



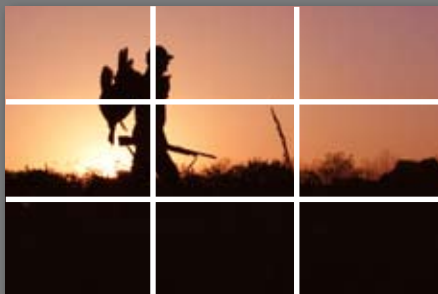
Take Your Best Shot

By Kim G. Nix, Editor and Billy Pope, Art Director

Photography is an integral part of *Outdoor Alabama* magazine.

Pictures can help tell the story and set the mood for an article in a way that text alone cannot. Each year the Outdoor Alabama Photo Contest draws hundreds of entries from amateur photographers. We receive a few great photos, many good photos, and many not-so-great photos. It's always hard to choose the winners, and we are often asked, **"What are you looking for in a picture?"** Even if you're not inclined to enter the photo contest, you probably want to take better photos. So, what makes a good photo? Based on our experiences, here are some guidelines to follow.

RULE OF THIRDS



When composing an image, practice the "rule of thirds." This means that you divide the frame horizontally and vertically into thirds. Placing the subject where those lines intersect will result in a well-composed photo and will provide a sense of balance.

COMPOSITION

Composition is the cornerstone of great photography. The subject of a photo should be obvious to the viewer. When composing an image, pay close attention to the foreground and background so that they do not compete or are not a distraction to the subject. Watch out for unwanted elements such as tree limbs that seem to grow out of a subject's head or a leaf that may be in the foreground obstructing the view of part of the subject. When looking through the viewfinder, it's natural to want to place the subject in the center of the frame. This doesn't usually produce the best-composed photo, however. When composing an image, practice the "rule of thirds." This means that you divide the frame horizontally and vertically into thirds. Placing the subject where those lines intersect will result in a well-composed photo and will provide a sense of balance.

Composition is like putting together a puzzle and there are many ways to do that. Using different lenses, getting closer to the subject and experimenting with different angles will increase your success. Walk around your subject and look through the viewfinder. You may find a more interesting shot at a different angle. Take a photo at eye level with your subject, but see what happens when you squat down and look up, or stand on a rock and shoot downward. While the shape, form and setting of the subject may determine whether you need a horizontal or a vertical photo, find a way to take both. As you frame your photograph, assess everything in the frame and ask yourself, is it all tied together? Does the framing compliment the subject? Does the primary subject relate to all the pieces? Is there a sense of balance and grace? Is there a clear point of view and message?

LIGHTING

Controlling the light in a photograph can be the most frustrating or most rewarding aspect of photography. Lighting will set the mood, feel and overall tone of a well-composed subject. Taking photos of a subject in different lighting conditions will provide the best opportunity to capture the photograph you're seeking. The least favorable time to take photos is during the middle of the day, which is generally true because the shadows that are cast by direct sunlight are often harsh. Early morning and late afternoon sunlight is the best for most photos; it provides more pleasing shadows and softer light.

Variations in times will also provide a change in the color of light. For example, for a photo taken at 7 a.m. on a summer morning, warm sunlight will enhance the subject. By 9 a.m., the color will be much cooler, producing an image that is more neutral, although not as visually engaging as the image taken earlier in the morning. Contrary

to what many believe, overcast or dreary days can provide great opportunities to create excellent outdoor photos with a unique sense of depth.

When shooting outdoors, photograph everything using the available light when possible. A flash unit can help create great photos when lighting conditions are poor. If your subject is in the shadows try using "fill flash." This technique of using a flash outdoors is good to fill in the dark shadows that may fall over your subject. It can be tricky because the flash can overpower the ambient light and produce a stark, unnatural look. The goal of "fill flash" is to avoid a flat lighting effect; you want to retain some soft shadows and avoid an overly bright subject.

In some instances, overriding the automatic flash may be a good idea. While your camera may think the flash is needed, try turning it off. Interesting silhouettes and naturally lit subjects may make a better photo without the use of a flash.




Longer zoom lenses increase the chance of blur due to physical length of the lens. The range of motion at the end of a lens increases at longer focal lengths, such as 300mm, with the slightest movement of the camera body. Shorter lenses are more forgiving due to the decreased range of motion.

EQUIPMENT

To take the best photographs, get to know your camera and experiment with its settings. If you have a digital camera, become familiar with its menu.

The amount of detail that a digital camera can capture is called the resolution, which is expressed in pixels. The more pixels a camera has, the more detail it can capture and the larger the pictures can be blown up without becoming blurry or grainy. We recommend that you save photos

at the highest resolution possible. Look at your camera's menu for a "quality" setting, and pick "fine," "extra fine," or "super fine," whichever is the highest level available.

Keep your battery charged and carry an extra battery. If you find that perfect spot for a photo and don't have the battery power to take another photo, you'll be frustrated. Carrying an extra memory card is a good idea as well. 

FILL FLASH



NO FILL FLASH

With the subject's face shaded by his hat, detail is lost in his face.



WITH FILL FLASH

With fill flash the details in the shadow areas are visible in the face and shirt.

FOCUS

Most cameras and lenses these days have automatic focus, but there are times when a shaky hand produces a blurry photo. Handholding a zoom lens such as a 100-300mm at an improper shutter speed, less than 1/125, can also lead to an out-of-focus photo. The shorter the lens, the less chance the photo will be blurred at lower shutter speeds. For example, if you have a 50mm lens you should be able to shoot at a shutter speed of 1/60 without any blur. The more you zoom, the more shakiness you are apt to capture, resulting in a photo that's not as sharp as it could be. One solution is to mount the camera on a tripod. This eliminates your shakiness and lets you concentrate on lighting and composition.

Other times to use a tripod are if you're taking a photo of something that requires a long shutter speed, like moving water, sunsets or sunrises. When taking a photo of something close like a water droplet on a flower, using a macro lens requires the camera to be as still as possible. In these situations, using an off-camera remote or shutter release to activate the camera will improve your chance of capturing the image you want.

5 Tips for Taking Better Pictures

1. Move in closer to your subject so that you fill the frame.
2. Compose your subject off center using the rule of thirds.
3. Take photos of the same subject at different angles and times of day.
4. Experiment with fill flash or no flash.
5. Use a tripod to steady your shot.