

Stockton Camera Club

The Shutter Tripper

March 2020

February Images of the Month



Mohave Point

Digital Image of the Month - Trey Steinhart



Deuce the Banded

Greater Sandhill Crane

Print of the Month - Doug Ridgway

February's 10's



DCA Waterfalls
Wayne Carlson



Chew With Your Mouth Shut
Ron Wetherell



Simplicity
Joan Erreca



John Moulton Barn
Dean Taylor



Mohave Point Abyss
Trey Steinhart



Young Wolf
Dean Taylor



Ruffle Succulent
Em McLaren



Peacock in Motion
Christine Blue



Juvenile White Egrets
Joanne Sogsti



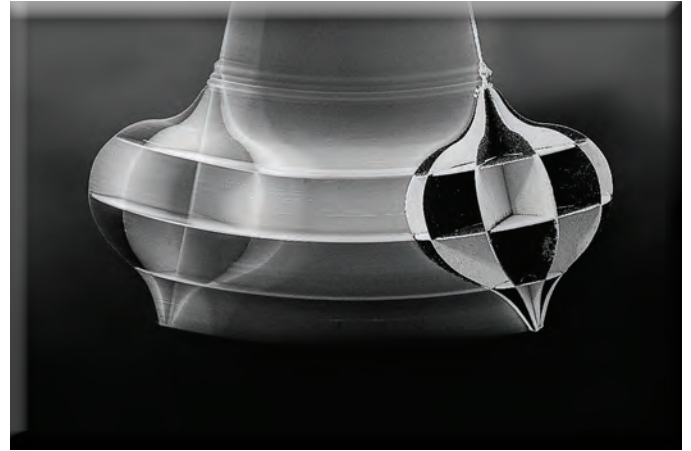
Bring It To Me
Sheldon Mc Cormick



Bald Eagle Flying By
Heide Stover



Splash Bath
Dean Taylor



Pendulum
Wayne Carlson



Speckle Belly Grandeur
Trey Steinhart



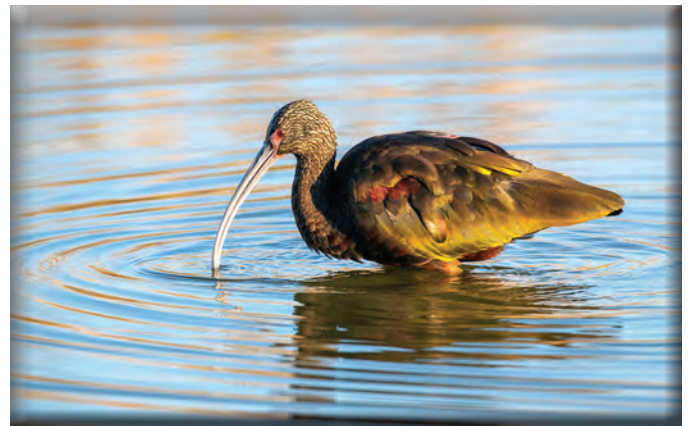
Sun Setting at the Bridge
Em McLaren



Old Hippie Surfer
Joanne Sogsti



Orchid
Christine Blue



White Faced Ibis
Heide Stover



Sparker
Trey Steinhart

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President's Message

March 2020

By Heide Stover

I think we had a good meeting last night with a lot of guests and a number of new members. Good way to start off the year. Jim is a good judge and he was very nice to us all.

Doug has a number of good events planned.

Our event on the 18th should also be a fun one. Sam Shaw has judged for us in the past and is very good. He is a very creative photographer. We will keep everyone posted on time and place. Wish you all a good month and see you in March.

Till then happy photographing and see you all then!

A Big Thank You to Our Sponsors!



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2020 Calendar of Events

Every 3rd Thursday (Except April, June & Aug) 6:30 PM	West Lane Bowling Alley Stockton	Membership Meeting Contact Heide Stover h1stover@aol.com
Thursday March 19	West Lane Bowling Alley Stockton	March General Meeting Special Subject - Sequence of 3
Saturday April 18	Zion Lutheran Church-ELCA 808 Porter Ave, Stockton, CA 95207	April Workshop Oil and Water
Thursday May 21	West Lane Bowling Alley Stockton	May General Meeting Special Subject - Urban/Cityscapes
Thursday June 18	West Lane Bowling Alley Stockton	June General Meeting Special Subject - Prints Only
Thursday July 19	West Lane Bowling Alley Stockton	July General Meeting Special Subject - Reflections
Aug TBA	TBA	Annual Pot Luck
Thursday September 17	West Lane Bowling Alley Stockton	September General Meeting Special Subject - Patterns
Thursday October 15	West Lane Bowling Alley Stockton	October General Meeting Special Subject - Monochrome
Thursday November 19	West Lane Bowling Alley Stockton	November General Meeting Special Subject - Prints Only (No Special Subject)
Thursday December 17	West Lane Bowling Alley Stockton	December General Meeting Special Subject - On the Water

2021 Calendar of Events

January 21	TBA	Annual Banquet
Thursday February 18	West Lane Bowling Alley Stockton	February General Meeting Special Subject - Long Exposure
Thursday March 18	West Lane Bowling Alley Stockton	March General Meeting Special Subject - Fog
April	TBA	April Workshop/Photo Opportunity
Thursday May 20	West Lane Bowling Alley Stockton	May General Meeting Special Subject - Macro/Close-up
Thursday June 17	West Lane Bowling Alley Stockton	June General Meeting Special Subject - Prints Only (No Special Subject)
July 15	West Lane Bowling Alley Stockton	July General Meeting Special Subject - Creative

Meeting Notes February 2020

Heide opened the meeting

Chris introduced the guests and new members:

Steve Perry (New Member, returned from the December meeting)

Dave Wireback (New Member)

Reginald Lee (New Member)

Liz Walsh (Guest)

Adela (don't have last name)

Jacqueline (aka Jackie, don't have last name, she was the one that came with Joanne)

Doug talked about three trips he is planning:

1. March 14 St Patrick's day parade in San Francisco

2. Mid-April on a Tuesday, Wednesday or a Thursday at the San Joaquin River NWR

3. June boat trip to the Farallon Islands largest nesting area for shore birds cost from \$130 to \$150 depending on the number of people who want to go. (Emails will be sent out later by Doug with details.)

Sharon talked about a workshop set for 18 April. There will be 4 table top setups to shoot with your own camera. The workshop will be 4-5 hours and might be at the church we used for last year's workshop. More details to follow later.

Dean introduced the Judge for this month Jim Cunningham. Jim is a longtime photographer and a member of the SJVCC.

Stockton Camera Club
February, 2020 Competition Standings
Congratulations to all the winners!!!

PRINT OF THE MONTH WINNER “Deuce the Banded Sandhill Crane“ by Doug Ridgway

DIGITAL IMAGE OF THE MONTH WINNER “Mohave Point“ by Trey Steinhart

Please check out the website, <http://www.stockton-cameraclub.com/home.html>

Class A Standings	TOTAL	OPEN	SS	FEB	MAR	MAY	JUN	JULY	SEPT	OCT	NOV	DEC
Joan Erreca	37	28	9	37	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ron Wetherell	28	28	0	28	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Lanny Brown	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Susanne Nichols	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Charlene Martin	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Brenda DeRoos	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Adrian Ferreya	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ricky Ortiz	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Albert Rivas	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Class AA Standing	TOTAL	OPEN	SS	FEB	MAR	MAY	JUN	JULY	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
Christine Blue	38	28	10	38	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Wayne Carlson	38	28	10	38	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Doug Ridgway	38	28	10	38	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sheldon McCormick	37	28	9	37	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Elizabeth Parrish	36	27	9	36	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Darrell OSullivan	36	36	0	36	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Class AAA Standing	TOTAL	OPEN	SS	FEB	MAR	MAY	JUN	JULY	SEP	OCT	Nov	DEC
Trey Steinhart	40	30	10	40	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dean Taylor	39	29	10	39	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Joanne Sogsti	38	28	10	38	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Heide Stover	38	29	9	38	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Em McLaren	38	29	9	38	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sharon McLemore	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

2019 Aggregated Scores

First Name	Last Name	Open	Special	Total	2020 Class
Joanne	Sogsti	274	66	340	AAA
Heide	Stover	273	64	337	AAA
Dean	Taylor	268	68	336	AAA
Trey	Steinhart	269	66	335	AAA
Sharon	McLarmore	265	67	332	AAA
Em	McLaren	263	63	326	AAA
Christine	Blue	259	65	324	AA
Wayne	Carlson	259	63	322	AA
Doug	Ridgway	262	60	322	AA
Sheldon	McCormick	240	60	300	AA
Elizabeth	Parrish	175	51	226	AA
Darrell	O'Sullivan	186	24	210	AA
Ron	Wetherell	131	18	149	A
Joan	Erreca	95	18	113	A
Lanny	Brown	51	0	51	A
Susanne	Nichols	39	0	39	A
Charlene	Martin	27	9	36	A
Brenda	DeRoos	24	8	32	A
Adrian	Ferreya	22	0	22	A
Ricky	Ortiz	0	0	0	A
Albert	Rivas	0	0	0	A

2020 Competition Policy

A. GENERAL RULES

1. Only paid-up members may enter club competition.
2. Regular print and digital image competition period: Once each month except January. A competition year is February through December. Current regular meetings are February, March, May, July, September, October and December. The number of meetings may change from time to time at the discretion of the Board of Directors and approval of the general membership as facilities permit. The Annual Awards Dinner will be held in January.
3. A total of four (4) images (all prints, all digital or a combination of both) may be entered each competition month. A total of three (3) images may be entered in the Open Division and a total of one (1) in the Special Subject Division. The number of entries may change from time to time at the discretion of the Board of Directors and the approval of the general membership.
4. Each image will be scored from 6 to 10 points. All prints or digital images receiving 9 or 10 points will be classed as an honor image. The title of each print or digital image entered will be read before being evaluated. The name of the maker will be read for 9-point honor winners. Maker's names will be announced for the 10 point images after the Print & Digital Image-of-the-Month winners are chosen.
5. A print or digital image that does not receive an honor score, may be re-entered one more time in the same division.
6. A print or digital image may be entered in all divisions for which it qualifies; i.e., an honor image in Open may also be entered in the Special Subject Division at another competition. A print or digital image that receives an honor score may not be re-entered in the same division.
7. Any print or digital image that appears to be ineligible for competition or not qualified for a specific division could expect to be challenged. The Competition Vice-President shall decide whether or not the image is acceptable.
8. The exhibitor must have exposed each negative, slide or digital image entered. All images submitted for judging must be the work of the photographer/maker including the taking of the images and any digital enhancements and/or manipulation of the image. This does not apply to the processing of film or printing by a commercial processor.
9. The same image should not be entered both as a print and a projected digital image in the same competition.
10. In the event of absence or barring unforeseen circumstances, a member may submit make-up prints or digital images for one competition night per competition year; and whenever possible must submit all make-up prints or digital images at the meeting immediately following the month a member failed or was unable to submit the prints or digital images. Make-ups in the Special Subject Division must be the same subject as the month missed. Also, in case of absence a member may assign the responsibility of submitting his or her prints and/or digital images for competition to another member.
11. A club member who serves as judge cannot enter his or her own prints or digital images in the same competition. The judge's make-up prints or digital images can then be entered in another competition during that competition year. This is in addition to the once-a-year make-up provision already

allowed.

12. Prints or digital images may be projected/viewed briefly before the judging of each division if the judge indicates he/she would like a preview.

B. PRINT ENTRY RULES

1. Each print entered must have a completed label attached to the back of the print including; name of maker, title, date entered and Division (Open or Special Subject). The writing or printing on the form must be legible. Labels must be attached on the back of the print in the upper left-hand corner for correct viewing of the print.
2. All prints must be matted or mounted with a total size (including mat board) of no larger than 18" X 24" and no smaller than 8" X 10". Exception: One side of a Panorama Print may be no larger than 36". Prints that are smaller than 5" X 7" will not be accepted. The maker's name must not appear on the viewing surface of the image. Framed prints shall not be entered.
3. Prints accompanied by entry forms should be submitted no later than 15 minutes prior to the start of the regular monthly meeting.
4. Prints receiving a score of 10 points, in each class, will be regrouped and judged for selection for the Print-of-the-Month honors. Print-of-the-Month honors will be given in Class A, AA & AAA.

C. DIGITAL IMAGE ENTRY RULES

1. Digital images must be submitted in a format and by the deadline specified by the Competition Vice-President. Digital images may be submitted by email, mailed (CD) or delivered (CD) to the Competition Vice-President. Definition of Digital Image: An image taken with a digital camera, a negative, slide or print scanned into the computer and processed digitally.
2. Images must be in a format compatible with the projector. The key thing to keep in mind when formatting photos for submission is that the projector we use in the competition has a (maximum) resolution of 1400 x 1050 pixels. This means that any photo that exceeds this size in either dimension, could end-up being cropped by the projector. In other words: the image width cannot be more than 1400 pixels and the image height cannot be more than 1050 pixels. If your image is horizontal, only change the width to 1400, if your image is vertical, only change the height to 1050. Do not change both. Down-sizing the image from the "native" resolution coming out of your camera also significantly reduces the file size. This helps when emailing the files and takes-up less space on our hard-drives.
3. The maker's name, title of image, date entered and division (Open or Special Subject) must be included as the title of the image. When you have finished re-sizing your image save your image with a new title. For example do a Save as: Smith Sunrise Splendor 05-15 O.jpeg. (O-Open or SS-Special Subject). Specify whether you're Beginner, Advanced or Very Advanced.
4. Digital Images receiving a score of 10 points, in each class, will be regrouped and judged for selection for the Digital Image-of-the-Month honors. Digital Image-of-the-Month honors will be given in Class A, AA & AAA.



True Affects: Using Special Effects to Realistically Affect Reality

Story and Photos by F. M. Kearney



Daylilies with Radial Blur
filter (spin method) applied

A friend of mine once showed me a movie trailer on Youtube for a foreign-made film called “B-14.” It’s about rival drug gangs, featuring an assassin with superhuman powers. To say that the special effects are ridiculously over-the-top would be an extreme understatement! This movie wasn’t meant to be funny, but I laughed more during this 1-minute trailer than I have during some 2-hour actual comedies. It seemed as though the producers just discovered special effects the night before and were determined to use all of them in this film – no matter how poorly executed, or whether the scene called for them or not.

Personally, I think special effects work best when they enhance existing attributes within a photo. If you can discern a distinctive pattern within a subject’s color or shape, or the overall composition of the scene, chances are there’s an effect that will accentuate it.



Daylilies (unaltered)

The photo above is the original, unaltered view of the opening photo. What initially stuck out to me in this photo was a kind of circular, swirling motion created by the angles and positions of the daylily blooms and buds. To emphasize that look, I used the Radial Blur filter in Photoshop. This filter offers a choice of two different types of blur: spin or zoom. I chose the spin option because it perfectly mimicked the kind of motion that originally caught my eye. All filter effects are global, so I applied a layer mask and used the brush tool to adjust its opacity level (the degree to how much the effect is noticeable) over various parts of the image. I completely removed it from the tips of the stamens.

I detected the same type of circular motion when I looked at the image of the maple leaves below. Once again, I applied the Radial Blur filter, but left the center leaves unaltered.



Maple leaves (unaltered) on the left and maple leaves with Radial Blur (spin method) applied on the right.



Japanese Zelkova trees (unaltered)



Radial Blur filter (zoom method) applied

The zoom method of this filter simulates an exploding effect. It comes in quite handy if you want to emphasize movement in passing clouds. I found it to be extremely useful in the fall foliage scene below. I came across a couple of magnificent Japanese Zelkova trees one autumn in the New York Botanical Garden. I positioned myself so that one tree was directly behind the other, with only its arching branches visible. They were at their peak and appeared to be exploding with color. I decided to create a literal interpretation of what I felt. The zoom method brought my vision to life. However, unlike the above examples, which only required a few minutes of minor tweaking of opacity levels, this effect took me about a week to complete. To make it appear as though the color was actually exploding from behind the trees, I painstakingly removed the effect from most of the major branches, as well as the tree and the ground. I then gradually increased the effect (by raising the opacity levels) as I worked my way out toward the edges.



Forest scene (unaltered)



Another interesting special effect filter is Motion Blur. As its name suggests, it's primarily used to convey motion, i.e., creating streaks in the wake of a moving car or a track runner. In nature, however, it's not used so much to show motion, as it is to exaggerate large clusters of vertical or horizontal lines. A forest is a prime location to apply this effect. I shot the image below during late autumn in Croton Dam Park in Upstate New York. The filter enhanced the strong verticals of the trees. As usual, I controlled its opacity levels by using a layer mask and the brush tool. I completely removed the effect from the ground, then gradually increased it toward the top. I removed slightly more of the effect in select areas in order to better highlight the sparse foliage.

Applying special effects with a filter is fairly simple and straight-forward. It may take some time learning how to fine-tune things to your personal taste and vision, but the end results are somewhat predictable. Other types of effects require a considerable amount of previsualization, and the photos below are one such example.

Combining images is like Forrest Gump opening a box of chocolates... You never know what you're gonna get! I combined the two images above via the "stacking" method in Photoshop – a unique way to combine two or more images. It's a technique which I will go into in depth in a future article. My intention was to blend another tulip image onto the face of the large, triumph tulip. In order for the effect to work properly, I needed to find an image of tulips that were small enough to fit comfortably inside. They also had to be of a color that wouldn't clash, be positioned at the right height and shot in the same type of light. I searched my files and found this image of white, single-late tulips. I thought the image would work perfectly, but I couldn't be completely sure until I actually combined them. After I did, I was amazed at how well they meshed. They were at the perfect height and their white color really stood out. Perhaps most remarkable of all – even bordering on serendipity – was the way the tall grass around the white tulips almost seamlessly melded into the design on the bottom of the orange, triumph tulip. Using the brush tool, I carefully painted in and/or out parts of the single-late tulip image to create a sort of optical illusion out of the visual confusion.



Triumph tulips
(5/6/15) on the left and single-late tulips (5/7/14) on the right



End result of the combined images

This photo is also notable because it was years in the making. I shot the triumph tulips on May 6, 2015, and the single-late tulips almost exactly a year earlier on May 7, 2014. But it wasn't until last year when I actually combined them. Nowadays, I actively plan for creating this effect by shooting photos with varying amounts of dead-space to better accommodate any potential image compilations. By definition, special effects are meant to alter reality. They're fun to use and there really are no rules as to a right or wrong application. Depending on your artistic vision, they can be as subtle or as outrageous as you desire.

For best results, though, special effects are more striking when they affect reality in a more realistic manner. Of course, there's nothing stopping you if you want to see just how crazy you can get. But, if you really want to see crazy, just check out the "B-14" trailer on Youtube!

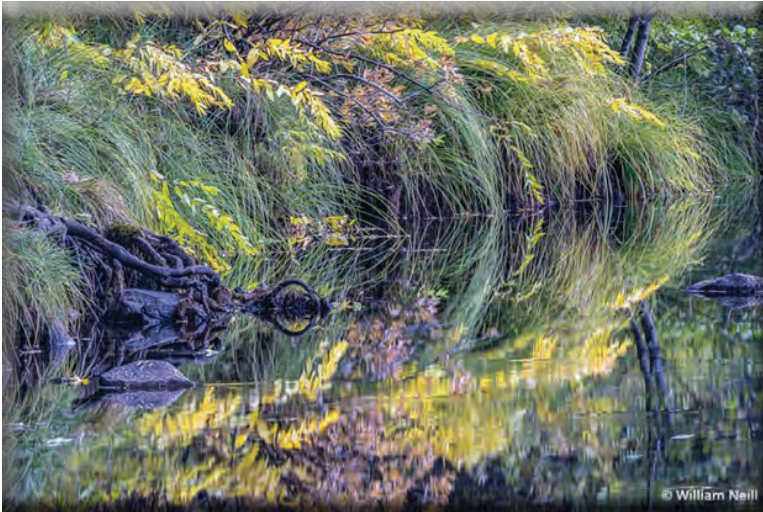
F. M. Kearney began his photography career as a photojournalist for New York City newspapers. His focus soon shifted to capturing the beauty of the natural world. As an award-winning nature photographer, Kearney's images have been widely published. A slight departure from photography, his recently published horror novel, "They Only Come Out at Night," about supernatural happenings in the New York City subway (partially inspired by his travels as a photojournalist), is available on Amazon. To see more of Kearney's work, visit <http://www.starlitecollection.com>.

Dealing with Depth

Tools and techniques for creating images with extended depth of field and sharpness

Text & Photography By William Neill

In landscape photography, we are often dealing with considerable depth of field with objects near the camera and distant subjects off in the distance. Call me Captain Obvious. The greater the distance from the nearest subject to the farthest requires using smaller and smaller apertures. With each smaller aperture, there will be a slight loss in resolution. The tradeoffs of losing resolution versus more sharpness near-to-far often require a balancing act. I miss the days when I could easily look at the depth of field scale on my lenses, read the scale to adjust the hyperfocal distance, and adjust the aperture choice. View cameras or tilt-shift lenses give greater control over near/far image sharpness, but they don't solve all situations. Smaller apertures are still needed where various angles in the landscape don't match the flat plane of focus given from the tilt, such as if photographing in a level meadow with tall trees in the distance.



Merced River Reflections, autumn, Yosemite National Park, California, 2018. Sony a7R II, Sony FE 100-400mm F4.5-5.6 GM OSS. Exposure: 3.2 sec., f/29, ISO 100.



Dogwood in Bloom, Yosemite National Park, California, 2017. Sony a7R II, Canon EF 70-200mm f/2.8L USM. Exposure: 1/100 sec., f/13, ISO 400.

Calculating and making use of the lens' hyperfocal distance is usually your primary solution. There are many ways to handle depth of field and many opinions on the best methods. If you are using manual focus, you can focus about one third into the depth of the scene and guesstimate which aperture will bring both near and far points into focus. If you are using autofocus, you can select the focus point in your viewfinder at the estimated distance in the same manner. I've used this approach for many years, often bracketing apertures to help me find the best balance of DOF and aperture.

Another method I've read about but not tried is called the "Double the Distance" method. In this technique, you calculate your distance to the nearest object you want sharp, then double it that distance, and that is where your hyperfocal distance is.

Don't forget that you can see an accurate view of the depth of focus with your camera's depth-of-field preview (aperture preview) button. This button "stops down" the lens to your chosen aperture. You can see the depth of field change as you open and close the aperture, allowing you to examine what will be sharp or not. On my Sony camera, I set up a Custom button to be my aperture preview button. (Not all cameras have this preview button, so check your manual.) Being able to see the results of your aperture choice makes this a valuable tool. When the DOF button is held down, the screen gets darker, which can be a problem. Looking through the viewfinder rather than the LCD makes this easier since more ambient light is blocked.

If you prefer, there are also many apps for smartphones that have accurate data for various camera, lens and aperture combinations that will help and are an excellent choice for more technically oriented photographers.

Now, let me get to the reason I got started discussing the whole depth of field issue. For a few years, when I've found the need, I started using focus bracketing when I'm dealing with extreme near/far differences. This technique is especially useful with macro subjects but also landscapes where no aperture is capable of capturing full sharpness near to far. I make small shifts in focus throughout the near/far measurement for as many frames as needed for the given depth. Next, I use Helicon Focus or Zerene Stacker applications to blend the multiple frames into a fully sharp photograph.

The technique is very effective but also a bit tedious to execute in the field. Focus and click, shift the focus a tiny bit, click, focus again, clicking 5, 10, sometimes 15 frames. I've used this technique only occasionally. What got me excited recently was seeing that many camera makers are now offering an automated approach to focus shifting in their latest models. I want that for my camera! I would use it often in my macro work and also telephoto landscapes.

There is a creative reason behind my interest in ways to gain full sharpness in a scene or subject that has great depth. I like mystery in my photographs. I like strong design, too. When I look for the graphics in a scene, I often like to combine the two qualities by making everything in the frame sharp, especially with intimate landscapes where there are fewer visual clues, like the sky, for example. When this approach works, the depth is not immediately apparent, and it becomes a visual pun or play on one's perception. Such flattening of the perspective can add a bit of intrigue that engages the curiosity of the viewer.

My "Merced River Reflections" was taken at 400mm with my Sony 100-400mm lens that serves to "flatten" the long stretch of riverbank depth into a flat-looking composition. My use of a small aperture gives near-to-far sharpness with the curved grasses and their reflections receding across the frame, with my very sharp lens showing a minimum of resolution loss.

I am also sharing my "Dogwood in Bloom" image here, taken a couple of years back using focus stacking and a grid of multiple frames stitched in Photoshop. I used 12 frames to make this photograph. I took four frames for focus-stacking—focusing from the frontmost blossoms to the cliffs behind them—for each of three compositions. Then the three focus-stacked frames were pano-merged to create a nearly square image. Every blossom is sharp in spite of the great depth, from the frontmost blossoms all the way back to the cliffs behind. I have a long-standing theme of forest tapestry photographs that this fits well in, and it matches the quality of the 4×5 film images in that group.

The next time you find yourself dealing with difficult depth of field and sharpness dilemmas, give the tools discussed here a try. Stay sharp. Stay creative.



[William Neill](#)

William Neill is a renowned nature and landscape photographer and a recipient of the Sierra Club's Ansel Adams Award for conservation photography. Neill's award-winning photography has been widely published in books, magazines, calendars and posters, and his limited-edition prints have been collected and exhibited in museums and galleries nationally, including the Museum of Fine Art Boston, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, The Vernon Collection and The Polaroid Collection. Neill's published credits include National Geographic, Smithsonian, Natural History, National Wildlife, Conde Nast Traveler, Gentlemen's Quarterly, Travel and Leisure, Wilderness, Sunset, Sierra and Outside magazines. He is also regular contributor to Outdoor Photographer with his column "On Landscape".

Previsualization to Get the Shot

Approaching a subject with a concept, planning and persistence

Text & Photography By [Melissa Groo](#)

Often as wildlife photographers, we take photos in a reactive way rather than planning for them in a proactive way. That's in large part due to the nature of wildlife photography, which, more than just about any other genre, relies on the unexpected. I know that many of my own favorite photos are the result of coming upon a surprise species or fascinating behavior that I haven't captured before. Maybe I'm simply responding to glorious light, turning my lens on any subject I can find to make use of that light.



Red-winged blackbird calls on a frosty spring morning, New York.
Nikon D850, AF-S NIKKOR 600mm f/4E FL ED VR, AF-S
Teleconverter TC-14E III. Exposure: 1/1000 sec., f/5.6, ISO 1600.

However, there is some predictability in wildlife behavior. Tapping into that means being in tune with the seasons and the cycles of target species—essentially, becoming a naturalist. Because I don't use set-ups of any kind (aside from a backyard bird feeder), preferring to capture completely natural behavior, over time I've learned to take advantage of the predictability in wildlife's natural cycles to put myself in the best possible position to make good photos. But quite often that means careful previsualization and planning: studying the light and the landscape in a location, observing the target animal's behavior, and knowing upcoming weather conditions and sunrise times.

Some of you may have seen the 2019 winner of the annual National Audubon Society photo contest, a red-winged blackbird blowing "smoke rings." (Full disclosure: I was a judge of the Audubon contest.) These rings are the visible pattern of his song, created by the condensation of his breath when it hits the cold morning air. Photographer Kathrin Swoboda put careful planning and forethought

into this image. I personally know how hard it is to accomplish such a well-executed shot because I, too, have worked on capturing this behavior and effect. The story behind capturing this kind of a shot is a good illustration of how predicting, previsualizing and planning can be the key to success.

Capturing the visible song of a red-winged blackbird is a common goal for wildlife photographers in spring. While we're waiting for the charismatic spring warblers and other colorful passerines to arrive, red-winged blackbirds provide a welcome subject, as the males arrive as early as March on their breeding grounds here in the Northeast. It can be great fun capturing their exuberant displays as they move from perch to perch, staking out their territory with their trademark nasal calls, flashing their brilliant red epaulets as visual cues.

I knew there were several elements that needed to be in place for me to make this shot. First of all, as I wanted to shoot from the car, using it as a blind, I needed to find a red-winged blackbird territory on a quiet road that ran north-south. This would enable me to face east from the driver's side, shooting into the rising sun, so that my subject and his breath would be backlit. (If front lit, the breath simply wouldn't be visible.) I was also looking for a contrasting dark background of land, not sky, so that the light-toned breath would stand out as much as possible. For the best backlighting effect, the sun needed to be low, on the same general plane as the birds. Toward the end of March, when I began to hear reports of returning red-winged blackbirds, I began to do some scouting, driving around to marshes and swamps. I finally found a marsh on the east side of a quiet road a few miles from my home that was inhabited by at least four individuals. I sat in my car one evening and watched them for a while, confirming that they were using perches near the road.

Now that I had my location, I needed the temperature and weather conditions to align. It was critical to have a clear sky on the horizon right at sunrise—rare here in central New York—which would mean at least an initial period of direct sun, and a temperature in the 20s or low 30s, so that their breath would condense. I would need to be up well before dawn in order to be in place at sunrise, ready to shoot.

One day, the forecast finally looked right, and I woke at 5 a.m. I arrived at my spot in the dark. As the sun rose, I realized that though the forecast had called for a clear sky, a bank of clouds obscured the sun. I tried again a few days later, and though the conditions were right, the birds never landed on perches near my position. After a couple more unsuccessful attempts, I finally was able to capture a few frames where everything lined up perfectly: direct, low sun facing me, a bird on a perch near the road and singing repeatedly, frosty temperatures causing breath condensation and a dark background. I cranked up my ISO and

shutter speed and used a wide-open aperture. When I later looked at the images on the computer, I finally felt I had accomplished my goal.

To sum up, it really helps to have a desired image in your mind and then to work backward from that, taking into account each element that is an integral piece of the whole. Rough drafts are often needed and failed attempts are to be expected. But if you have a vision and are methodical in your approach to achieving that vision, I really believe you will meet with success.



[Melissa Groo](#)

Melissa Groo is a wildlife photographer, writer and conservationist. She believes that photography can be both fine art and a powerful vehicle for storytelling and education, and considers herself a “wildlife biographer” as much as a wildlife photographer. Passionate about ethics in nature photography, Groo is represented by Nat Geo Creative, a contributing editor to Audubon magazine and an Associate Fellow with the International League of Conservation Photographers. She advises the National Audubon Society on ethical photography, and has also counseled National Wildlife magazine and NANPA (North American Nature Photography) on guidelines for ethical wildlife photography. She also serves as a member of NANPA’s Ethics Committee. In 2017, Melissa received the Katie O'Brien Lifetime Achievement Award from Audubon Connecticut, for demonstrating exceptional leadership and commitment to the conservation of birds, other wildlife and their habitats. She also received the NANPA 2017 Vision Award, given to a photographer every two years in recognition of early career excellence, vision and inspiration to others in nature photography, conservation and education.