Do you like going outdoors and taking photos of wild things? Here are some ideas and tips to help you snap your best shots.

Outside SHOTS

Story and photography
By Gary Alan Nelson

FOR THE PAST 25 YEARS, I have been getting paid to take pictures of rocks, trees, lakes, wildflowers, dragonflies, snakes, and nearly anything having to do with the outdoors. But I enjoyed taking photographs long before I became a professional photographer. Tucked in a book in my office is the first photograph I ever took. I used a Kodak Instamatic film camera, a birthday gift when I was 10. The photo is mostly green and has a brown blob in the middle. I think the blob was a toad or a frog hopping across the lawn, but I can't be sure because the picture is out of focus.

Today any photographer can take crisp photos using an inexpensive digital camera. Some cameras are small enough to fit in your pocket. Some are bundled in cellphones. These cameras are simple to use.

But a camera can't tell you what to photograph, what to include in your picture, or how to make the picture interesting. To make a good photograph, you'll need to look closely and add a dab of concentration and a sprinkling of creativity. Here are a few tips to help you see how to have fun and get photos you'll enjoy looking at for years to come.

When to shoot? Clockwise from top left: Try shooting hoarfrost on prairie grasses in late fall. Capture early morning fog on a calm lake. Along Lake Superior in the morning light, shoot clouds in any season and snow and ice in winter.

What to shoot?

Take photos of things you like to look at. You can begin in your backyard. Sit down and look around. What captures your attention? Maybe your eye is drawn to flowers, bushes, or trees. Watch for a while and see if a butterfly visits a flower, a rabbit hops out from under a bush, or a bird lands on a tree. Any of these plants and animals could be the subject or main character in your photo.

Take your camera with you on trips—whether you're walking to a friend's house or going on vacation with your family. When you go to new places, you often pay closer attention to everything you see.

Pick out patterns. Like stripes on a shirt or polka dots on a dress, patterns also appear on things in nature. Look for patterns on leaves or tree bark. Do tracks in the sand or the snow have a pattern? If you are taking a photo of a fish you caught, try zooming in to show the details and patterns of its colorful scales.

Be a detective. Give yourself daily assignments. One day you might photograph things that are green. The next day you could focus on objects that have lines in them.

Look for circular shapes in nature. Search for things that are grouped in odd or even numbers. Selecting specific kinds of things to photograph will train you to look critically and see ordinary things in extraordinary ways.

Try shooting while lying on your belly, for a worm's-eye view of things. You'll be surprised what you can discover when you change your point of view.

Left: On the shore of Lake Superior, an owl feather on surf-smoothed stones shows pattern and shapes. Right: The pattern of feathers stands out in this close-up shot of a peregrine falcon.

Drawing with light

The word *photography* has Greek language roots. *Photos* means *light,* and *graphos* means *drawing*. Together they mean drawing with light. The quality of light can be just as important to your photograph as your subject.

Go for the gold. The light is golden during the first hour *after* sunrise and the hour *before* sunset. These golden hours are great for shooting photos. When the sun is close to the horizon, its light changes to warm and pleasing colors. At sunset, notice the golden light on your skin.

In the golden hours, shadows are long and everything takes on a magical glow. Clouds become more dimensional as the sun lights them from below. The texture of grass, snow, rocks, and sand becomes more apparent because of the sun's low angle.

Twilight watch. Twilight occurs roughly a half-hour *before* sunrise and *after* sunset. Then there is no direct sunlight, but you can often see a glow in the sky. The light is a red-orange color at the horizon, fading into lavender and blue pastels farther up in the sky. If there are clouds, they are often lit up in yellows, oranges, and reds, reflections from the sunlight.

Morning hours occasionally reveal dew, fog, or hoarfrost. Each adds an enchanting element to photos. In the morning you are more likely to see calm water and reflections.

Welcome clouds. Stormy weather adds drama, especially to the sky. The light before and after thunderstorms can be turbulent and striking. Rain highlighted by the sun after a storm often produces rainbows.

Overcast days are good for looking down at flowers and insects and shooting close-ups. The lack of shadows makes colors richer, more saturated, and vibrant. When the sky is white or gray, try to keep it out of your picture. A white sky will lead your eyes away from the subject.

Any time can be a good time to shoot photos. The golden light is frosting on the cake, but many tasty cakes don't have frosting.

Top left: In early morning light, fall leaves glow and fog rolls along a river. Bottom left: As a full moon rises in twilight, the silhouette of a cedar tree stands out. Right: Clouds and a rainbow add to the play of light on a marsh.

Above: Moving in closer simplifies the background so the damselfly shows up better. Right: Placing the boy and the snake on the left side of the photo follows the rule of thirds.

Keep It Simple

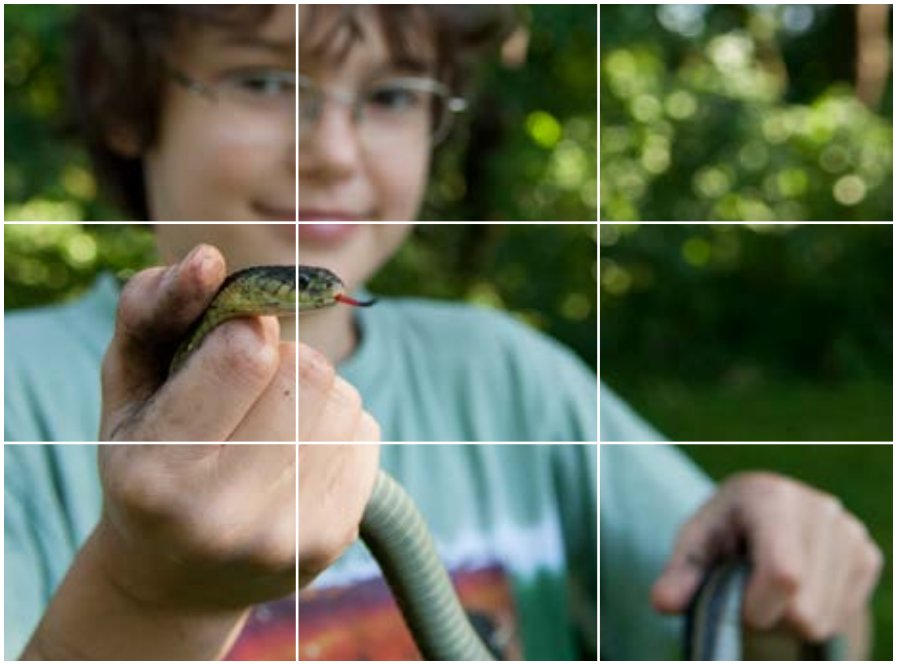
When you look through your camera's viewfinder and decide what to include in your photograph, you are composing your photo. When composing, keep it simple. Knowing what not to include in a photograph is just as important as what to include. Take your time and include only what adds interest to your photo.

Don't show clutter like telephone wires and poles and other things that take attention away from your main subject. To eliminate clutter, get closer to your subject. Walk in or zoom in with your camera. Or shoot from different angles for a cleaner image. A simpler image often makes for a stronger image.

Learn the rule of thirds. One composing guideline to follow is called the rule of thirds. Imagine dividing a photograph into three equal parts, both horizontally and vertically. You'll get nine squares, like a tic-tac-toe game. Keep these imaginary lines in mind while looking through the viewfinder. Use them as guidelines for where to place your subject and horizon line.

Placing your subject near one of the four intersections of these lines is usually more pleasing to the eye than placing the subject in the center.

Where the sky meets the earth is called the horizon, or skyline. Placing the horizon on one of the two horizontal lines is a good bet. If the sky is dramatic, give it more space by putting the horizon on the bottom line. If things in the foreground are more interesting than the sky in the background, place the horizon on the upper line.



What's Good?

When you have made several photographs, take a look at them on a computer screen. The larger screen lets you see details not obvious on your camera's screen. Check each image to see if it has the right ingredients for a good photo. Ask yourself these questions: Is the photo in focus? Is there a subject or point of interest? Does the picture hold my attention? Did I fill the frame with useful elements? Did I get rid of unwanted clutter? Was I able to shoot in good lighting conditions? Is the camera angle interesting? Does my photo tell a story? Does it have emotional impact, or give me a certain feeling?

If you have a combination of these ingredients, you probably have an interesting photo. If not, decide what you need to do to improve. For example, I have visited some places several times to try to get perfect lighting conditions. If good lighting doesn't happen today, I might try again in a day, a week, or a month from now.

Once you have gone through your photos and chosen the ones you like, enlist the help of Mom and Dad or a sibling or friends to get their opinions about which ones are keepers. After you have saved a folder of good photos, discard the others. One good photo is better than several not-so-good photos.

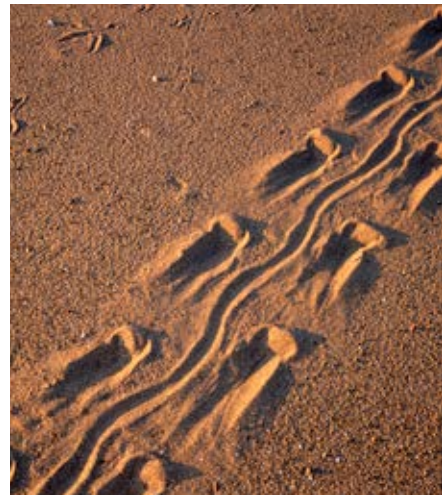
Horizontal or vertical? Most people take photos with a horizontal view. The photo's shape, or format, is horizontal. It's the way we see the world, looking left to right or side to side.

If your subject is taller than it is wide, try shooting vertically. The height of a tree shows better when shot vertically. Shoot the same scene both horizontally and vertically, then decide which works best. That's what I did for the photos of the white pine tree at the top of the opposite page.

Point of view. I shot these three prairie smoke flowers at eye level. Walk around your subject to find the best view of it. Crawl on your belly. Try getting above your subject for a bird's-eye view.

Lines. Look for lines—such as these blades of grass and shadows on snow. Look at tree trunks, flower petals, spider webs, and shorelines. Horizontal lines lead your eyes across a picture. Vertical lines lead your eyes from top to bottom. Converging lines, like a road winding into the distance, lead your eyes into a photograph.

Texture. Below, animal tracks appear in sand. Sand, snow, stones, and grass show off texture when splashed with sunlight in the golden hours. Tree bark, snake scales, ripples in water, and raindrops on a leaf show texture without the aid of sunlight.



Practice. Take lots of photographs. Make mistakes. You learn by doing, and the more you do the better you get.

Teachers resources:
Teachers guide: *www.mndnr.gov/young_naturalists*