

Life Long Learning: Improving Your Photography

Greg Ferguson Photography

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Nature Photography

Joy in looking and comprehending is nature's most beautiful gift.

Albert Einstein

Sometimes I do get to places just when God's ready to have somebody click the shutter.

Ansel Adams

The artist's world is limitless. It can be found anywhere, far from where he lives or a few feet away. It is always at his doorstep.

Paul Strand

I quite obviously see something that is not literally there I'm interested in something built up from within, rather than just extracted from without.

Ansel Adams

I have several goals for this presentation. First, I want to entertain you. Next I want to inspire and motivate you to improve your photography. Some of you may find that some of this information will be new for you. Even if you already know everything I'm going to tell you, I hope to inspire you enough to spend more time on photography, or at least spend your time more wisely.

I am going to tell you the most important things you need to do to improve your photography. The more time you spend doing these things, the more your photography will improve. It's a simple formula. You're trading your time for improved skills. The reverse is impossible. You cannot get better without spending more time.

Greg Ferguson Photography Intro Slide Show

The camera always points both ways. In expressing your subject, you also express yourself

Freeman Patterson

[Photo Show]

There are always two people in every picture: the photographer and the viewer.

Ansel Adams

1975 to 1995: My Landscape Years; Photography When Your Subject Is Still.

The difference in “seeing” between the eye and the lens should make it obvious that a photographer who merely points his camera at an appealing subject and expects to get an appealing picture in return may be headed for a disappointment.

Andreas Feininger

In the mid ‘70s I lived in San Francisco, about the time Galen Rowell was gaining a national reputation. I loved his work in the Sierra Nevada and the Himalaya so I decided to buy a camera and visit some of the locations in Galen’s pictures. It was 32 years ago this month when I bought a 35mm camera and took pictures one Sunday afternoon in Marin County. How hard could photography be? The Marin hills were gorgeous green and the wildflowers were in full bloom. There were white puffy clouds and birds singing.

When I picked up the prints I ripped into the package, sure that I was going to find images that would make Galen Rowell swell with pride. To say I was headed for disappointed was an understatement. I was devastated. The photos were awful. One picture on the roll was surprisingly good, for reasons that were inexplicable to me at the time, but all the rest looked like Stevie Wonder had been taking the pictures. How could the pictures look so bad when the scene was so beautiful? Everything around me was beautiful. Why had I so miserably failed to capture that beauty? The key, as Andreas Feininger says, is that the camera and lens see the landscape entirely different from the way your eye sees it.

I ask the question again: how hard can photography be? The answer is: surprisingly difficult if you want reasonably consistent and quality results.

Greg’s Rules

What I’m going to do is present Greg’s Ten Rules for improving your photography. They don’t necessarily have to be done in a specific order. I’m just going to present them in the order that I discovered them.

The first, and most important, rule for improving your nature photography is taken directly from John Shaw, noted nature photographer. John says in every seminar or workshop he teaches:

Go outside. Take pictures.

John Shaw

To make it my rule instead of John Shaw's rule, let me add a bit more to John's thought.

Greg's Rule #1 Go Outside. Take Pictures. More Often.

If you are out there shooting, things will happen for you. If you're not out there, you'll only hear about it.

Jay Maisel

You have to shoot more often than once or twice a year. Photography isn't like riding a bicycle: you can ride a bicycle even if it has been 20 years since you last rode one, but if you haven't been shooting in 4 or 5 months it takes a while to get the reflexes back. If you are a beginner the digital camera is a fantastic teacher—by learning to read the histogram you have virtually instantaneous feedback on your performance. This feedback loop is what made photography so hard to learn in the past, so the more you do it the faster you learn. It is simple neuroscience—assuming any neuroscience is simple.

If you only photograph when you feel like it....you'll never be totally successful as a photographer.

Sam Abell.

For years I would go on a photo trip about once every six months. I couldn't understand why I didn't get better. In retrospect it is clear that I just didn't photograph enough. How can your photography improve if you don't take pictures? Go Outside. Take Pictures. More Often.

**Greg's Rule #2: Treat your photography like a business:
Develop a written business plan.**

You need to set specific goals and objectives for yourself and develop some way to measure them. You need to set specific time commitments. Your objectives will be different depending on your current skill level, how much time you are willing to invest, and the degree to which photography is your profession, your hobby, or merely a passing interest. Further, you don't need to do your planning inside at a desk. You can be driving around, walking, jogging, or photographing. But you need to eventually write it down for future review so you are aware when you are lying to yourself.

I devote parts of my written plan to the number and locations of photo trips in a year, equipment purchase/sales, specific techniques I want to learn more about, and education. There are always more things I want to do than have time to do. But specifically, I plan ahead to devote time to my photography. I have two or three major photo trips per year (one week or more), one quarterly trip (long weekend), *and weekly self-assignments*.

Note that not all the time you allocate to photography has to be spent shooting. I have a full time job, but I still spend 20 to 40 hours per week or more on photography, sometimes more, sometimes less. When I am on a photo trip I'm spending 10-15 hours per day on photography. If you have children in the house, you obviously won't be able to spend as much time as I do. But I know you can spend more time on photography than you do now, particularly if you learn how to use the *<Power Off>* button on your TV remote control.

It's really quite simple: you must trade time for increased skill. You cannot improve your photography unless you spend more time doing it.

Greg's Rule #3: Know your equipment.

It's 8:00PM. Do you know where your camera manual is?

Can you find your camera manual? When was the last time you read it? It's stunning how many people I see in workshops, or photograph with, who cannot work their cameras. Your first self-assignment is studying your camera manual. Not just reading, but studying, figuring out how to use your camera for all the basic functions. For basic landscape photography you should be able to do the following:

- Change metering modes and understand how they differ.
- Change the ISO setting on your camera.
- Change the film advancement speed/mode
- Lock up your mirror (if you have a mirror lock up)
- Work the self timer—particularly if you don't have mirror lock up
- Deliberately underexpose/overexpose
- Turn autofocus on/off
- Change between Aperture mode and Manual mode
- Adjust shutter speed and aperture in Manual mode
- Shoot on bulb setting

It matters little how much equipment we use; it matters much that we be masters of all we do use.

Sam Abell

Here's the bottom line. I can tell you millions of things that photographers say about photography. "It's too contrasty, it's too dark, it's too light, I wish we had some clouds, etc." Here are some words you will never, ever hear any photographer say in a million years "I really regret spending so much time studying my camera manual and really learning how to use my equipment quickly and properly."

Your assignment is to find your camera manual, pick out a feature you wished you knew how to use, then go outside and take pictures to learn that feature. Then go on to the next feature, and the next. In the spirit of practicing what I preached, I went through my camera manuals again for this presentation and discovered several things I had overlooked. The moral to the story is that today's cameras are so complex it is doubtful that you could ever learn all there is to know that is useful about your camera.

Learn how to use the equipment you own. Learn how to use it properly, and quickly.

Greg's Rule #4: Hit the Books and Do Your Homework

You can't depend on your eyes if your imagination is out of focus.

Mark Twain

OK, you've studied your camera manual. You can quickly focus on the close foreground or the mountain in the distance. You know that you have auto focus, auto exposure, auto advance, and even auto bracketing.

But where's the auto composition button on your camera?

This is where most beginning photographers fall short. I know that I couldn't figure out why some of my shots were very good, but most were not.

The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance.

Aristotle.

The major hurdle we all have learning photography is how to represent the huge multidimensional, multi-sensory world on a small paper rectangle,

or a smaller screen. It takes quite a bit of study and experience to even begin to figure it out.

You start by reading and studying people who know what they are doing. You can go to the public library and look at the books, you can order from Amazon, or buy locally. But I can tell you one thing. If you show me a person who is truly good at photography then I'm absolutely certain that if you visit their home you will find dozens, or hundreds of books about photography.

You learn by closely studying the work of those who have already figured it out. It's called modeling. You are modeling yourself after someone else. When you were a child you learned how to do things by watching your parents and other adults. Why can't you do the same as an adult?

John Shaw takes his students through the following exercise. Get a book with good photographs in it—like one of John's or Art Wolfe's. Then look at each image and see how much you can tell about the photograph by simply looking at the photo. It's a great exercise, particularly if it is one of the books that has thumbnails in back explaining how the pictures were taken (many of Art Wolfe's books have these in back.)

Here are some recommended books to start your studies.

- *The Print and The Negative*, Ansel Adams. Ignore the darkroom chemistry part, but everything else is just as valid as the day these books were written.
- *Examples: the Making of 40 Photographs*, Ansel Adams. Read this after the above two books.
- *Mountain Light*, Galen Rowell. A combination of photo how-to's, explanations of atmospheric phenomena, and a discussion of personal vision
- *John Shaw's Nature Photography Field Guide*, John Shaw. Classic introduction to nature photography. The best selling photography instruction book ever. Enough said.
- *Digital Nature Photography: The Art and the Science*, by John and Barbara Gerlach. Introduction to contemporary nature photography.
- *The Art of Bird Photography II*, Art Morris. Only available on CD from his web site www.birdsasart.com. Don't think this is only about shooting birds, it is applicable to all photography.
- Anything by Freeman Patterson.

- *Out of the Blue*, by John Naylor. Not really a photo book, Naylor explains in detail atmospheric phenomena and how to locate unusual lighting conditions.
- Anything featuring David Muench, Art Wolfe, John Shaw, Pat O'Hara, Art Morris, Tom Till, or Jack Dykinga.

The limitations of photography are in yourself, for what we see is only what we are

Ernst Haas

In addition to building a reference library, go to a bookstore and spend a few hours looking through all the magazines. You have to study images and learn what makes a powerful image. Fifteen years ago the rule of thumb in the magazine business was that you had from 5-7 seconds to stop a viewer from turning the page. In 2007 that was down to less than two seconds. Only a powerful image can compel you to stop turning the page. You learn what's powerful by looking at other people's work, particularly advertising images and well made films.

If you subscribe to magazines, cut out photos of interest. For example, I will assume that if you consider yourself to be a nature photographer you subscribe to *Outdoor Photographer*. Cut out all the articles and pictures of interest. Then organize all your cut outs by category. What you're doing is building a "swipe file". For example, I have a swipe file on all the places I visit regularly, like Moab, UT, Yosemite, Yellowstone, or the Grand Canyon. That way when I'm going to an area I look over all the pictures, and may even take a few with me if I'm trying to find a specific location. For example, I'm going to Moab and Capitol Reef, UT in about a week and will probably take some of my swipe file pictures with me.

I also maintain swipe files on specific techniques (e.g., using flash, macro, high dynamic range, etc.) that I use at home to teach myself new techniques.

Greg's Rule #5: Chance favors the prepared mind.

I'm paid to be lucky, and that means making your own luck: getting yourself in the right position at the right time, in the right light.

Michael Yasmashita

Now we are about to start the things that separate the professionals from the amateurs. You may think that what I'm about to tell you takes the fun out of photography, but since your percentage of good shots begins to

climb when you do this it adds to the fun. Here's the truth: the vast majority of good nature shots are planned and set up to a greater extent than many realize.

Adventure usually begins where poor planning leaves off.

Michael "Nick" Nichols

Think about all great accomplishments. Take Sir Edmond Hillary, the first person to climb Mt. Everest. Do you think he was just out wandering around and suddenly, before he knew it, found himself on the top of Mt. Everest? Or Neil Armstrong. Think he was just out walking the dog and just had the good fortune to find himself walking on the moon? Of course not.

A good photograph is knowing where to stand.

Ansel Adams

The big secret is that nature photography isn't so different. Clearly, luck does play some part of it. If you're in Yellowstone in June you cannot "plan" to take a picture bugling elk tomorrow at 400PM. It really isn't likely to happen. But you will increase your chances greatly of getting the same picture by going to Yellowstone in late September and hanging out around the Madison River. If you were a betting person this would be as close as you could get to a sure thing.

With all the resources available today on the internet, travel guide books, GPS routes, etc., there is no reason you can't figure out exactly when to be in the right place with the right light. You aren't guaranteed a shot, but you sure increase your chances. You have to do the research. I actually enjoy this research because sometimes it is like a big detective story figuring things out about a place you've never visited.

Greg's Rule #6: Consult Experts, Get Training.

A self taught man usually has a poor teacher and a worse student.

Henny Youngman

Creativity is allowing yourself to make mistakes. Art is knowing which ones to keep.

Scott Adams.

It would be difficult to learn good composition on your own without getting feedback from someone trained in this area, but looking at books from photographic masters like Art Wolfe, David Muench, Art Morris, Tom Till, and Tom Mangelson sure helps.

Workshops and seminars are a great way to learn, providing you select the correct ones. John Shaw and Art Morris are hard to beat in this regard. Both started out as teachers and carry those skills into their photography workshops and seminars. During my time as a developing landscape photographer I studied with Neil Chaput (founder of Rocky Mountain School of Photography), John Shaw, Galen Rowell, George Lepp, and John Gerlach.. All were outstanding. Others I studied with were not.

**1995 to Present: My Wildlife Years.
 When Your Subject Runs Away in Terror**

Reviewing Greg's Rule #6: Consult Experts, Get Training

The more you attempt wildlife photography, the more you realize how much more difficult it is than landscape photography. You may have to locate new sources of inspiration. For example, I admire Tom Till for his work with his 4x5 on the Colorado Plateau. But those techniques simply are not applicable to photographing birds in flight. To learn that I must find a different mentor such as Art Morris.

Here are some of my experts and where I got my training in wildlife and more contemporary subjects such as digital printing and digital imaging. The bottom line is that you must model yourself on people who are knowledgeable and successful in those areas that are important to you.

- North American Nature Photography Association (NANPA)
www.nanpa.org
- Daryl Balfour, South African photographer
www.darylbalfour.com
- Arthur Morris, bird photography
www.birdsasart.com
- National Association of Photoshop Professionals (NAPP)
www.photoshopuser.com
Bill Atkinson, digital printing
www.billatkinson.com
- Charles Cramer, digital printing
www.charlescramer.com

Greg's Rule #7: How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, Practice, Practice.

The next rule is based on an old joke. Did you hear the one about the tourist to New York? He got into a cab—this is in the day before all the cab

drivers were from Pakistan—and asked the driver how to get to Carnegie Hall. The cabdriver replied “Practice, practice, practice.”

You learn to see by practice....the more you photograph, the more you realize what can be photographed and what can't. You just have to keep doing it.

Eliot Porter

You don't learn by going to a workshop and then not shooting for six months. You need to practice, practice, practice. If you want to shoot children's portraits, you practice, practice, practice on children's portraits. Practice weekly. If you want to shoot birds, you practice, practice, practice. shooting birds. Practice weekly.

Remember the Carnegie Hall Rule: Practice, Practice, Practice

Practice doesn't make perfect. Only perfect practice makes perfect.

Vince Lombardi

Why practice so much? You need to master all your equipment and know how everything works. Shooting wildlife (or sports, moving children, or any moving objects) require far more expertise about the workings of your camera, lens, and flash than landscape photography requires. You must study your manuals even more. Know how to use your autofocus. Know how to move the point of focus. On higher end cameras you can program one of the buttons on the back of the camera to autofocus which you absolutely must do in wildlife photography—and it even helps in landscape photography. You can achieve focus with your thumb without moving your eye from the viewfinder.

Most of the new cameras perform tricks that required expensive additional equipment in years gone by. If you are a Canon user, Art Morris's web site www.birdsasart.com has a wealth of resources on the operation of Canon lenses and cameras. If you are a Nikon shooter, try Moose Peterson's site www.moosepeterson.com.

Greg's Rule #8: Don't ever leave the scene of a shooting until you nail the exposure.

Histograms rule!

Greg Ferguson

Digital photography is a blessing to everyone who wants to improve their photography specifically because of the immediate, irrefutable feedback on exposure. You might not be doing well with your compositions, but there is absolutely no excuse these days for improperly exposed photos. Always have the histogram display turned on. If I had to choose between the histogram and seeing the shot on replay, I'd choose the histogram every time—or almost every time. That's because the histogram tells me more about the exposure than the tiny jpeg representation does—assuming you are shooting RAW, which you should most of the time. Also, set your camera so your highlights blink on the review if the image was over-exposed.

The more you practice, the more feedback you get from your camera's histogram, the more you learn.

For more on histograms, see this article:

<http://www.luminous-landscape.com/tutorials/expose-right.shtml>

And now for an option contrary to my statements on histograms.

I don't give a rat's ass about histograms.

Jay Maisel

Jay can get away with it because he is in his 70s and has been shooting since he was a kid. He can just look at a situation and know what the proper exposure should be.

When you can look at a situation and always dial in the correct exposure without metering, then even you can stop looking at your histograms.

Greg's Rule #9: Learn and Practice New Technologies

Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

Arthur C. Clarke

Digital is opening up an exciting world of new possibilities for photography. After being stuck in the narrow dynamic range of transparencies we have a slightly wider range of exposure values in digital. Additionally, we can open up the range farther by using newly developed High Dynamic Range (HDR) techniques. I built the image on this slide by sandwiching two exposures in Photoshop, one exposure for the shadows and one exposure for the highlights. I blended them myself because I thought the automated HDR made the highlights too bright. But sometimes I use an

automated program like Photomatix (www.hdrsoft.com) or FDR Tools (www.fdrtools.com.) All yield slightly different results and I'm never sure which will give the best result so I may try all of them.

Another area that is outstanding for digital photography is low light, long exposure photography, particularly with the low-noise high-end Canon cameras. I've heard that the new high end Nikon also produces low-noise images. I'm taking pictures now that I would have never attempted with film.

The real secret to creativity is being able to hide your sources.

Albert Einstein

With film you needed expensive panoramic cameras to produce these types of images. I find that Photoshop CS3 does a remarkable job of stitching images together and automatically color correcting them. I'm always shooting panos wherever I go these days.

Greg's Rule #10: Develop your VIP: Vision, Inspiration, Passion

The only real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.

Marcel Proust

If you practice, practice, practice, master your equipment, and improve your composition you will see vast improvements in your photography. But skill and technique can never surpass the skill of "seeing" and developing your own personal vision, inspiration, and passion for photography and your subjects. I have a friend I shoot with who will never, ever take a picture of any location unless he has seen that picture published in some magazine. Stated another way, this guy has a swipe file and will only take photos that are in his swipe file. I don't want to do only that because I'm only chimping what others have done before.

I may have given you the idea that with all this planning going on I only shoot this way. That isn't true. In the end, photography is all about light. It's far more important to see and photograph what you're given instead of stubbornly waiting for what you expect. What I mean by that is that after all the practice and all the planning, when I reach my location I'm paying attention to what's actually there, not what I thought or hoped would be there.

You can't say "I need feel inspired to go out shooting." It works the other way. You go out shooting to get inspired.

Greg Ferguson

In the end you need to shoot what you're passionate about so that passion shows through in the photograph. If you go outside, and take pictures of things you are passionate about in great light—that's the real payoff. If you get a few good images along the way, well that's just icing on the cake.

Greg Ferguson Photography: Africa

You don't take a photograph, you make one.

Ansel Adams

I hope you were both entertained and inspired tonight. Just like Ansel Adams says, you don't take a photograph, you're given them and you make one.

Here's the show summary

- Plan and commit your time
- Hit the books: research and plan
- Consult experts, get trained
- Practice, practice, practice
- Master your histograms
- Develop your vision, inspiration, and passion
- **Go Outside. Take Pictures. More Often**

Feel free to email me at grferguson@comcast.com if you have any questions.

Other Information and Resources

The main program was a PowerPoint presentation.

I prepared the automated slide shows with Photodex ProShow Producer: www.photodex.com. Start with the ProShow Gold package and learn that before you upgrade to Producer.

I use Adobe Photoshop Lightroom for raw developing and file management. I use Adobe Photoshop CS3 for further adjustments and printing (www.adobe.com.)

Here are other web sites I look at regularly:

Art Morris' site: www.birdsasart.com

Scott Kelby's photography/Photoshop blog <http://www.scottkelby.com>

Ben Willmore (for more HDR information) www.digitalmastery.com

Moose Peterson's blog <http://www.moosenewsblog.com/>

Michael Reichmann's Luminous Landscape
<http://luminous-landscape.com/whatsnew/>

Photoshop News www.photoshopnews.com

Lightroom Killer Tips www.lightroomkillertips.com/

SpaceWeather Interesting information on atmospheric and celestial phenomena <http://www.spaceweather.com/>

On-line Sun/Moon Rise/Set/Transit info <http://aa.usno.navy.mil/data/>