Digital SLR Photoshoot Workflow
Monday Morning Tip

One of my favorite phrases is, *"Flitting like a fly from one cow patty to the next without a plan or direction."* I heard this from an engineering manager who used to describe new hires this way. Over the years, I've told a number of people that they'll never learn photography if they flit from one idea to the next without a plan or direction. Eventually, I came to realize most people need a step-by-step recipe as a starting point. This MMT is that recipe.

Before you even leave the house, have a plan in your mind of what you intend to photograph. It doesn't need to be a detailed plan but a general idea of what you want to capture. If you've been to the site before, you should have more details but if it's a new site, you should know enough about the location to have some idea. This avoids a huge part of "flitting from one cow patty to another". For example, when I go to the Wild Animal Park (WAP), one of my favorites is "Fred" (that's just my name for him), the shoebill stork. I've probably taken hundreds of photos of Fred but I keep going back because I still haven't captured the best portrait of Fred. Other favorites are the Abyssinian Ground Hornbills and secretary birds. Before I get to their exhibits, I've already set my camera for the current conditions.

First, I select an appropriate lens. At WAP, I know most of my subjects are within 30-60 ft so I usually mount my 70-200/4 + 1.4TC or 100-400/4.5-5.6 and most of my shooting will be around 200mm. If I'm after a specific shot, e.g. baby tigers, baby pandas where I know I'll stand in one spot, I'll drag out one of the "big guns" but, otherwise, it's no fun carrying an 8-10 lbs lens.

Next, I set ISO to 100 or 200 for most bright, sunny San Diego days. If it's overcast or cloudy, I might go to 400. If it's a night shoot, I'll probably set ISO to 400 but keep in the back of my mind that I may need 800.

I set aperture to f/5.6 because I know that, with average-size critters at 200mm and 30-60 feet, I'll have about 18 inches to 8 feet Depth of Field. This lets me quickly change to f/4 or f/8.0 for more or less DoF since those are just one click away from f/5.6.

Now, I'm ready to select a metering mode and drive. Since I use Evaluative (Nikon Matrix) for 80% of my photography, I usually just confirm that I haven't changed it. I used to shoot almost exclusively in single shot mode (except sports) but now, I select between Low Speed Burst (3 frames/second) and High Speed Burst (6.5 frames/second) depending on the situation. At WAP, Low Speed is generally fine.

Finally, I make sure Exposure Compensation (EC) is zeroed so I'm not adding/subtracting light.

With ISO and aperture set, I aim at a neutral colored object and dial in an approximate shutter speed. This puts me in the neighborhood so I'm not frantically turning the dial when I get to the exhibit.

Let's assume I now have ISO 100, f/5.6, 1/250 second dialed in. When I get to Fred's kingdom, I know he's usually facing north or west, away from the sun and today is no different, he's facing north. I take a quick exposure measurement by half-pressing the shutter button. Fred is neutral

gray in color and usually stands in neutral green foliage so my original exposure is ½ stop too high. I dial in –½ EC to bring the Exposure Level Indicator to ±0.0 and take a test shot. The histogram and "blinkies" tell me that, as usual, I've blown (overexposed) the light parts of Fred's massive beak. I quickly dial in another -½ EC so now my ELI indicates -1.0 and take another test shot. This time, the exposure is nearly dead on so now, I can concentrate on composition. In the end, I got another fine, but not great, portrait of Fred.

Reading about photography is completely different from doing photography. Join me at the Wild Animal Park for a "Hands-On" Photoshoot Workshop. Check the Workshops section of my site.