurred subject gets us nowhere. A good shutter speed for an under or over exposed or out of focus subject also gets us nowhere. You get the idea.

In nature photography, the exposure is often one of the most difficult things to get right. The subjects are often moving. The subject may well be in different lighting than its surroundings and those surroundings may be different enough tonally to have a significant influence on our metering.

What I am going to suggest is that we move off of the evaluative or matrix meter settings to spot metering. Now, I am not going to suggest that it is a must. There are some effective systems out there, such as the one promoted by Art Morris, for using evaluative/matrix metering and adjusting exposure compensation to account for the tonal differences of the subject's surroundings and how large the subject is in the frame. After you've mastered such a system mastering a new language or Windows 10 should be a snap. Also, some camera systems, Nikon for example, have a noticeably higher "hit" rate for yielding an accurate exposure when there are significant tonality differences in the frame. With those admissions made, I am still going to suggest that we are in better control of our photographic fate by using spot metering for nature subjects.

Once we have moved to spot metering, we need to decide how to use it effectively. It is still a reflected light meter, so the logical choice is to find something that represents a middle tone (note I'm not saying middle gray) and balance the meter for that. Sometimes that will actually be our subject. Often, we will need to find something in the same light as our subject and meter that as a substitute.

When a middle toned alternative is not available in the same light as our subject we are faced with metering the subject and making some type of exposure allowance, shooting a test exposure, checking the histogram, adjusting again, and then shooting. If the light changes, the process has to be repeated. If the subject is white, we will adjust to show it as overexposed on a meter reading (start at 1 2/3 stops in good sun). If it is dark, we will adjust to a reading that suggests under exposure (remember the meter is thinking in terms of middle gray). The amount will depend on how close the subject is to black. For example a black bear or bison might be at a minus 1 to start with in good light.

One of the currently popular mantras is that to maximize the information in an image we should Expose To The Right (ETTR). Basically it means that we should bias our exposure to the over exposed side while still avoiding clipping any significant aspects of the image, including any highlight areas that should retain detail. The reason for doing this is because over seventy percent of the data for an image is captured in the portion of the histogram to the right of the midtone (128,128,128). There is some validity to this, but also a lot of assumptions behind it.

The first assumption that ETTR is based on is that you are shooting at the base ISO for your camera, typically ISO 100 or 200. The practice doesn't work at higher ISO settings. The second basic is that you still don't want to clip the highlights, or at least those of any importance to the image. Hence, exposing to the right on a white bird is pretty useless. We're already trying to hold the detail in those white feathers.

The ETTR idea has merit on very dark subjects where we can over expose in a relative sense and then back off in post processing to get back to the subject's natural tones. Think alligators, bison, moose, black bears, black vultures, etc. It also is worthwhile trying ETTR when

the subject is largely backlit. Just be careful not to clip the surroundings if you will keep them in the final image.

In the "old days" I would also have suggested that you move over to manual exposure (that dreaded M setting on your camera). The newer Canons like the 7D MK II and almost all Nikons now allow you to lock an exposure in Av or Tv mode and retain the lock until you tap the AEL button again or shut the camera off. The locked exposure can include compensation and in many cameras you can further adjust the compensation after locking the exposure without having to start over again. This gives you the ability to spot meter, lock in the exposure, recompose, and shoot multiple shots without having to keep the AEL button pressed down. Just remember to tap the AEL button again to release the locked setting before moving on to the next scene. Check your camera's manual to see if your camera allows for holding and AEL setting and where to do that in the menus (generally in custom controls that set the function assignments for your buttons).

Try spot metering for your nature subjects. With a little practice I think you will be hooked.