

Camera Equipment Review...

GROOFWIN Pod

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As nature photographers, we all share a common desire - spotting interesting subjects in our viewfinders. Natural habitat is shrinking to make way for more homes and shopping centers. Many popular nature photography locales are so crowded with tourist activity, making good images is nearly impossible. One of my favorite ways to beat the crowds is to shoot from my vehicle, along the back roads and lesser-traveled venues. Most parks and wildlife refuges now have an observation drive; a loop or turn-out whereby the public can both view and photograph nature's beauty without ever leaving their automobile.

For lenses in the 200mm and under range, bracing against the car's window frame may suffice to eliminate camera shake. Bigger lenses will require more support. I have found the best way to stabilize my F5/600mm rig is by using a specially made car-mount sold by L.L. Rue Enterprises. The GROOFWIN POD (Ground-Roof-Window) is a versatile, yet stable platform for holding a tripod head and camera/body combo. It is made from black anodized aluminum, weighs only 2 5/8 lbs.,

and is only 11" x 3", making it small enough to fit in my suitcase when traveling by plane. Supported by three large rubber pads, it can be used in the flat position at ground level, or placed on the vehicle hood, or roof. A threaded knob secures the two sections tightly together whether in the flat position or mounted in the car window.

In the field: How steady is this rig? As previously stated, I often use the GROOFWIN with a 600 F4 and 1.4x set on an Arca-Swiss B1 ball head mounted to the driver's side window of my Chevrolet Tahoe. Setting up or taking down the unit between locations takes less than two minutes. Make sure the knurled knob, which locks the unit against the door panel, is secure, especially when using long lenses. Using the GROOFWIN to photograph birds from my vehicle enables me to get much closer than by foot. Anyone who has tried to photograph birds knows how tough they can be to approach, but using the GROOFWIN helped me get this image of the Eastern Meadowlark, shown singing away on an old fence post. He allowed me to pull within 20 feet. As he continued to sing, I exposed an entire roll of Provia F.

Birds, and other wildlife, normally reluctant to assimilate to the proclivities of man, have become acclimated to the sight of vehicles, accepting them as a part of their daily lives. From a car, animals can often be approached to within a few yards without getting spooked. The GROOFWIN POD is a winner as far as I am concerned. It has allowed me to get images I could not have made otherwise. Additional information about the GROOFWIN and other photo accessories can be found on the [L.L. Rue website](#). You'll find their staff to be amiable and courteous.

When using a window mount, I strongly recommend turning off the car's engine to eliminate vibration. Keep in mind some flexibility is lost when shooting with a window-mounted camera, especially at upward angles. Also, shooting from a motor vehicle presents different criteria compared to taking images by traditional means. NPN offers the following guidelines on photography from a vehicle for safety and preservation of the environment:

- **Turn off engine** - Engine vibration often goes unnoticed, but it will show up in your slides.
- **Buddy System** - When possible, take along a friend or family member who can drive (and watch for traffic) while you devote full concentration toward making images.
- **Respect the environment** - OK, you've got that new 4WD SUV that could climb the face of Mount Rushmore. Resist the temptation to leave public or private roads for the sake of a few images. The old adage, "Take only photographs, leave only footprints" applies in this case.
- **Approach slowly** - When shooting wildlife subjects, slow down well in advance. Take a few images, work in closer, then take a few more... then move in more until you are as close as possible without jeopardizing the subject or the environment.

- **Don't harass wildlife** - We know you would never dream of doing so, but unintentionally, in the excitement of the shoot, you may find yourself getting too close- passing through the animals comfort zone. How close is this? It varies for each animal and what season it is. Mother's with young ones will want you to give a wide berth, a male on the prowl may be aggressive if you get too close, or a single grazing animal may not care where your vehicle is. That is why it is important to get to know your subject. You may feel safe inside your vehicle, but it does not mean the animal does not feel threatened. Harassment of wildlife is not only unethical, it is against the law in many states, and especially so if your subject is an endangered or threatened species.
- **Drive carefully** - It is easy to get distracted by that 10-point buck grazing just 20 yards off the road. If you decide to take a few images, pull onto the shoulder out of the way of other traffic, stop and turn off the engine. Be sure to turn on your 4-way flashers. Flashers won't scare off wildlife, but they may save you from getting rear-ended. Also, drive slowly - it's difficult to spot wildlife at 70 mph! Slow down, relax, and remain observant, especially for other traffic.

You will be surprised how much you can see and safely photograph from your vehicle this way!

BH-NPN

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