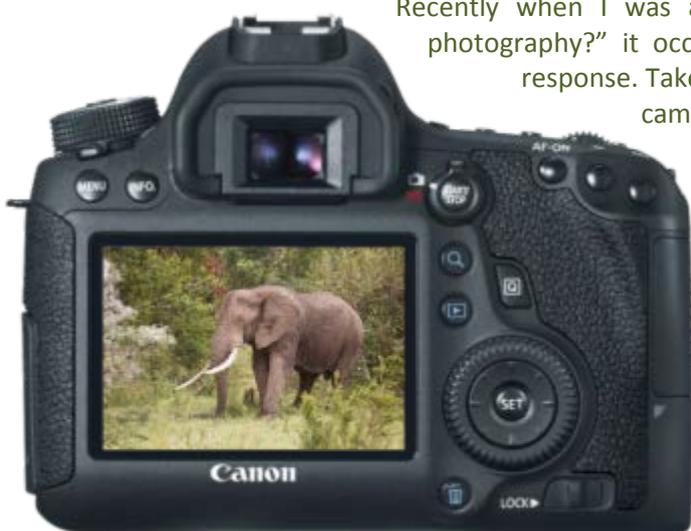


“Rinse and repeat” or why it’s good to chimp to improve as a photographer

I was one of those youngsters who read every label on every bottle and packet. One day I was reading the instructions on a shampoo bottle which said, wet hair, apply shampoo, work to lather, rinse and repeat. Being the sort of annoying child who pestered their mother with questions I asked her how many times should I – ‘rinse and repeat’. She thought for a moment and then said “as often as necessary and you will know when you’ve done it enough”.

This phrase ‘rinse and repeat’ has now entered the general lexicon and is applied all sorts of random things.

Recently when I was asked the age old question “how do I improve my photography?” it occurred to me that ‘rinse and repeat’ could be an apt response. Take your photographs check the results on the back of your camera or computer, ask yourself the question how could I improve on this and repeat the exercise until you do.



The only difference I guess is that eventually my hair will be clean but if I’m being truly critical my photographs will never be the best I can achieve. There is a quote attributed to many a photographer but which is very true whoever actually said it. When asked “What is the best photograph you have ever taken” the reply given was “the one I am going to take tomorrow.” It was the famous photographer Henri Cartier Bresson who is quoted as saying “your first 10,000 photographs are your worst.” With the advent of digital cameras I truly believe that the

feedback we are given, and that’s not just the LCD display, but also other information such as the histograms, means we can perhaps improve faster so that maybe 10,000 is rather excessive. However I guess that because it’s easier to take photographs digitally some of us will have surpassed 10,000 very quickly!

The important thing however is that you use all the tools at your disposal to constantly refine and improve your photographs. Look critically at your image and ask yourself what could you have done to improve it. Could you have used a wider aperture to put distracting backgrounds out of focus? Could you have used a faster shutter speed to freeze or intentionally blur motion? Could you have positioned yourself differently to exclude or include some important element in the photograph or portray the subject of your photograph in a different

way? When I photograph wildlife I want to use all these techniques to enable; the viewer to enjoy the same moment, the same magic that I experienced when looking at the animal.



One of the wonderful benefits of the modern digital SLR cameras is the ability to check the image and image data immediately after shooting so that if necessary you can amend and shoot again - to be able to ‘rinse and repeat’. It’s all too easy however to ignore this and I see people doing it all the time. They get caught up in the excitement of the moment and continue taking shots of the subject, maybe a bird in a tree, as it

moves little by little. I sometimes feel that we think if we take the camera from our eye to check the image, histogram and settings we may miss something. I would suggest however that if we don't use these options to check the settings we are missing the opportunity to improve the very next photograph we take. We are also missing a really important benefit of digital photography namely the opportunity for instant feedback and subsequent correction.

The action of "chimping" or glancing at the back of your LCD display every few minutes is often frowned upon. In fact I have heard somebody say that "a good photographer knows what he has shot without having to look at the back of the camera, chimping is for beginners who are not confident with their photography". I've heard some very arrogant things said in my time but this has to enter the list somewhere near the top. I started shooting in film days when you took 36 frames, put the film in an envelope and posted it to the processing laboratories. One week later you receive the results of your labours. I don't suspect I am alone in saying that when I went through them I often cursed and said gosh if only I had realised, I wouldn't have done things quite like that. Oh how different it would have been if I could have seen the image and the image data immediately. I could have made some adjustments and reshot the image whilst the moment, the subject, the light and all other elements that contributed to the image were still as I originally saw them. To me the whole idea of telling people not to use the wonderful technology that is now built into their cameras is mind-boggling. Don't get me wrong I don't feel we should be checking the viewfinder after every shot and yes we should be trying to develop our technique and get things like exposure, focus and composition correct from the start. However the only way we will know if we are achieving this, and are able to correct it if we are not, is precisely by looking at this information.

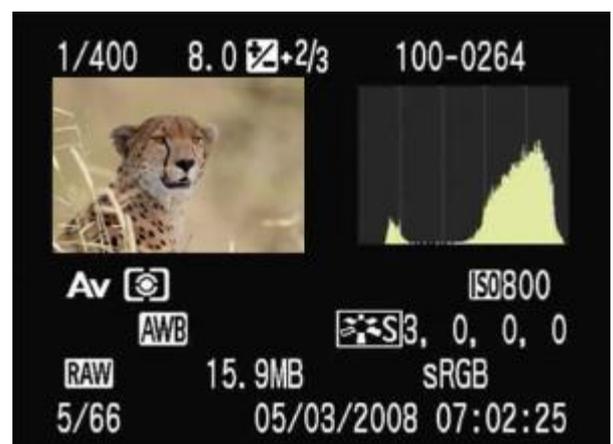


Some of you will have heard me say that I once had a photographic mentor who used to annoyingly turn to me whilst out in the field and ask me how my camera was set up. What were the settings dialled in, the ASA of the film etc. and when I couldn't tell him he came out with the annoying (at least to me at the time) mantra "leftover settings give leftover photographs". He was however completely correct. If I hadn't thought about my camera settings before setting, out and was not constantly revising them during the photo expedition I could miss an excellent opportunity. When one day I asked him "but how do I know what settings I should choose" he told me to review my photographs after they were developed and ask myself the question – "what could I have done at the time to improve that photograph?" I was even encouraged to keep a booklet in my camera bag in which I would note the settings used. No EXIF data in those days! Once I had worked out what I could do to improve the shot I was to remember it so that I would improve next time. I guess that was chimping 1960s style.

The way I shoot these days is to:

- carefully consider the settings I need to dial into my camera before a shoot,
- take a few frames,
- glance at the back of the camera to review them but look for key information so as not to spend so much time that I miss a key opportunity.

I firmly believe that one of the most powerful tools on a modern DSLR camera is the histogram in that this will tell us how well you calculated the exposure*. I therefore ensure that the camera is set up to display not only the image but also the histogram and the settings that were used. I also use tools such as blinkies (highlight warnings) to tell me when I have overexposed something. A simple quick glance at the camera back will tell me whether I've got everything correct regarding the exposure and I can then put the camera back to my eye and shoot the next image maybe correcting something in the process. I agree that if I wish to check the



focus and sharpness of the image then I have to view it as large as I can on the viewfinder. I need to zoom in to check the detail of small elements of the image. However if you're shooting fast paced wildlife you won't have time for this so you just have to trust to your experience, your skill in setting things up, the camera's autofocus system and the lessons you learned previously – particularly how to use the tools you have at your disposal to create the best photograph you could. Maybe when there is a break in the action you can check this fine detail, learn from your lessons and amend if necessary. To paraphrase the great American photographer Ansel Adams, great photos are not snapped or taken they are creatively crafted, photography is art – my art!

Back when I started out in photography it was only by reviewing my images that I could learn and improve. Nothing has changed in that respect it's just that it is now much easier, more immediate and we have some very powerful tools to help us. My advice to all on my photo workshops is to 'rinse and repeat' and nerve be afraid to chimp.

* There isn't the space here to discuss fully what the histogram for a good exposure looks like, maybe I'll do that in a future newsletter or if you're new to photography you might want to book on my "taking control of your camera" workshop where as well as other issues I discussed this at some length.

More reflections and musings of a wildlife photographer.

If you have found this interesting please visit <http://www.naturesphotos.co.uk/pages/musings-of-a-wildlife-photographer.php> for more of my thoughts

If you are a member of camera club and would like me to come and share more of my thoughts on what it takes to be a successful wildlife photographer ask your programme secretary to visit my website [here](#) and look at the talks I provide together with the feedback from clubs where I have been in the past.

Bob Brind-Surch