

[From Winter 1999]

Timely Photo Tips

It's that wonderful time of year on Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge (CNWR). The annoying summer pests have departed the area -- I'm referring to the biting and stinging insects of summer. You have just celebrated the holidays and welcomed in the new millennium. You just got your photographs back from the local processor with those memorable moments from the holidays and possibly your last visit to a national wildlife refuge during the waterfowl migration. If you are like me, you are probably wondering why your photographs did not turn out the way you had envisioned. Some of your photographs may be too dark (under exposed), too bright (over exposed), and blurry or out of focus. These are common problems that can be easily corrected with a few tips.

People believe that they have to have a high dollar 35mm single lens reflex (SLR) camera and a cache of lenses to take stunning photographs. However, with a nice "point and shoot" and a little knowledge, you can get stunning photos of wildlife and breathtaking scenes at CNWR.

The first thing you must understand are the limits of your camera and lens system. A camera with a 24 to 35mm. zoom lens is great for taking photographs of scenery, the beach, sunrises, the lighthouse, and family and friends enjoying their vacation. A telephoto lens is very helpful in capturing wildlife photographs. If your "point and shoot" camera has a 70mm or greater "zoom", you can probably photograph whitetailed deer, sika deer, wading birds such as herons and egrets, and waterfowl such as Canada geese and mallard ducks from the Beach Road or the Wildlife Loop.

Chincoteague NWR also offers glorious sunrises and sunsets from the beach and the marshes, and the Assateague Lighthouse is spectacular front lit with crystal blue skies around. Just keep in mind that it is best to have the sun at your back when photographing with a camera that does not have an exposure compensation button.

Blurring or out of focus pictures are another common problem. Photographers buy high tech auto focus cameras and lenses to get sharply focused photographs. However, they neglect to purchase and use a sturdy tripod. Camera shake caused by hand holding the camera and lens results in photographs that are slightly blurred. The shaking is magnified when using telephoto lenses. The use of a good, sturdy tripod will eliminate this problem and result in much sharper images. Give it a try for all your photographs and see if you notice a difference.

Composition is very important from an eye pleasing standpoint. When photo-graphing people, turn your camera side-ways and take a vertical photograph to make them tall. Be sure to include all of your subject from head to toe, unless you are trying to emphasize a

certain characteristic like a unique hat. Also, shoot vertical pictures of the Lighthouse, big tall birds like herons and egrets, and trees.

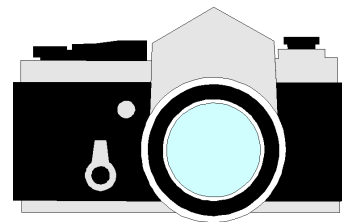
Think about the relationship of the horizon and your subject in the frame. Avoid having your main subject in the center with equal amounts of ground and sky in the frame, this is BORING. Try moving your subject to a "power point." You do this by dividing your camera screen (viewfinder) into a tic-tack-toe board and by placing your subject at the point where a vertical and horizontal line cross. These power points really enhance a photo.

For you photographers with fancy 35mm SLR's, try experimenting with exposure. Exposure is the most difficult concept to grasp, but it is also the most important to understand. Modern cameras have highly sophisticated metering systems commonly called matrix metering. Matrix metering takes a reading from all areas in the frame and provides you with a reading that will correctly expose the photograph of medium tone subjects (neutral gray). To understand exposure, you must understand how the position of the sun, the type and amount of sky in your photograph, and the tonality (the brightness or darkness) of your subjects is interpreted by your camera.

For example, if you are taking a picture of a snow scene on a cloudy day, your camera will meter the snow and give a reading that will make the snow gray instead of white. Therefore you must decrease your shutter speed to make the snow white. Another tricky situation is photographing a dark subject such as a black bear. The camera will meter the bear and give a reading that will make the bear gray instead of black. Therefore you must increase your shutter speed in order to make the bear black.

The easiest way to ensure correct exposure of your photographs is to meter on a green tree with the sun at your back with your camera mode set to "A" for aperture priority mode. Remember the shutter speed number displayed in the viewfinder, compose your subject in the frame and meter the scene and compare the shutter speeds. Use the exposure compensation button on your camera (the +/- button) to adjust your shutter speed up or down until it matches the green tree reading. This method will ensure a correct exposure for most situations.

Now go and take lots of photographs. Don't forget to record your camera settings so you can determine why your photographs were or were not properly exposed.



Give these tips a try the next time you visit your favorite national wildlife refuge and see if you notice an improvement. However, keep in mind that national wildlife refuges are here to provide wildlife with necessary habitat to ensure their survival. So please respect all warnings and do not disturb the animals while trying to capture those award winning photographs.

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