

Milton's Nature Photography

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Before there was civilization, there was nature. Yes, I know! It is still around today—but it kind of got lost between the blocks of pavement across the landscapes that we call cities. Most of the 300 million people that live in America's cities have never really experienced the true natural world. Aside from a walk in the park they only get a glimpse of it through the images that we photographers make and show them in our slide shows, exhibits and publications. So it is up to us to make those images so compelling that the viewer wants to get out of his or her easy chair and go buy a backpack and sleeping bag.

Throughout my career in photography I've been conscious of trying to make each frame I shoot better than the previous one. It didn't always work out that way. I've had some pretty bad days like everybody else, but in the long run I've seen my work improve enough to convince me that practice makes perfect. Yes! You will attain perfection and become a better photographer in time.

However, between now and your 140th birthday, here are a few tips that I hope will help to improve your nature photography skills. With apologies to David Letterman I call them:

Milton's Top Ten List

1. Love your subject more than your camera. Learn all you can about your subject whether it's a person, place, or plant. A good photograph will show the passion.



I learn where, when, and how I can get the best example of animal behavior of the species. **Where:** I went to the best place to photograph anhinga at the nest—The Anhinga Trail, Everglades NP. **When:** February-March. **How:** with a 500mm lens plus a 1.4x tele-extender.

2. But love your camera anyway—know the tools of your trade.



Crawling out on a mud flat to get close to the small horseshoe crab shell meant I had to love my subject. But I still had to keep my camera high and dry. I gave up trying to hold an umbrella in my teeth. Now I just bring plastic bags. Clean your lenses often.

3. Buy the best lenses you can afford. Good glass makes a difference. Upgrade your other equipment later.



This image was made with a Canon 500mm type-L lens. For the finest feather detail use the top-of-the-line quality of type-L lens.

4. Practice, practice, practice—persistence eventually wins over talent (tortoise and hare theory).



The more often you get out there and take pictures, the better you will get. You are not only honing your camera skills, you are training your eye and mind to see the beauty that makes a good image. In this case I saw the shape of the clouds coming from the setting sun and looked for a form in the dunes that would compliment it.

5. Study the masters to see what they did right. Mine were Ansel Adams and Elliot Porter. I recommend them.



The most important rule I learned from the early masters of nature photography was simplicity within the frame—now known as the KISS rule (**Keep It Simple Stupid**). In this case to eliminate the opposite shore and horizon I climbed from the beach to a higher bank to include only water in the background.

6. F/22 and be there. OK-OK, F/8 if you're still using film—but BE THERE!



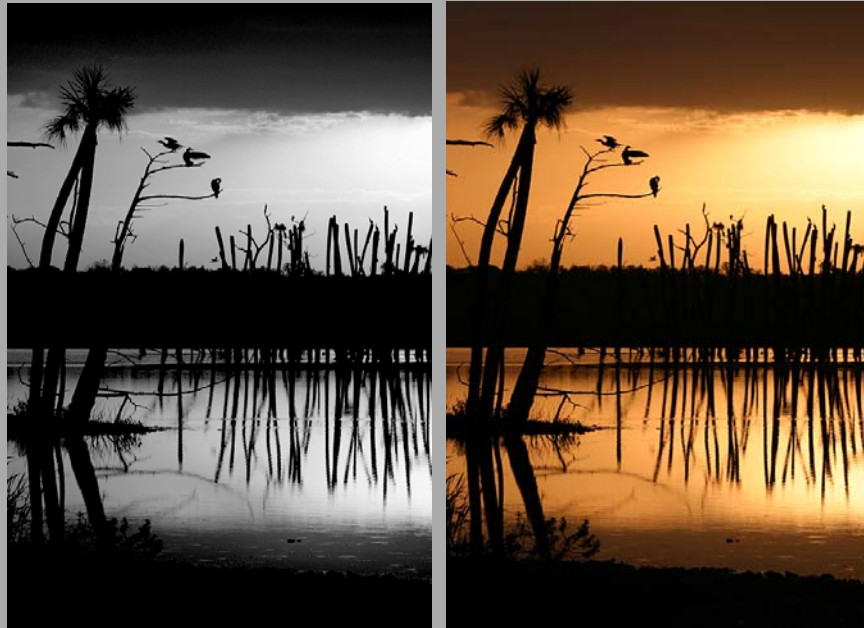
I had passed this scene many times, and stopped to take many pictures of it. But one foggy morning I made a special trip knowing that other obstructions in the scene would be subdued by the fog. It turned out even better than I expected.

7. Know the rules of composition—and when to break them.



While shooting warblers at a water fountain with a 500mm lens a family of raccoons ran out from the brush to take a drink. One of them saw me and started the families' quick retreat. The last one out stood up wondering what was going on. With no time to change lenses I had a choice to play by the rules and include the ears, or follow my instincts and show the wet neck.

8. Think in Black and White—then add color as your embroidery, i.e., think in terms of forms of composition. Use color, but don't be dazzled by it.



There are four major forms in this image (disregarding the water reflection for the moment): the top clouds, open sky, land mass, and the trees containing the point of interest—birds. As you can see, the forms work well in B&W. Adding a water reflection gives the image another dimension—and what would a sunrise be without a blast of yellow. A good way to test an image with busy color is to look at it through a yellow or amber filter. This will neutralize the color dazzle allowing you to examine the balance of forms.

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9. Early to bed and early to rise, put the dawning sun before you eyes. It is the best time and light.



This image was made a few minute before sunrise. It speaks for itself.

10. Don't let bad weather keep you home (easy for me to say—I live in Florida). Some of my best mood shots were taken with approaching or clearing storms.



While backpacking I keep a camera with a 28–135mm lens on my neck outside my jacket, but under my rain parka. This keeps it out of the rain and away from body heat and condensation.



At 2 miles away from my car an unexpected storm came blowing in my direction. I stopped running long enough to put on a 10-22mm wide angle lens. Fortunately, I was in my car when it hit. It was my 3-minute mile that kept me dry.