

# NATURE'S BEST BACKYARDS

## PHOTO CONTEST

WHERE PEOPLE BRING NATURE CLOSER TO HOME



# PHOTO TIPS

## MAKING AWARD-WINNING IMAGES IN YOUR BACKYARD BY BOB TOPE

Create an outdoor studio filled with photographic opportunities in your own backyard! You can attract birds to a simple feeder or water feature, plant floral gardens bursting with color, or add specialized plants to your landscape to attract butterflies and other wildlife. Perhaps the greatest advantage to having your own backyard photography studio is your ability to visit it in all kinds of weather, during each season, both day and night. You will come to know the best times to capture your subjects in just the right light and in their most appealing poses. By experimenting close to home, you will gain skills and techniques that you can reliably use in other settings to capture incredible images.

### LIGHTING

Photography is the recording of light reflecting off the subject in an image. The same scene will appear differently under different lighting conditions. Many pros and amateurs prefer early morning or evening light for the rich colors and textures the sun's low-angled rays create, and avoid the flat light of midday. Overcast days offer a softer light that may be good for taking close-up, or macro shots. Storms can develop into dramatic skies with unusual lighting. Recent rains or fresh snow provide opportunities to capture sparkling water drops, or ice crystals. With time and practice you will develop a sense of what light is best for different subjects. Although natural light works well, adding a flash for fill light is often desirable to soften harsh shadows. Use a flash with adjustable output and reduce the light by one half of a stop or more to provide just enough light to open dark areas of your image without overpowering the natural light. Experiment to see what degree of fill light works best for your purposes. A reflector such as LiteDisc by Photoflex® may be used to bounce soft light into the scene. A flash may also be used to freeze action, such as the motion of a bird's wings, or the movement of insects. Specialized ring flashes may be needed in close-up photography.

### TRIPODS

The single most essential tool that you can add to your camera gear to improve your images is a tripod. Tripods allow the use of slower shutter speeds and smaller apertures, affording a greater depth of field for your images and thus increased sharpness throughout. Tripods also eliminate camera shake, which is especially noticeable with long lenses that not only magnify the subject, but also magnify the slightest camera movement. Select a tripod that is versatile and can achieve a height suitable to your needs as well as being adaptable for use with subjects that are low to the ground. Choose a tripod head that will allow you to quickly frame and compose your subject either as a horizontal or a vertical image. As a rule of thumb, use a tripod for every shot unless you have a good reason to shoot without one.

### LANDSCAPES

Wonderful images can be taken with basic equipment. You need nothing more than a camera and lens mounted to a sturdy tripod and control over your shutter speed and aperture to get started taking contest-winning photographs. Carefully meter the scene and make exposures that will retain detail in the brightest highlights. You may have to allow details in the darkest areas of the scene to be lost, but using fill flash, or bounced lighting, can help define detail. Use small apertures and slow shutter speeds to gain depth of field making the image appear sharp. Note that while you will increase the sharpness of stationary objects, elements such as wind-blown grass or leaves, or flowing water may appear blurred if you are using long exposures. This effect can be attractive in some compositions, but it can also ruin shots that are meant to be razor sharp. Wide-angle lenses are good for taking broad scenes such as landscapes. They also afford opportunities to create dramatic perspectives by positioning a subject near the camera in the lower portion of a vertical frame and placing the horizon near the top. Doing this creates a feeling of great depth within a photograph. Leading lines, such as a garden path or branches of a tree, can help invite the viewer into the composition. While not commonly thought of as a landscape lens, a telephoto lens can be used to create compositions that may not be apparent at a glance. Magnifying the subject compresses the image, resulting in endless design opportunities. They also allow you to isolate a subject against the background by shooting at larger apertures while maintaining sharp focus on the subject and producing soft focus backgrounds.

## MACRO PHOTOGRAPHY

There is an amazing world waiting in your backyard, a miniature environment that can best be seen only when magnified. Moss may become a forest of exotic trees, and insects take on monstrous proportions and reveal magnificent beauty in design and color. To get started taking macro images you will need a point-and-shoot camera with a macro setting, or better still, an SLR (single lens reflex camera, either digital or film, with interchangeable lenses) and a macro lens that will allow you to focus at a one-to-one ratio. Macro lenses typically come in focal lengths varying from 50mm to 200mm, with the longer lenses offering more working distance between you and your subject. Accessories such as extension tubes and diopters may be added to most lenses to magnify the subject and allow close-up photography.

## WILDLIFE

Wild creatures that visit your backyard are often skittish and may flee in the presence of people, requiring more stealth in your photographic approach. You will need to use a long lens and a tripod. You could position yourself in a blind, behind vegetation, or shoot through a nearby window. The use of camouflage netting can allow you to get close to your subject while outside. Do not make any sudden movements or sounds, as birds and other wildlife are easily frightened away.

A good method for photographing birds is to find a window within your home that can be used as a blind overlooking your garden, feeder, or water feature. Cut a piece of cardboard to cover the window and cut out a hole for your camera lens. This way you may move around inside without disturbing the wildlife, as they can go about their lives right in front of your camera without ever knowing you are there. This method also allows you to keep your camera set up, safely out of the weather, and ready at a moment's notice. Become acquainted with the behavior of the birds and animals you wish to photograph. Learn which branches are preferred perches. What time of day or night do they visit your yard? What food sources do they prefer? What can you do to enhance your environment to encourage their visits? It is fairly simple to set out a bird feeder and offer a variety of seeds to attract specific bird species. Hummingbird feeders placed near your blind or "camera window" will help you get close to your subjects without disturbing their routines. You can also select plants and shrubs that produce nectar, berries, or seeds. Set up natural perches for the birds to visit on their way to and from the food source. These will be great places to catch birds posing, landing, and taking off. You can also create water features to attract birds and wildlife to drink and bathe. Maintain these as you would a feeder to keep everything clean and fresh.

Mating season is a great time to catch birds at their best. Brightly colored males engaging in territorial disputes, mating rituals, and nest-building behaviors provide interesting photo opportunities. Try placing natural nesting materials in front of your camera. If you are lucky, birds may nest in shrubs or low trees within range of your long lens. While nests make wonderful subjects for photographers to document the raising of offspring, be careful never to disturb the parents or young.

In bird and wildlife photography it is crucial that the eyes of your subject be in focus. When viewing images of animals, people are naturally drawn to the eyes. If the eyes are out of focus, the image can be much less appealing. Mammals present their own challenges to the photographer. Rabbits, squirrels, and deer may appear cute and innocent when visiting your yard, but remember they are wild animals and may bite or, in the case of deer, also kick if threatened. Maintain your distance and use long lenses to record their natural behavior. Raccoons, opossum, and fox are nocturnal and can be difficult to photograph; using a flash will be necessary. If these creatures are frequent night visitors, set up a tent in your yard and lay out with your camera ready. Chances are, with patience, you will be able to get some fine images.

## COMPOSITION

Consider backgrounds. If you are shooting a landscape and want everything in the image to be tack sharp, choose a small aperture to gain the greatest depth of field. But if you are shooting birds or wildlife, you may want just the subject to be in focus. Here you will need to use a large aperture for a shallow depth of field. Be sure to check your depth of field preview button to be certain all parts of your subject are in focus and unwanted elements dissolve into a soft blur. With all of your photographs, avoid centering your subject in the frame. Too many great shots are ruined by poor composition. Just because the manufacturer puts the camera's meter and focusing sensors in the center of the viewfinder doesn't mean your subject has to be there. If you must place your subject in the middle of the frame for measuring the light and distance, go ahead; meter and focus, then compose the image with the subject off-center. It is best to have animals looking or moving into the shot. Also, be careful not to have critical elements of the subject touching the edge of the frame, so as not to destroy the integrity of the composition. Finally, before you release the shutter, take a look around the viewfinder. Is there anything intruding that will distract from the subject? Would shifting the camera left or right, up or down, offer a better composition? When you are sure that you have the best shot possible, go ahead and capture that award-winning image.

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