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Think About Your Subject Before You Begin Shooting

Featuring **DAVID MIDDLETON**



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David Middleton is a Nikon Legend Behind the Lens

See the picture, take the picture, right?

Not necessarily. David Middleton suggests another method: See the picture, think about the picture. "Put your hands in your pockets and wander around for a while," David says. "The biggest mistake people make is that as soon as the idea pops into their heads, they take the picture," David says. "What they should do is look at the subject—the flower, the scene, whatever it is—and ask themselves, is this the best way to take it? So wander a bit and think about it, look for different angles, different views. The accomplished photographer is the one who spends more time looking at the shot, analyzing it and figuring out how to take it than actually taking it."

By that definition, and just about any other, David is an accomplished photographer. He's been an outdoor and nature photographer for over 18 years, has published several books and contributed images to numerous magazines. In addition, he teaches between ten and 15 workshops each year. He has conducted photographic tours and taught workshops for, among others, the National Audubon Society and The Great American Photography Weekend.

"Definitely look to your own backyard," David says. "That's another common

mistake. Most people want to go for the glory shot—a bear, a moose, the snow-covered Tetons, the Delicate Arch. But those pictures have been done over and over again. And if you run around taking the glory shots, you end up with a hodgepodge of images. People forget that the best light they're ever going to find is the light they see when they walk out their front door on a beautiful spring morning. Drive around, wander your own area, you'll find more to photograph than you ever imagined." Go deep, he suggests, rather than wide.

David says that a lot of people do "that Tetons, Denali thing because they think it's the way to get published, but it's actually the way to rejection because there are so many pictures of those places already. People think if they bag a large hairy mammal they'll get published. But there are tens of thousands of photographs of large hairy mammals."

Of course, when the time comes—and the market is calling—David is expert at photographing creatures in the wild. But not too wild. "I prefer to photograph, say, a mountain lion in a protected area where the animal isn't chased and stressed. And I used to do photo tours in Yellowstone and see some photographers throwing out cheese slices to coyotes and foxes to get them to come closer to be photographed. A fed animal is a dead animal, and I won't do that." And so David does a lot of his controlled-environment photography at the Triple D Game Farm in Kalispell, Montana.

For his workshops, David takes people to great locations, but he's still interested in teaching them to find subjects close by. "A couple of feet from the car we can find something," he says. "Exertion and photography do not go hand in hand. And good nutrition and good photography have nothing in common, either. Many a donut sealed a wonderful shot."

David maintains that every nature photographer can find interesting subjects close to home. "There are nature preserves everywhere," he says, "and every local nature preserve, nature center and local conservation group needs good images. Their members take pictures that are probably heartfelt but not very good. If you're serious about your photography, talk to people at the nature preserves and nature groups. Offer to take pictures for them—for their mailings, publicity, maybe their websites. It can get you published, and most important, it gets you access. You're no longer behind the fence or with the other visitors. And if your pictures are good, you'll get greater access. The nature preserve people will tell you more and more—here's where the heron refuge is, the tern nesting spot; the turtles are over there.

"Everyone wants to get published in *National Geographic* or *Outdoor* or *Nikon World*, but there's so much competition for those pages. But every place has a local magazine or newspaper, whether it's the lower Hudson Valley or the Catskills. The big nature photographers aren't making submissions to those magazines, but you can.

"And if you just want to get seen, go to the marsh, take the pictures and go to your local bank. Ask them if you can put up a few framed images, and then there you are, the local hero, and then people are calling you up. That's how it can work if your pictures are good.

"I talk a lot about this in workshops, about getting affirmation and positive feedback and how important those things are.

"What's also important is having fun. We do photography because we enjoy it, and we should never lose that."

The Top Tips

"First, realize that technology is a tool," David says, "and better equipment doesn't equate with better pictures if you don't know what you want to do with the equipment. Have a reason for everything you do and for every piece of gear you add. Technology works best when your brain is working, too."

The one piece of gear you should add early on is a tripod. "A tripod is a pain in the neck, but it's vital. Everybody thinks about a tripod in terms of sharp pictures, and of course that's true, but I think the greatest importance of a tripod is that it slows you down. It makes you more deliberate, gives you a chance to consider things—the composition, the angle, the light. The slower you go, the more your craftsmanship will come to the surface.

"And don't put thousands of dollars worth of camera gear on top of a \$39 tripod. Get a big, sturdy one. The more expensive tripod is easier to use; it's just made better, sets up easier and doesn't fight you. If you're wrestling with it and it hurts your fingers to set it up, you got the wrong tripod."

Finally, do some thinking before you do some shooting. "If you really want your creativity to blossom," David says, "give yourself focus, a project—like, 'my backyard' or 'seasons of Smith County' or 'lost and forgotten' or 'macro world.' Get away from a hodgepodge of images. Work with your mind before picking up your camera."

Out of the Box

"I shoot in the rain all the time," David says. "Not pouring rain, but mist to light drizzle. Why? Well, first thing, there's no one else out there, which is nice. And then contrast is so low that it allows colors to reach their greatest saturation... A lot of people think rain means crummy light, but when you do long exposures, the shutter is open for so long it gathers so much light that often the picture you get actually looks better than what you saw when you were out there."

David's [website](#) is more than just a website, it's a resource. David offers shooting tips, field reports and The Nature Photographer's Year—his calendar of when to

visit ideal sites for nature photography. There's information about David's workshops, tours and publications, and the site is the place to see a series of books by David: *The Nature of Vermont*, *A Photographer's Guide to Vermont*, *A Photographer's Guide to the Maine Coast* and *A Photographers Guide to the Oregon Coast*.

For more about David, go to his website at www.davidmiddletonphoto.com.

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