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Newsletter of E.J. Peiker, Nature Photographer and [www.EJPhoto.com](http://www.EJPhoto.com)  
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Welcome to the quarterly newsletter from E.J. Peiker, Nature Photographer and [www.EJPhoto.com](http://www.EJPhoto.com). In this publication, I keep subscribers posted on upcoming workshops as well as sharing photos and experiences with you. I will also give you impressions on any new equipment that I get the opportunity to use and any other general information in the world of digital Nature Photography. Finally, I strive to bring Photoshop processing techniques to you that you may not have thought of. Please feel free to forward this to other photographers and interested parties but please do so only by forwarding this newsletter in its entirety. All content is copyrighted by E.J. Peiker and may not be reproduced. If you would like to be added to the mailing list, unsubscribe, or access back issues, please visit: [www.ejphoto.com/newsletter.htm](http://www.ejphoto.com/newsletter.htm)



Golden-winged Warbler - Upper Gulf Coast, Texas

## The Best Lenses For Your Nikon and Canon Cameras

I recently started a bit of a storm by posting some of the results from three years of lens focus adjustment and resolution testing online. I summarized the very best lenses with a native Nikon or Canon mount at major focal length nodes. Unfortunately this had a result that I should have predicted. People have an emotional attachment to things they spent a lot of money on and when that item isn't picked as the best, and especially if it is a somewhat inferior product, they get very emotional, upset and sometimes lash out. The anonymity of the Internet can bring out the worst in people. I also got some hate e-mail on this. It almost reminded me of political election behavior of people.

So, here I go again! But this time I will do what I should have done to begin with - list the best lenses at each focal length node for the Nikon and Canon systems separately since you can't mount a Canon lens on Nikons even with an adapter (you can mount Nikon lenses on Canon cameras with an adapter). Please remember that these are simply the best of the best. Just because your lens or some particular lens you like is not on the list does not mean it is a bad lens, it just means that it isn't the very best lens available for your native camera mount. My definition of best puts a premium on corner to corner resolution on a full frame sensor. It also considers chromatic aberration and uses linear distortion as a tie breaker. The latter two are not as important in my definition as corner to corner sharpness because they are correctible in post processing. In the case of fast primes, focus shift between large and smaller apertures is a secondary consideration.



Rattlesnake Canyon - D800e, Zeiss 21mm f/2.8 ZF.2

Lens Category	Canon EF Mount	Nikon F Mount
Ultra Wide Prime	Zeiss 15mm f/2.8 ZE	Zeiss 15mm f/2.8 ZF.2
Extra Wide Prime	Zeiss 21mm f/2.8 ZE	Zeiss 21mm f/2.8 ZF.2
Wide Prime	Zeiss 25mm f/2 ZE	Zeiss 25mm f/2 ZF.2
Moderate Wide Prime	Sigma 35mm f/1.4	Sigma 35mm f/1.4
Standard Prime	Zeiss 50mm f/2 Makro Planar	Nikon 50mm f/1.4G
Portrait Prime (short telephoto)	Canon 85mm f/1.2L II	Nikon 85mm f/1.8G
Medium Telephoto	Zeiss 135mm f/2 Apo Sonnar ZE	Zeiss 135mm f/2 Apo Sonnar ZF.2
200mm Prime	Canon 200mm f/2L	Nikon 200mm f/2G
300mm Prime	Canon 300mm f/2.8L IS II	Nikon 300mm f/2.8G VR
400mm Prime	Canon 400mm f/2.8L IS II	Nikon 400mm f/2.8G VR
500mm Prime	Canon 500mm f/4L IS II	Nikon 500mm f/4G VR
600mm Prime	Canon 600mm f/4L IS II	Nikon 600mm f/4G VR
800mm Prime	Canon 800mm f/5.6L IS	Nikon 800mm f/5.6E VR
Wide Angle Zoom	Tokina 16-28mm f/2.8 ATX Pro FX	Nikon 14-24mm f/2.8G
Standard Zoom	Canon 24-70mm f/2.8L II	Tamron 24-70mm f/2.8 Di VC
Telephoto Zoom	Canon 70-200mm f/2.8L IS II	Nikon 70-200mm f/4G VR
Super Telephoto Zoom	Sigma 120-300mm f/2.8 EX DG OS*	Nikon 200-400mm f/4G VR II

\* The new Canon 200-400mm f/4 Extender lens has not yet been tested.

There have been a couple of changes since I first posted my list on NatureScapes.net. The new Zeiss 135mm f/2 Apo Sonnar has easily outdistanced the Canon and Nikon equivalents. Also, Canon has just released the new and exciting 200-400 f/4 Extender lens with a built in 1.4x teleconverter. This lens has not yet been tested but I expect it to become the best lens in the Super Telephoto Zoom class.

### **New Sigma 35mm f/1.4 - A New Standard**

For those that follow the world of prime lenses, you have probably read great things about the brand new Sigma 35mm f/1.4 lens. This is the first lens to come to market using Sigma's new individually Quality Controlled lens manufacturing process and significantly upgraded production techniques on their professional grade lenses. All of the reviews so far have been excellent with this lens easily outperforming 35mm lenses that cost 2-3 times as much. This includes all 35mm DSLR lenses from the major manufacturers and the lens even outguns the Zeiss 35mm lens on independent tests. Since the review read so superlative as if Sigma themselves had written them, I decided that I had to see for myself so I pitted two brand new Sigma 35mm f/1.4 against a brand new Nikkor 35mm f/1.4G and a completely rebuilt and overhauled to better than new Nikkor 24-70 f/2.8G to see what the hype is all about... All those other reviews were right!

The Sigma blows away the Nikon lenses (or Canon for that matter). when shot wide open in every category except vignetting where it has about 1/2 stop more vignetting than either of the Nikon contenders. It is sharper in both the corners and the center wide open. It has significantly less chromatic aberration and dramatically less pincushion/barrel distortion. The Nikon 35mm f/1.4G has a lot of barrel distortion regardless of aperture. The Nikon 24-70 also has a lot of linear



distortion at the widest end of this zoom but it is well controlled by the time you zoom to 35mm. By f/2.8 the Nikon 35mm f/1.4 catches up to the Sigma for center resolution and then stays approximately equal throughout the aperture range but it never catches the Sigma for corner resolution or Chromatic aberration. Vignetting affects the Sigma more than the others until you get to f/5.6. By f/8 the Sigma actually vignettes less than the two Nikon lenses. ACR 7.4/8.1 and LR4.4/5.0 already include lens profiles for the new Sigma lens which eliminates the vignetting. One of the biggest issues with the Nikon 35mm f/1.4 is focus shift. This is a phenomenon where the lens focuses in a different place depending on aperture. Since we focus with the lens wide open on a phase detect autofocus DSLR, a small amount of focus error is induced when stopping down. The Sigma has less focus shift from wide open to other apertures while the Nikon prime does exhibit this phenomenon - about a 5 point AF tune value difference is needed between f/1.4 and f/2.8 on the Nikon 35mm f/1.4G. The 24-70 also has very little focus shift which was to be expected since focus shift is generally an issue only for the very fastest prime lenses. Horizontal Red/Green Chromatic aberration is significantly higher on both Nikon lenses but is essentially eliminated using the lens profiles supplied by the latest version of ACR and LR. Build quality on all three lenses is first rate. The Sigma is not one of those lightweight plastic feeling lenses that we often find in third party lenses. This is a bulky, strong professional grade lens with first rate lens finish like it's Nikon counterpart. It has a decidedly modern and very high quality look. Autofocus on this lens is significantly faster than the Nikkor 35mm f/1.4G, which is one of Nikon's slowest focusing AF-S lenses. It is on par in focusing speed with the 24-70mm f/2.8G lens.



Below, please find a table of the results ranking the lenses from first to third for each category tested. As you can see, the Sigma lives up to its claims and easily dethrones the Nikon 35mm f/1.4G lens which is by all accounts an excellent lens although wide open leaves a bit to be desired. All tests were done with a D800E using contrast detect AF on an ISO 12233 test chart to eliminate shot-to-shot variability:

<b>35mm shootout</b>			
	Nikon 24-70 f/2.8	Nikon 35mm f/1.4	Sigma 35mm f/1.4
<b>f/1.4</b>			
Center Resolution	N/A	2	1
Corner Resolution	N/A	2	1
Chromatic Aberration	N/A	2	1
Linear Distortion	N/A	2	1
Vignetting	N/A	1	2
<b>f/2.8</b>			
Center Resolution	3	1	1
Corner Resolution	3	2	1
Chromatic Aberration	3	2	1
Linear Distortion	2	3	1
Vignetting	2	1	3
<b>f/5.6</b>			
Center Resolution	3	1	1
Corner Resolution	3	2	1
Chromatic Aberration	3	2	1
Linear Distortion	2	3	1
Vignetting	1	2	2
<b>f/8</b>			
Center Resolution	3	1	1
Corner Resolution	3	2	1
Chromatic Aberration	3	2	1
Linear Distortion	2	3	1
Vignetting	2	2	1

A final word on the Sigma 35mm f/1.4 for Canon users. Everything I have stated above holds for Canon shooters as well. Current Canon cameras top out at 22 megapixels so Canon cameras do not challenge lens resolution as much as the Nikon 36 and 24 megapixel cameras so the differences are a bit less but still very measurable and noticeable when photographing scenes with high frequency detail.

### **Nikon 80-400 f/4.5-5.6G Evaluation (and a few words about the new D7100)**

Nikon recently introduced a significantly updated model of its 80-400mm zoom lens. I was fortunate enough to get to test one of these. I also had a D7100 to put through its paces. Here are the findings:

Construction: The 80-400mm f/4.5-5.6G is a relatively large and bulky lens for the genre but overall, given its size I did not find it very heavy and found it to be well balanced even on a lightweight D7100 without optional vertical grip. If this lens had the same metal construction as the 300 f/4 or 70-200 f/2.8 it would be even heavier. There is a lot of polycarbonate in the lens similar to the other recent f/4 range of lenses. This

isn't necessarily a bad thing as it still feels strong and durable but doesn't have that tank-like feel and could be a bit more susceptible to impact damage. In normal use it will last a long time but I would not want to subject it to a hard hit or a fall to the ground as it would likely be seriously damaged.



Long-billed Dowitcher - D7100 in 1.3x DX crop mode handheld, 80-200 f/4.5-5.6G @ 400mm

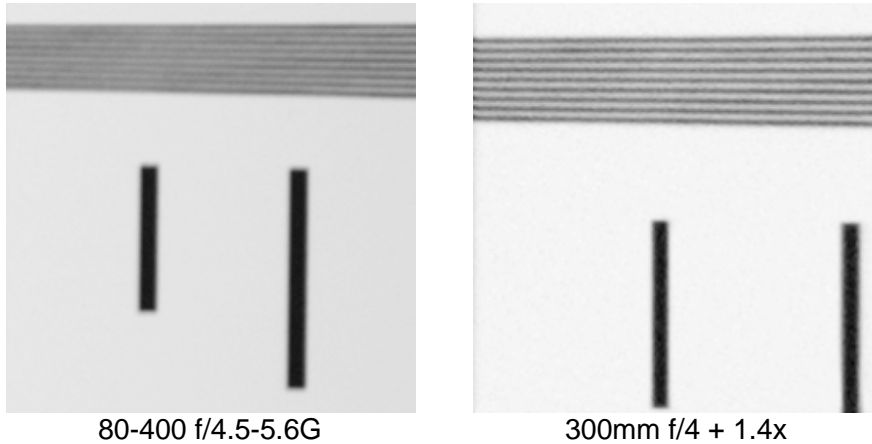
**Sharpness and Resolution:** Overall the lens promises to be significantly sharper than the lens it replaces and my findings bear that out. I tested center sharpness as well as DX, FX, and DX crop modes. The FX tests were done on a D800E and the crop mode tests were done on a D800E and D7100. I compared the results at various focal lengths:

At 80mm, the lens' resolution is very good in the center but it finishes significantly behind the 85mm f/1.4G and f/1.8G at similar apertures. Both current models of the 70-200 (f/2.8G VR2 and f/4VR) also beat the new 80-400 but by less than I was expecting. The new lens still is very impressive especially since it was being shot wide open. By f/8 there was virtually no difference in the center between the new 80-400mm lens and the two 70-200mm zooms. The FX corners are a different story where the other lenses handily beat the 80-400 by nearly 30% in the lines per frame resolution test. The difference is mostly gone when shooting the 80-400 in DX mode on either the D800E or the D7100 with the resolution drop falling to just 12% compared to the 70-200 f/2.8 and f/4 lenses. When using the 80-400 in what Nikon calls 1.3x crop mode on the D7100 which is really a 1.95x crop compared to a full-frame sensor, the 80-400 holds up very well with just a 8% lower resolution which is relatively insignificant. This makes the D7100 with the 80-400 f/4.5-5.6G in crop mode the best handheld bird rig on the market today.

At 200mm the new 80-400 lens is an f/5.3 lens. Results at 200mm mirror those at 85mm. It is a very good performer in the center and in the two DX crop modes but it falls off compared to the other lenses in the full-frame corners.

Many have asked how this lens compares at 300mm to the 300mm f/4 and also at 400mm to the 300mm f/4 with 1.4x converter. In short, it doesn't compare well. The 300 f/4 is an amazingly sharp lens and trounces the 80-400 in resolution throughout the full frame and even when using either DX crop mode and the 1.95x

crop (1.3x DX crop). With the 1.4x attached to the 300, it still handily beats the 80-400 for resolution. Here are 100% crops of identical areas of the ISO12233 test chart taken from the upper right hand corner of a DX frame comparing the new 80-400 vs. the 300 f/4 + 1.4x:



A comparison of the new 80-400mm versus the 70-200 with 2x or versus other offerings like the Sigma 120-400, 50-500 and 150-500 also reveals this lens significantly superior to those options. The Sigma lenses are dispatched easily with this lens being sharper in all regimes and all parts of the frame. Some have also asked how it compares to the Canon 100-400. The new Nikon 80-400 is superior to this very old lens in every category except build strength which easily goes to the all metal Canon lens. But optically and especially in auto-focus speed there is no comparison. It also easily outperforms the Nikon 70-200 f/2.8G VR2 with 2x III teleconverter in all regimes. At 280mm, the 70-200 f/2.8G VR2 with the 1.4x II shot at f/5.6 is slightly superior in the center and significantly superior on the edge for sharpness and resolution to the 80-400 at f/5.6. At f/8 the centers are equal but the FX corners are still superior using the 70-200/1.4x combo.

Stopping down to f/8 puts the lens into diffraction at the pixel level on the D7100 but the diffraction fall-off is less than the improvement in sharpness in the lens so it is still better to shoot at f/8 and accept some diffraction than it is to shoot wide open. The breakeven point on the D7100 is about f/11. At f/11 you will get similar sharpness (with greater depth of field) shooting with the new 80-400 as you would get shooting the lens wide open. The larger pixel size of the D800E pushes this to about f/13. The sweet spot on both cameras for maximizing resolution is to shoot at f/7.1.

Overall this lens is an excellent pairing with DX cameras where the weakest part of the lens - the full-frame corners - are always masked off. It is an even better performer in the 1.95x (1.3x DX) crop mode where only the best part of the lens is used. If shooting this on a D7100 you get a 160mm-780mm stabilized 15 megapixel system. As stated above, this is the best hand held bird photography rig on the market. It is a hand-holdable mega reach system with excellent optics and very capable stabilization. The only downside is the frame rate and buffer of the D7100 - more on that later.

Linear distortions: I am surprised and impressed by how well linear distortions are controlled throughout the zoom range of this lens. Very little observed pincushion or barrel distortion is observed on the linear distortion test chart. Adobe's ACR 8.0 release candidate already has a profile which corrects these.

Chromatic Aberration: Similarly, chromatic aberration, even in the FX corners is minimal and the very slight purple fringing is easily corrected and are completely corrected with the ACR 8.0 profile for this lens.



**Auto-focus Response:** Auto-focus is quick and positive with little to no hunting. It is literally light years ahead of the lens it replaces and also blows away the focus response from the Sigma lenses in this genre and the now very old Canon 100-400mm lens. The lens can easily be used as a bird in flight lens. With the focus limit switch engaged, it feels like you are shooting with a faster lens. Even the D7100, which has a lower spec AF system than the D800, was easily able to track Mourning Doves flying in my neighborhood. Initial focus acquisition was faster with the D800 though.

**Vibration Reduction:** The 80-400G has Nikon's latest spec VR system which is claimed to be good for 5 stops. Overall I found it to be very effective and similar to what I found with the 70-200 f/4G which shares the VR system with this lens. My subjective rating is that the practical reduction in vibration is approximately 3 - 4 stops.

**Other Observations:** This is not a true 400mm lens. My tests show it to be closer to 385mm lens when focused at infinity and that is reduced somewhat as you get near minimum focus. Unfortunately this focal length inflation has become all too common in the photo industry. If you are going for reach, the difference between the 420mm of the 300 f/4+1.4x is more significant than you would expect due to this. You can see this in the ISO 12233 test chart crops above.

Many will ask, can I use this lens with a Teleconverter for even more reach? I did briefly test this and in the center it is a credible combination. Of course AF speed is compromised and corner sharpness leaves a lot to be desired but in a pinch, the center is plenty sharp for internet or small print uses. In cropped DX frame mode (1.95x) you would have a field of view equivalent to that of a 1092mm on a full frame camera. Stopping down to f/10 makes things better especially on the larger pixel cameras.

**Conclusion:** The new 80-400 f/4.5-5.6G is an exceptional follow-on to the older 80-400 f/4.5-5.6D lens. AF performance is in a different universe compared to the old lens. Optically it is also much better especially in the center of the frame. It basically runs circles around the old lens in every regime. It is significantly superior to using a 2x III with the 70-200 f/2.8G (either the VR or VR2). It is not as good on the long end as the 300mm f/4 with or without the 1.4x II but then again it is much more versatile due to the zoom capability. I highly recommend this lens for the DX shooter but if you need edge to edge sharpness on an FX frame, this is not the best lens for you. The biggest Achilles heel for this lens is its price; \$2700 is a steep price for an f/4.5-f/5.6 variable aperture zoom. For that amount you could just about buy a 70-200 f/4, a used 300 f/4 and a 1.4x and have better performance but it would be a bulkier and less versatile kit.



AF sensor position vs. point of focus - see D7100 text below

At \$2000 I would be very enthusiastic about this lens but at \$2700, unless you really need the versatility, I would wait for the inevitable rebates and price reductions. I do however feel that paired with a D7100 this is an incredible lightweight combination for some serious reach and capable of professional level results.

A few words about the D7100: This test gave me a lot of time with a D7100. Overall I am very impressed with the camera. The AF performance is better than I expected and its detail rendering capabilities at low ISO, due to the large pixel density and no low-pass filter, are impressive. Handling is pure Nikon and anybody comfortable with Nikon DSLRs made in the last few years can transition to this camera very quickly. Build quality is very good but the camera does have a bit of a plastic feel which is to be expected in such a light body. It has many of the features built into the pro bodies at a lower price point. I tried to create moiré since this camera does not have the filter designed to avoid that but was unable to - the pixels are just too small. I think removing the low-pass (or AA) filter was a wise move by Nikon. The camera does have some drawbacks compared to what I am used to in the professional grade bodies. First there is no separate rear AF button. You can program the AEL/AFL button for AF but then you lose that button for other functions - I like to program the AEL/AFL button to change aspect ratios quickly. Second, as reported by others, the buffer is just awful. The camera literally comes to a stop after just 6-7 RAW frames. It takes a long time for the next frame after that and all subsequent frames. The camera is very slow to write data to a card and it takes a long time for the buffer to clear. This improves slightly in 1.3x DX crop mode but not as much as I would expect given that the camera is moving just a little more than half the data. You will definitely want the fastest cards made if you want to shoot action with this camera. The camera is a bit more noisy than I would like which is also what I expected given the pixel density. It seems to be about 1 stop noisier than the D800E. I also noted that with a busy high contrast background, even though the viewfinder depiction of an AF point was completely on a bird's head, the camera wanted to jump to the background indicating that the actual AF sensor might be located in a slightly different place or be somewhat larger than its depiction (see picture above). In short, the D7100 is a very capable camera but lacks some of the features and precision found in the pro bodies. It is superior in every way to the D7000 which it replaces.





## My Changing Shooting Style

I have been a photographer for most of my life (see my [bio here](#)) and throughout my 45 years or so of photography, my style has changed many times. When I first got heavily into bird photography about 13 years ago, the trend in North America was towards shooting birds as big as possible in the frame and I followed that trend taking at least 100,000 birds that were "stuffed" in the frame. In recent years photos like this have become less and less satisfying to me but I continued to take photos where the bird took up the vast majority of the frame. Part of this was driven by the pixel counts of the era. With 8 and 12 megapixel cameras, in order to get enough pixels on the bird for larger scale reproduction, it was necessary to not "waste" too many pixels. But as cameras got to larger megapixel counts like 24 and now 36, it became possible to include a lot of the surroundings and still have plenty of pixels if a publisher does need a tight shot.

Even though I teach photo workshops, every year I attend one or two workshops as a paying participant with photographers that I respect, admire, and can learn things from. One should never stagnate in their craft! This spring I attended Alan Murphy's and Brian Small's Warbler Migration workshop on the Texas Gulf Coast. There is no better bird photographer in the world than Alan Murphy and Brian Small is one of the top experts on birding, birds in general and bird photography in the world. I am happy to call them both friends for years now. While photographing an amazing array of birds during this workshop, it hit me that I am not taking nearly as many shots with teleconverters and that I am taking a lot more shots with a lot more of the perch and the environment than I did in the past. As I thought more about this, I concluded that the reason for this is that we now have the tools that allow me to take the types of images that I find more visually pleasing but at the same time be able to use those photos for editorial purposes where the only thing that matters is the primary subject.

Below is an example of the types of shots I used to take and what I am taking more and more of now:



Magnolia Warbler - 2003



Magnolia Warbler - 2013

I find the image on the right much more visually pleasing. The amazing thing is that the number of pixels that comprise only the bird is actually higher on the newer image on the right due to the much higher megapixel camera that it was taken with. I could crop the new image so that the bird is the same size in the frame as the older image and still have a larger file and be capable of larger reproduction. Who says that newer equipment can't unleash creativity?!

## **Upcoming Workshops**

I continue to offer workshops in some fantastic destinations through NatureScapes Certified Workshops. Click on the Workshops below for all of the info. For the complete schedule of Workshops offered by NatureScapes, please click [HERE](#):

**[Navajo Country and North Rim Grand Canyon](#): (Aug 25-30, 2013 - SOLD OUT)**

**[Banff and Jasper National Parks](#): (Oct 19-26, 2013)**

**[Ultimate Iceland Adventure](#): (July 7-19, 2014)**

Stay tuned on the [NatureScapes Workshops Page](#) for more amazing workshop announcements in 2014!!!

## **Private Photography Instruction and Consulting Services**

In addition to the photo workshops that I launched over 10 years, I also offer private instruction in Wildlife and Landscape photography at the place of your choosing within the USA and Canada. These private workshops are of the one on one variety (or two on one). Clients may schedule time in 4-hour time blocks for either classroom or field sessions. With just two people, a number of shooting locations become possible that aren't possible for larger groups and thereby making it possible to photograph some species or locations that are not attainable with larger groups. More specific instruction, based on the client's specific needs, can be given using this delivery method in either the classroom or in the field. For more information please see the following link: [www.ejphoto.com/duckshop\\_private.htm](http://www.ejphoto.com/duckshop_private.htm)

I also offer both photo equipment and computer workstation/digital darkroom consulting services. This allows me to combine my 27 years of work in the computer industry with my lifetime of photographic experience and provide services at a technical level that are hard to find elsewhere. Contact me for rates and specifics or visit my rate sheet: [www.ejphoto.com/Quack%20PDF/Rate%20Schedule.pdf](http://www.ejphoto.com/Quack%20PDF/Rate%20Schedule.pdf)



## **Two eBooks Now Available**

Be ready for Duck Photography with my eBook "**Ducks of North America – The Photographer's Guide.**" It is an essential text that covers all of the techniques needed to get the best shots of waterfowl and birds in general. It covers every species in the wild and in captivity in North America and gives species specific tips on how best to capture them and where to find them. Eleven years in the making, this book is a great tool for the beginning, intermediate or advanced waterfowl photographer. The tips in it are easily applied to all birds and most other subjects too. It sells for \$30. While this is expensive for an eBook due to the incredible amount of time and money it took to create it, it will easily save you 10 times that in aggravation, time, and failed attempts.

I have also released my previously privately published paper book "**West – A Collection of Photographs From The Western United States**" in a fully updated and revised eBook version. It is available for \$10.

Both books can be ordered from the fine outlets you will find at this link:

[http://www.ejphoto.com/ebook\\_page.htm](http://www.ejphoto.com/ebook_page.htm)

## **Facebook Page**

On my Facebook Fan Page, I am keeping those interested up to date on what photo excursions I go on as well as short commentaries on a variety of photo related subjects and tools. I also have nearly 100 galleries accessible through there. Please visit:

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/EJ-Peiker-Nature-Photographer/150804446733>

and if you like what you see, please click the "Like" button.

## **Image Recovery from CF and CD Cards**

Let someone that worked as a professional in the computer industry for more than a quarter century and has a multitude of tools available attempt to recover images from your damaged, formatted, or corrupted media cards. There is a basic \$25 charge for the analysis. If I determine that I can recover images, I will recover them, with the card holder's approval, for an additional \$75.

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