

Slow and the Curse of the Computer

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A long long time ago, I can still remember how Kodachrome used to make me smile. But you knew you had only one chance to get the picture right because it would be up to 2 weeks between exposure and review. That delay was cut to two days during the dazzling Velvia era. Now, photographers in the thrall of the CMOS need be patient for only, well, two seconds. No more sitting and wondering if you've nailed the shot, taking more than you need to, just to be sure. Instant feedback in the age of digital capture accelerates the learning process for new photographers and is a boon to workshop leaders. The latest generation of cameras produce RAW files which, when properly processed, can reproduce more smoothly and sharply on the printed page than any scanned 35 mm Provia or Velvia slide - and certainly better than 70 mm duplicates. As a result, picture libraries love digital capture. And if you are fond of the company of your computer, then you will love it too.

It is unsurprising that digital capture has caught on in the US so quickly (and Europe is not far behind): the process has profound appeal in cultures where the work ethic is intertwined with national identity. Capturing pictures digitally provides the opportunity to always to be productive. There is no down time. You edit between exposures. You download, edit again and back-up images on the evening of the shoot and on returning home, process the RAW files on a calibrated screen in a grey room and back up once more. If you are especially conscientious, you'll archive the images to DVD too. Don't dare let things slip or the devil will be on your back and you will never get out of the mire of unprocessed files. Evenings of relaxation, reflection and conversation - of doing something other than photography - are becoming a luxury. We now have the perfect excuse to be by ourselves; we're working. Incidentally, this hectic, unrelenting process does little to cultivate an ingredient missing from most nature photography, something that, when present, amplifies a picture's appeal ten-fold: humour.

Digital capture harmonises perfectly with our times and we itch for the LCD review as impatiently as we itch for the next text message or e-mail. Snap judgements about what is worth keeping and what can be deleted favour the obvious over the subtle - pictures with instant rather than enduring appeal. This in spite of a lingering memory of how pictures can "grow on us", how, over time, they mature in our minds, begin to make sense. But digital capture has no more room for reflection and contemplation than modern news reporting. It encourages impetuosity, accommodates impatience, makes children of us.

To be frank, none of this would matter a megapixel if it didn't extend into the way we relate to our subjects and connect with the land. But it does, profoundly, and not always for the good. The culture of immediacy most of us experience in daily life which, with our use of the Internet and mobile 'phones, digital cameras and fast food, we willingly, compulsively, engage in, is out of step with natural rhythms. We may be living our lives faster, but natural process continues at the same pace it has always done - sometimes faster, usually much slower.

Photographing birds at their nests is now deeply unfashionable, the assertion that "it has all been done before" the most common reason given for refraining. Yet this is an absolutely central part of the subject's story and offers the photographer an opportunity to witness moments of drama and tenderness, comedy and pathos. As a genre, it has no more "all been done before" than, say, Arctic wildlife or the Scottish landscape. But doing nest photography properly - which results in the fledging of a healthy brood as well as pictures offering a new insight- requires a huge investment of time in finding the ideal nest, reading the adults' reaction as a hide is introduced, and putting in the dawn-to-dusk hours for days on end to watch the family in action. It is time that few of us, least of all working nature photographers, can spare and anyway, what's the attraction when faster photo opportunities are on offer instead? Sitting all day for a handful of frames just isn't productive enough. Yet, without this coverage, the account of a species is incomplete.



The more we buy into the “Now!” culture, where patience and restraint represent weakness and indecision rather than virtue, the harder it is to fall into step with natural time. If you want to find out how this feels, go wild camping for a couple of days without your mobile or laptop. Even just sit in a hide at a bait site for 11 hours. Experience how long it takes to become warm after the sun rises. See how slowly the shadows from a branch move across a tree trunk. Wonder if the eagle’s last visit to the bait an hour and a half ago was the last one of the day - or the week. Feel unproductive. Begin to get a sense of natural time. Generally, it’s slow, achingly slow in the absence of the distractions provided by what writer Robert Michael Pyle characterises as “the cheap tricks of modern life.”



This is where seeing begins - there is little else to do, after all, except to study what’s around about you. The wildlife painter Keith Brockie is celebrated for the veracity and detail of his work, sketches for which are done over many hours in the field through a telescope. During workshops he has noticed the difficulty that many students now have in seeing their subjects fully, of noticing things that can’t be taken in merely by looking at them. This is hardly surprising when moving imagery - that most analogous to how we witness the world - is fed to us as sight-bites by media controllers afraid that our infantilised senses will become bored if made to look at the same thing for more than a few seconds. Working with that most *avant garde* of Norwegian outdoor photographers, Pål Hermansen, on a beach on Lewis, I was intrigued as he set about making a thirty minute video of the chaotic flows of water over a thin layer of black sand and the patterns revealed in the pale sand beneath. What, on my part, began as an exercise in curiosity, then boredom soon transformed into one of fascination and speculation. This was natural time in motion, revealed by the unblinking, unmoving scrutiny of the lens. In the realm of digital capture, it is altogether too tempting to look, snap and review rather than to see, consider and decide as film photography demands. The results may end up looking the same, but the latter process better equips the photographer to repeat a success.



The argument that the greater control (and by implication, more choices) offered by digital capture is empowering is fallacious. In the field, too many options simply lead to missed pictures. In the office, it means unlimited mantis* time in front of a monitor. Limits, boundaries, make it possible to fill a creative space; without them technique can always lord it over content - there is always another setting to be tried. Witness the creative atrocities of early PhotoShop days (some of which I am guilty of in the digital chapters of [The Art of Nature Photography](#)). They also lead to much more time in communion with a computer rather than outside with our subjects. There are more practical considerations, too. I’ve watched even experienced photographers break concentration with what is going on around them as they check the histogram or zoom in to confirm sharpness. Things happen. Pictures are missed. And when you see what you had in mind appear on the LCD, what is the incentive to keep shooting? Uncertain film photographers, in contrast, keep on shooting and shooting, in the process often making pictures they never dreamed of.

No longer do people ask, “do you do your own processing?” but instead, “are you shooting on digital?”. I find it deeply disappointing that so much discussion between nature photographers currently revolves around the means of image capture rather than the content, direction and usefulness of our work. This at a time when our consciences are troubled daily as one environmental calamity after another - with the inevitable immediate or long term consequences for people - is reported. The crucial question we should really be asking is, “does the way you work allow you to spend enough time with your subjects?” Any process that leads to a further distancing from the natural world - arguably the “real world” - will hinder our attempts to understand and represent it faithfully.

* mantis time - think how your arms and hands look when you are typing on a computer key board then think of a preying mantis....

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Niall Benvie, who runs [Images from the Edge](#), is the UK’s most prolific writer on natural history photography, publishing almost 70 articles and a book (amounting to over 135,000 words) between 2000-2002 alone. But the scope of his writing extends much wider into issues of land management and the polarisation of nature and culture as well as travelogues and commentaries on subjects as diverse as species re-establishment programmes and eco-tourism.

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