

I Have Seen the Lazy Photographer...And He Is Me

By Mike McBride

Recent observations followed by my reading of a few magazine articles have led me to conclude that photographers as a whole are becoming lazy. Pondering on the reasons for this has led me to a conclusion that the biggest culprit is our equipment. While I do acknowledge that much of today's photographic equipment provides some huge advantages, I don't intend to highlight the advantages in this article. My emphasis rather will be on the disadvantages and hopefully when we catch ourselves falling victim to reliance on the equipment, we'll be able to use these tools to express our vision and create better images rather than letting the camera define our vision for us.

Program Mode

I like to shoot in Program Mode because it is so simple to change the settings on my camera. Without moving my right hand, I can change the shutter speed and aperture combination by simply rotating a dial with my thumb. The problem is that I amaze myself with the number of times I point and shoot without even looking at the aperture and shutter speed selected by the camera. It's right there in front of me! I should never take a picture without choosing the shutter speed to convey my vision of the motion or lack thereof in the final image. I should never take a picture without choosing the aperture value to achieve the depth of field I desire. This same concept applies to other auto modes on our cameras such as white balance. We need to understand them and use them or we will not get the best image possible in some situations.

In-Camera Meters

The meter can't interpret the scene before me and it certainly can't understand the mood I'm trying to create. Meters have become very sophisticated and do a better job than ever, but they are still wrong sometimes. We need to learn to question our meter more. We need to assess the scene and decide what is most important in the scene and if there are bright or dark elements that will confuse the meter. If so, we need to use exposure compensation.

Zoom Lenses

Zoom lenses have come a long way and they are much better optically than they used to be. Consequently, most of us use them most of the time. The problem is this: We find a subject and then we zoom to include or exclude elements. We need to zoom with our feet. Moving closer to or farther from an object changes the perspective. We need to move around and find the desired perspective, then if we use a zoom to select the appropriate focal length for the subject and our

chosen perspective that's fine. Without controlling perspective we may get a good shot and miss a great shot just a few feet away.

Long Telephoto Lenses

I remember when I first started photographing wildlife in Yellowstone more than fifteen years ago. Back then 300mm lenses were very common. Most were fast and expensive f/2.8 lenses, but that was a common tool even among professional wildlife shooters. Occasionally you would see someone with a longer 400mm or 600mm lens. Now, it is rare to see a 300mm f/2.8 lens but 600mm lenses are everywhere. Most of them are being used on digital bodies with an average magnification factor of 1.5 times. So essentially, we used to get the job done with a 300mm lens and now use a 900mm f/4 equivalent. This extra reach makes it easier to get shots without ever leaving the road and so we get complacent and the shots we could get with a little work go completely unnoticed and uncaptured.

Image Stabilization

Why take the time to set up a tripod if I have image stabilization? Using a tripod will still produce a sharper picture and will allow more precise composition.

Digital Media

Digital memory cards will hold hundreds of pictures. So what do I do? I shoot hundreds of pictures and then pick out the best. I'm afraid quantity replaces quality too often. More time spent on fewer pictures would yield more great shots I'm sure.

PhotoShop

Why get up early, why use a filter, why use a tripod, or even focus for that matter? Just fix it all after the fact. This seems to be a common sentiment. Many of the editing tools are very good and can work wonders. No doubt PhotoShop can improve almost any photo, but it can't do it all and it's no substitute for applying your craft in the field. If you start with a great picture you can make it even a little better. If you start with a mediocre picture, you may be able to get a publishable picture, but in my opinion, it will never be as good as a picture that started out great in the camera.

No doubt there are other technologies I haven't mentioned. The bottom line is this: Don't rely too much on the tools. Train yourself to think. Force yourself to pay attention.