

QUACK

Newsletter of E.J. Peiker, Nature Photographer and www.EJPhoto.com
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Welcome to the quarterly newsletter from E.J. Peiker Nature Photography and www.EJPhoto.com. In this quarterly email publication, I will keep subscribers posted on upcoming workshops including the DuckShop Workshop Series as well as sharing some photos and experiences with you. I will also give you brief impressions on any new equipment that I get the opportunity to use and any other general information in the world of digital nature photography. Please feel free to forward this along to other photographers and interested parties but please do so only by forwarding this newsletter in its entirety. Note that all content is copyrighted by E.J. Peiker. If you would like to be added or deleted to the mailing list, just send me an email message at ejpeiker@cox.net. Back issues are available online at <http://www.ejphoto.com/newsletter.htm>



Vermilion Flycatcher - Chandler, Arizona (D300, 500mm, 1.7x)

Common Photo Problems

Through my years of teaching photographic workshops , moderating photographic forums, and critiquing tens of thousands of photographs I have run across just about every type of image problem you can imagine. In this issue I have amassed what I think are the most common traps photographers get themselves into that result in poor photographs or photos that are less than what they could be. In many cases, the photo was actually taken well but the photographer had not mastered the art of processing the image in the digital darkroom.

Let's talk about a few of the most common ones:

1. *Wonky Horizon*: I love the term wonky which I borrowed from our British English speaking friends across the pond that we call the Atlantic. The Brits use this reference when a horizon is not level. I will expand it to also refer to any horizon that suffers from noticeable pincushion and barrel distortion. An unlevel horizon is due to not having the camera perfectly level when taking a shot that includes a horizon. Many photographers have a tendency to always lean the camera slightly to one side or the other and some just don't pay enough attention to level the horizon prior to taking the shot. There are several aids that can be employed to help you avoid this. The oldest aid for this is the gridded focusing screen. Most of the higher end cameras have interchangeable screens that allow you to replace the stock ground screen with one that has some horizontal and vertical lines etched into them which aids in aligning the horizon. Some newer cameras have this capability through projecting an optical or electronic grid into the viewfinder. Another method is the bubble level. Several accessory manufacturers make double-bubble levels that can be placed in the hot shoe of the camera to aid in leveling the camera in both the horizontal and vertical axis. Finally, some of the latest cameras now have an



Mohave Point - Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona (D3x, 24-70mm)

electronic level that displays either on the back LCD, in the viewfinder, or both. If all of these aids are unavailable, fail, or are ignored, you can always still level the shot in the digital darkroom although you will lose a few pixels in the areas that will have to be cropped when you level in the digital darkroom. There simply is no longer a good excuse to not present level shots.

2. *Lack Of Contrast:* Quite often, what seems like an excellent photo compositionally looks flat. This is usually due to a lack of contrast. If you shoot in the RAW format (and you should), quite often shots will look flatter than the scene actually was. This is intentional and allows the camera to capture the maximum dynamic range possible. What some photographers forget to do is to set the white and black points properly in post processing leaving a black area as dark gray and a white area as light gray. Either Levels or Curves in Photoshop or the white point and black point controls in your RAW processor can easily take care of this. In fact, in Levels, if you hold down the ALT (Option on Mac), and start to move the black point or white point sliders, the screen will either go black or white and show you when you first start to saturate highlights or block shadows. This can be an invaluable tool in setting black and white points and help you get better contrast in the photo. If you want to customize contrast and maybe add contrast to just a certain part of the luminosity range, try an S-curve in the curves command. There are even some pre-canned curves in the Curves command. The one called Linear Contrast can be very effective. Regardless of how you do it, there is no need for flat looking images.



Grand Prismatic Spring - Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming (EOS 1Ds, 24-70mm)

3. *Blown Highlights/Blocked Shadows:* This is the opposite of a lack of contrast. This occurs when either the dynamic range of the scene was too large for the camera to record or the shot was either under or overexposed. In the field, you must use your histogram to assess if you are blowing highlights, blocking shadows or both and make appropriate adjustments. If your histogram has data spiking on the right edge, you are creating blown highlights and less exposure is in order. If your histogram has data spiking on the left edge, you are creating blocked up shadows and are underexposing. If both happen simultaneously, the dynamic range of the scene is greater than what the sensor can record. In this situation you have several options. If you have to choose between blown highlights and blocked shadows, in most situations you will want to choose blocked shadows. The human eye and brain is much more used to seeing dark or black shadows than it is used to seeing detail less blown out whites. You do have another option and that is to take two (or more shots) – one for the highlights where the

shadows are blocked and one for the shadows where the highlights are blown. You can then later combine them in Photoshop into one properly illuminated scene. An alternative is to do this with 3 or more exposures separated by about 2 stops and use High Dynamic Range (HDR) Software such as Photomatix to put them together for you. The shots should all be taken from a tripod with no camera movement between shots and ideally one would adjust exposure with shutter speed, not aperture to maintain a constant depth of field between shots. The HDR process takes a lot of practice and digital darkroom skills to look natural.

4. *Color Shift:* Our cameras today have Automatic White Balance systems. They work reasonably well between an hour after sunrise and an hour before sunset. So basically they are most useful during the times when many nature photographers, and especially landscape photographers do not shoot. They render high color temperature scenes taken before or at sunrise (and at sunset or after) way too blue and they render anything right after sunrise or just before sunset way to red. In other words they work well when the color temperature is between about 4500 Kelvin and 6500 Kelvin but fail miserably outside of that. There are many ways to achieve proper white balance in any light manually and this article is not going to explore all those ways. I don't feel that extra white balance tools in the field are necessary. I will usually allow the camera to assign whatever white balance it wants in

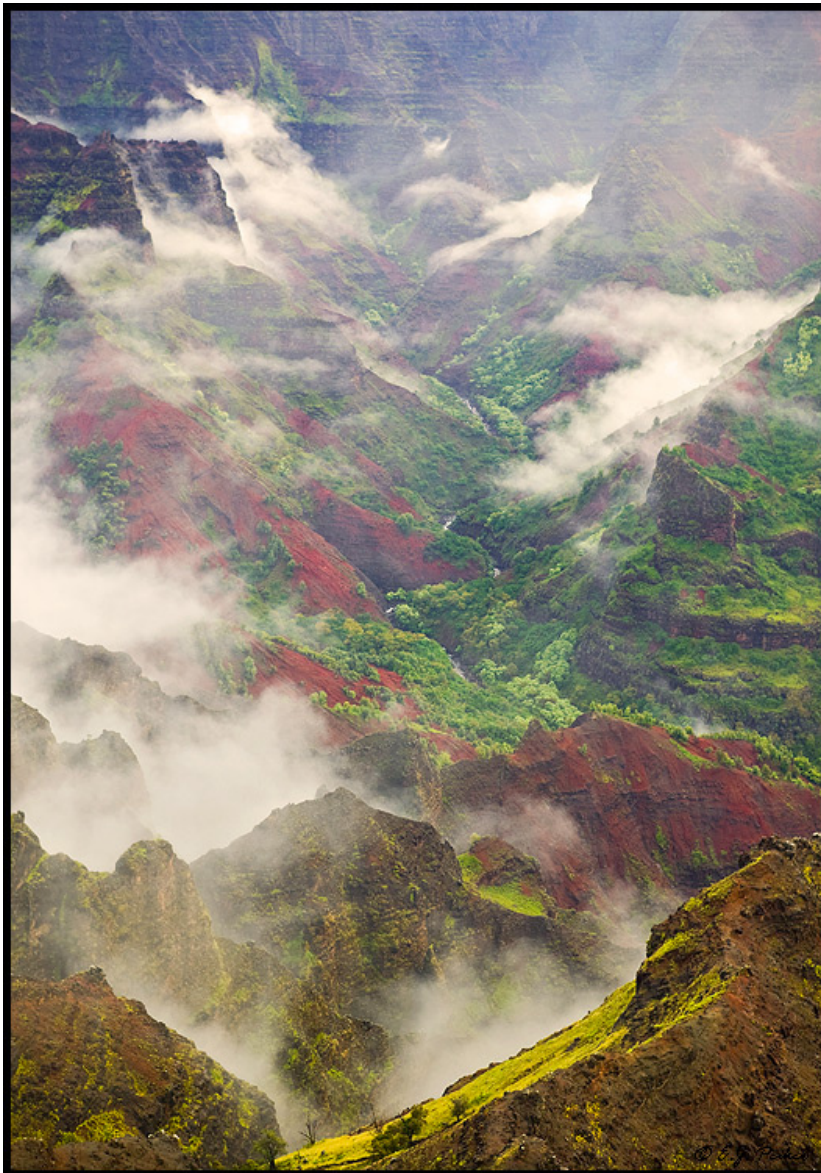


Great Horned Owl - Tucson, Arizona (D300, 300mm)

Automatic White balance mode (AWB) and correct it in RAW processing. This is another reason you should shoot in RAW as you simply cannot do this well on an 8 bit JPEG. Be aware of blue casts in your photos and adjust for them in RAW processing and your photos will be much more appealing. While a bluish shadow might not look that bad, a waterfall where the water is a cyan blue just doesn't look right.

5. *Intrusive Elements*: Quite often you see photos of a beautiful subject, with nice exposure but the photographer failed to notice an intrusive item such as a branch, a cut-off rock, a bright background highlight, etc. During my duck workshops, when we do the lunch time critique after the first shooting session, this is the most common problem. Many parts of other ducks in the picture's background and the photographer never even saw them. This is target fixation. A photographer must be aware of everything that is going on in the viewfinder even in a fast changing environment such as shooting wild waterfowl.
6. *Centered Composition*: This one can also be called "Slave to central point autofocus". For years, the center autofocus sensor has been the most sensitive and often camera manufacturers have not made it real easy to quickly change the AF point (the Canon two wheel approach comes to mind prior to the multi-controller concept). This has bred a generation of photographers that put their subject smack dab in the middle of the viewfinder. Compositionally this is boring and leaves a lot of empty space, especially above the subject. A centered composition in the horizontal direction on a vertical (portrait) orientation isn't that objectionable since we see people portraits that way quite often but note that the head or eyes

of the subject on shots like this are well above center. In a horizontal shot (landscape), having the subject dead center is very static and compositionally displeasing. Utilizing the rule of thirds where a main subject element is either a third of the way in from the top/bottom or left/right or even both is much more pleasing compositionally,



Best Photo Locations

Last quarter I started a "Best Locations" section. This quarter I have four more areas that offer some of the very best photography in the US for certain types of photography:

Best Wildflower Display – Mount Rainier National Park, Washington. The USA is blessed with many spectacular mountains but for sheer beauty, accessibility, and photographic variety, Mount Rainier is hard to beat. Late summer produces the most spectacular wildflower display anywhere. The variety, the density, and the incredible backdrop of Mount Rainier makes this a chart topping destination.

Best Geological Display – Arches National Park, Utah. Arches and part of Canyonlands National Park offer many natural arches and bridges. Most are red sandstone arches. The sheer variety of them as well as many other geologic formations will keep the photographer busy for a long time.

Best Canyon – Waimea Canyon, Kauai, Hawaii. We go back to Hawaii for the best Canyon photo location. While the Grand Canyon may be bigger, the colors and much clearer air of Waimea Canyon, with its waterfalls and deep gorges make this the best canyon photography spot in the US.

Best Waterfall Location – Silver Falls State Park, Oregon. Silver Falls State Park doesn't have the single prettiest waterfall nor the tallest but what it does have is a network of accessible waterfalls in close proximity that is unrivaled. From the tall South Falls and North Falls to the other's in between and the many unnamed cascades, Silver Falls will keep you shooting for a while. Different seasons bring different effects. An excellent network of trails links them all.



Turret Arch through North Window- Arches National Park, Utah (EOS 1Ds Mark II, 24-105mm)

New Gear

I have a few new items to recommend this quarter. For those new to the newsletter, I am on the constant lookout for gear that just works for the nature photographer and when I find some excellent products, I try to let you know about them. This quarter I bring you a (pseudo) Point and Shoot camera that finally gives us DSLR quality, a camera strap that finally works, and a computer/photo gear bag that beats all others.

Panasonic Lumix GF1 with 14/45mm lens: I have been looking for a camera that is smaller and easy to throw into a brief case ever since the dawn of the digital era. But the stipulation was that I was not

willing to compromise on image quality. Until recently, there simply were no options due to the very tiny and noise prone sensors used in these cameras. In the film era, there were many options since the recording media, 35mm film, was the same between SLRs and point and shoot cameras. So all you needed to do was to find one with a decent lens. Last year Sigma fired the first shot with the DP-1 but it was very limited due to a single focal length wide angle lens. They followed that up with a normal field of view model called the DP-2. Next came the Olympus Digital Pen but its autofocus was perhaps among the worst ever put in a camera and it didn't have a flash but it did have micro 4/3 interchangeable lenses. Finally, Panasonic, who has been an innovator in point and shoot digital cameras, brought the GF1 to the party. It has all of the features I was looking for: DSLR sized sensor for excellent image quality, dynamic range and noise; high quality wide to short telephoto zoom lens, interchangeable lenses, flash, great autofocus. It sounded too good to be true but after reading about all of the pre production hype, I ordered one with a 14-45mm (28-90mm 35mm equivalent) direct from Panasonic through a corporate partnership that Intel has with Panasonic for employee discounts. I was not disappointed. This little camera is fantastic. The image quality far exceeds the original EOS 5D and rivals the EOS 1Ds Mark II and D700/D3. The images are sharp and crisp out of the camera and require very little sharpening. The flash could be a bit more powerful but other than that I have no complaints. This little camera goes everywhere I go.



Cascade - Chandler, Arizona (GF1, 14-45mm)

Black Rapid Camera Strap: I have been searching for a camera strap that works for years. Many have come and all of them have gone after disappointment – that is until the Black Rapid Strap. This strap is unique in that it connects via a single point on your camera and can be instantly removed. It doesn't

slip off your shoulder and it is unique in that the camera travels along the strap from your hip to your eye with the strap never moving. There are several models available but the basic RS-4 does the trick for me. Check them out in the NatureScapes store – they really are the better mousetrap.

ThinkTank Urban Disguise: The NatureScapes Store recently provided me a ThinkTank Urban Disguise 50 to test out and put through its paces. After unpacking it, my first impression was that this was too small to be useful as a small carry-on as it wouldn't be able to store much gear. Was I ever wrong. It's diminutive size, no larger than a regular laptop case in appearance, is very deceiving. I was able to load up the bag with my D3x, a 17-35 f/2.8, a 24-70 f/2.8, and a 70-200 f/2.8, plus an SB900 flash extra battery, filters and other small accessories with no problem at all. In addition, the laptop pocket still easily accepted my 13.3" MacBook Pro and a notebook. The front pocket was able to house the charger, my iPod Touch and other small items. Basically I was able to put an entire landscape travel kit, sans tripod in this small bag. Granted I removed the Velcro attached dividers as I do in all camera bags, backpacks and rollers, preferring to pack my gear in neoprene pouches. This is very impressive and this counts as your small carry-on! You could use another bag for your large carry on and have room for a 500mm or 600mm lens plus a 300 f/2.8 or 200-400 f/4 plus a slew of other things and still easily meet the US requirements for carry-on luggage and even many non-US carriers. Of course those that impose somewhat arbitrary weight limitations as many European carriers do will still be a problem. Build quality is the usual ThinkTank high standard and the bag comes with dividers as mentioned above for those that prefer to use them. The laptop pocket is generous enough to fit even most 15" notebook computers. I find that most shoulder straps are fairly uncomfortable after a while but the padded strap on this bag can be worn on the shoulder for a long time without undue discomfort. It is very wide and extremely thickly padded. Furthermore the rubberized underside is dimpled making it almost impossible for it to slip off of your shoulder. This is important for those of us that are not broad shouldered. Other bags are a constant source of frustration in this regard. Overall, I could not be happier with the UrbanDisguise 50 and I believe that would apply to the other models of this bag as well. For me, the 50 is the ideal size.



Redheads in the Mist – Chandler, Arizona (D300, 500mm, 1.7x)

New Facebook Page

After years of ignoring social networking on the Internet, I have finally put up a Facebook fan page. On this 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 a number of galleries accessible through there. Please visit <http://www.facebook.com/pages/EJ-Peiker-Nature-Photographer/150804446733> and if you like what you see, you may choose to become a fan of the page.

DuckShops – A New Delivery Model

After 7 years of DuckShops I have decided to change the way they are delivered on a trial basis for the 2009/2010 Winter season. In recent years I have received an increasing number of requests for one on one in the field or classroom sessions rather than the group sessions that comprise the Workshop model of delivery. This Winter all DuckShops will be of the one on one variety (or two on one). In other words, this will be a private delivery model. Clients may schedule time in 4 hour time blocks for either classroom or field sessions. Clients will be able to make special requests for certain species. 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 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:

http://www.ejphoto.com/duckshop_private.htm

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Notice:

EJPhoto will be closed January 30 - February 17, 2010. All orders and inquiries will be processed in the order in which they were received beginning February 18, 2010.

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