

Worth Much More Than 1,000 Words

Secrets to making your trophy photo the best it can be!

By: Guy Eastman

A good field photo can be worth far more than 1,000 words. Photographed properly, an entire outdoor experience can be easily relayed to a fellow hunter with the aid of a few good photos of the adventure. Taking a good photo of your trophy can be as simple as one, two, three with some basic knowledge of digital photography and good camera equipment. Far too often I hear, “I wish I would have taken better photos” from fellow hunters who did not take the time or have the proper knowledge of photography to thoroughly document their trophy hunting experience. Once you get the hang of it a good photo shoot in the field can be completed in a mere 15 or 20 minutes.

Modern digital photography is re-writing what we know about taking and processing photographs. In the past four years, taking good quality photos has become easier than ever before.

When Shon and I choose photos and stories for the magazine the three main criteria that we look for are, the clarity of the photos, the composition/set-up of the trophy, and finally the actual size of the trophy. I cannot be of much help on the size of your trophy in this article but armed with a better knowledge of photo clarity and composition you can easily take better field photos and hopefully you will never have to tell a buddy or magazine editor the dreaded line of, “he is much bigger than he looks in the photo” ever again!

Photo clarity encompasses a wide variety of aspects. The most important of which is the quality of the equipment that you are using. Just like hunting optics, buy the best camera you can afford. A camera that will shoot a 5.0 mega-pixel digital photo is the bare minimum right now. Every year the image size capacity gets larger and larger. It is also very important to have the settings on your camera properly set up before you start snapping off photos. I think it is pretty safe to say that 100% of your trophy field photos will be taken outdoors. This said it is very important that you have the aperture setting adjusted to shoot the equivalent of 100 speed film. Most of the digital cameras will have settings for 100, 200 and 400 speed film equivalents (these are called the “ISO Speed Settings on Canon cameras). When you shoot outside always have your camera set to 100 ISO Speed. The second setting you want adjust is the file size of the photo that the camera is capturing. This means that the camera is gathering more or less data when you press the shutter button. It is imperative that you set your camera to “Super-Fine” and “Large” file size (2592 X 1944 DPI on my Canon PowerShot SD400). You want your camera to gather as much information as possible. If you want to send a photo to grandma over the internet, you can reduce the file size back down to 72 dpi (72 Dots Per Inch is the standard for web publishing) later on your computer. It won't matter what kind of computer or software you have, digital data cannot be replaced or re-created after the fact. If you are afraid you will not be able to take as many photos with your memory

card with this format, quit being a cheap skate and BUY ANOTHER MEMORY CARD! A good second memory card (1-giga-byte) will run you a little under \$100 at Best Buy. Your photo files pulled directly from your camera to your computer should be between 1 and 3 MB (mega-bytes) in file size. If they are smaller than this you need to double check your settings again or buy a camera with a larger mega-pixel capacity.

To recap, to ensure clear digital photo quality, (1)you want to make sure your camera is shooting hi-res J-PEG format (2)at a 100 speed ASA equivalent (3)with the camera flash on. Always shoot with your flash on, even at high noon on a bright sunny day. These are the three most critical components that will ensure your digital photo has good color and clarity.

Now that we have covered the basics on equipment and camera settings we can finally get into the “nitty gritty”, nuts and bolts of what makes good photo composition or set-up. The three major components of a good field photo set-up are: (1)light, (2)foreground, and (3)background.

Light is the single most important component of a quality photo. After all a digital camera is nothing more than an electronic eye that records light or the reflection there of into a digital file format. Basically a digital photo is nothing more than a file containing millions upon millions of 1s and 0s. This file of 1s and 0s mathematically compose the formula of your photo image. Unfortunately, you cannot always control the light in every situation, but you can do a few things that can make a good photo great when it comes to lighting. The first thing I do when taking a field photo is to make sure I put the sun to my back as the photographer and make sure the subjects (hunter and trophy) are looking into the sun. Direct sunlight will reduce the quality of your photos. The harsh rays of direct sunlight will tend to “wash out” your photos and make them lose their dimension. For this reason, I always try to avoid taking field photos between the hours of 10 AM and 3 PM. I know this is not always possible but sometimes if I can stall a photo shoot under cold conditions I certainly will do so. If you do need to take photos during this time frame be sure to use your flash. It sounds pointless but, trust me the flash will help to fill(lighten) those harsh dark shadows created by a mid-day sun. Even on a cloudy or stormy day be sure to get the photographer’s back to the sun. A digital camera is much more sensitive to light than the human eye and while to your eye the light all looks the same on a cloudy day, to the digital camera it will make a huge difference. On a partly cloudy day, be patient and wait for the sun to peak through for your photo shoot. You will be glad you did. The absolute ideal light is the “golden” two hours after sunrise and before sunset. The soft, golden light of this time of the day will really make your photos pop, with minimal shadow intrusion.

When we talk about foreground we are talking about the subjects of the photo, more specifically the hunter and the trophy. One of the most important points here is to show your trophy the respect it deserves. I personally find the photos of a guy “riding” his dead bull elk with his rifle hung in the antlers particularly distasteful and disrespectful to the animal. The only photos worse than these are the back of the truck gang or the old head

on the shop work bench crew, which need no further explanation. This also means putting the animal's tongue back in his mouth and cleaning up as much blood as possible.

Now that we have the animal cleaned up and the photographer's back to the sun it is time for the hunter to set up the animal while the photographer clears the grass and brush from in front of the trophy. We get a boatload of photos submitted to the office where the photo crew forgot to clear the grass from in front of the animal ultimately causing the photo to be obscured by tall grass or even worse the camera inadvertently focuses on the brush instead of the hunter.

There are a thousand ways to set-up a trophy for the actual photo. I just don't have the real estate here to go into too much detail. The key point to be made here is to show the camera the best attribute your trophy has to offer. By this I mean, every animal has a strong side of his rack or horns. Put the strong side toward the camera for your best photos. Keep in mind sometimes this is a tremendous spread and in that case a straight on shot is usually the best. As a general rule, elk and antelope look best when photographed from the side, deer usually are best from the front, and sheep are best when shot at a turn to either side. Another thing to keep in mind is to make sure the body of your animal is broadside to the camera. This gives the hunter something to get down behind and a great way to also incorporate the weapon into the photo.

Make sure you get down low. The very best trophy field photos are taken right at eye level with the animal. This means the photographer has to get down and dirty, period. If you want to take the equivalent of ten inches off your deer without the use of a hack saw, just have the photographer take the photo from a standing or kneeling position. When shooting photos I usually find myself rolling around on the ground on my stomach. Hey, it's a dirty job but someone has to do it. Another thing to keep in mind is make sure the hunter is sitting low to the ground. The hunter's head should always be below the top of the antlers in the photos and clear from obstructions. Sometimes a really nice trophy photo is submitted to us but, but you cannot see the hunter's happy face because he is behind the antlers peering through the tines as though he is in antler jail. That one gets a little tough to fix in photo shop.

The final element that will set off your field photo is the background or "back-drop" as Mike calls it. This is everything in the photo behind the hunter. Sometimes just dragging a buck up the ridge 20 yards can make all the difference in the world. Try to get a nice scenic back drop if possible. This is the photo that will make your buddies and family members stare in ah at your photo. I realize with elk and moose you are just stuck with where ever it is that they fell, but most other animals can be easily moved a few crucial yards to make the best of a photo set up. As an added note here, you might also want to watch out in the background for any four-wheelers, pick-up trucks or garage doors. These can seriously detract from your photo.

The best advice I can give in the end is to get good photo gear, set it up properly and keep in mind the basics of a good set up and try some different shots out play around with it a little. The best thing about digital photography is that you can immediately look at the

photo on your camera and see how it looks right there in the field. Try a bunch of different set ups and angles and keep looking at the photos to find that perfect “sweet spot” where the trophy looks the best and don’t forget to smile. Sometimes after looking at so many field photos I wonder if hunters are really very happy people.

Photo Tip: Always keep your camera easily accessible. Once I started keeping my smaller digital camera in my shirt pocket, I started taking five times as many photos just because of how easy it was to get to.

Photo Tip: When taking digital photos under low light conditions, be sure to hold the camera very steady for at least 3 seconds after pushing the shutter button. Digital cameras can take a minute to gather and write the photo data to the disk in low light and if you do move the camera prematurely the photo will appear blurred. A tripod and the timer can be used under these circumstances to ensure a more clear photo.

Photo Tip: The photographer’s back should always be to the sun, the only exception being a nice sun rise or sunset.

Photo Tip: Try to avoid mid-day photography. In these conditions the camera will have a hard time balancing the harsh bright highlights and the dark shadows. The processor will then just average the exposure resulting in a tremendous loss of color brilliance.

Photo Tip: Always copy your photo files to your computer and burn a “back-up” CD of the original files straight from your camera before taking the chip to Wal-Mart or Costco to be processed. Never, ever take the memory chip to a photo processor and then empty the chip. They will alter your file sizes (dump information) to expedite the process.

Photo Tip: When shooting a set-up photo of your trophy do not use the zoom. Zoom the camera back all the way and get as close as possible to the subject to fill the frame completely. When you zoom a camera lens you sacrifice a slight bit of clarity. Important: never under any circumstances use the “digital zoom” function on your camera. In fact turn it off if possible. This is like looking at your television with your binoculars. It is a total “junk” function.

Photo Tip: Position your trophy’s strong side or unique quality toward the camera. For example if you buck has a drop tine, make sure it is clearly visible to the camera and unobstructed.

Sidebar: Guy's Camera Picks

If you are in the market for a new digital camera here are some options that you definitely want to look into further.

Best “Ultralight” digital camera: Canon PowerShot SD550 Digital ELPH. This unit can take a photo that is 7.1 megapixels and retails for around \$350.00 US. Other options to look into are the Nikon Coolpix L1, 6.2 megapixel (\$250.00 US) and the Olympus FE-140, 6.0 megapixel (\$230.00 US).

Best “Consumer Grade” digital camera: Canon PowerShot G5.

Best “Semi-Professional” digital camera: Canon Digital Rebel EOS. This is the particular camera that Cameron Hanes and I use on most of our hunts.

Best “Professional” digital camera: Canon Digital D20 EOS. This is a top of the line model that is also good for wildlife photography. This is the unit that most of the live wildlife photos in the magazine are taken with. Mike Eastman uses this particular model for all of his photography.