Feature photo and camera illustration courtesy of author.

Creative Memo

Northwest Arkansas Outdoor Photography, a fictional company, needed ads to promote a spring field course. It was designed with a campaign in mind, including a blog, email, and landing page.

My objective with this editorial was to:

1. Write an SEO-friendly and reader-useful article.
2. Have the article easy to skim if read as a blog and relevant concept illustrations.
3. Have a print version that mimics a magazine layout baring accommodations to fit the portfolio and include a memo box.
4. Feature photo and a headline that stand out and portray the content. The photo retains the blog thumbnail to showcase the digital design, but it could be removed for print.
5. For textual contrast and easier print readability, the body text is serif and captions are sans italic.

How to Take Sharp, Colorful Photos in Low-Light Forests

By Leah Markum

It's not entirely your fault.

Forests are challenging environments for photographers. Professionals take time with several shots of the same subject with different settings. They also carry tripods to overcome these challenges.

But you're a hobbyist who wants to enjoy creating art and completing a hike with family and friends. So you want advice that's fast and effective.

You want advice that you can use even on a hurried road trip through national parks with a group.

The ultimate object here is to get more light. More light means less blur and more dynamics like color saturation and texture.

This advice follows a familiar format for photographers: rules for shutter speed, aperture, ISO, post-processing, and lens choice.

Shutter Speed

If you're used to taking photos in automatic mode, your shutter speed suffers in forests.

Automatic mode, in a low-light environment, sacrifices your shutter speed.

You click your shutter, think you hear the action immediately, and move. Oops. Instead, the shutter took extra time to gather light and recorded your movement.

Even if you hold still, your arms and breathing shift the camera enough. You'll get that blurry photo you're trying NOT to take.

For this reason, your best bet in the forest is to shoot in shutter-priority mode. Your camera will shift other settings to accommodate your shutter.

Longer shutter speeds capture more movement by creating blur. (Photo courtesy of Flickr user Thomas James Caldwell.)

If you choose to bring a tripod to overcome this issue, you still risk objects in the forest shifting on you. So you'd still have a blurry photo when you don't want it.

Thus, make a point to shoot in shutter priority mode. It leverages your situation the most. It also might be the only adjustment you need.

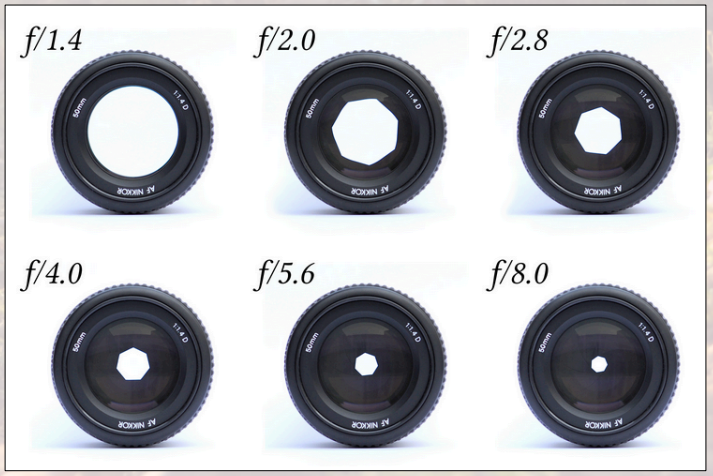
Aperture

Sometimes you want to use a different setting other than shutter priority.

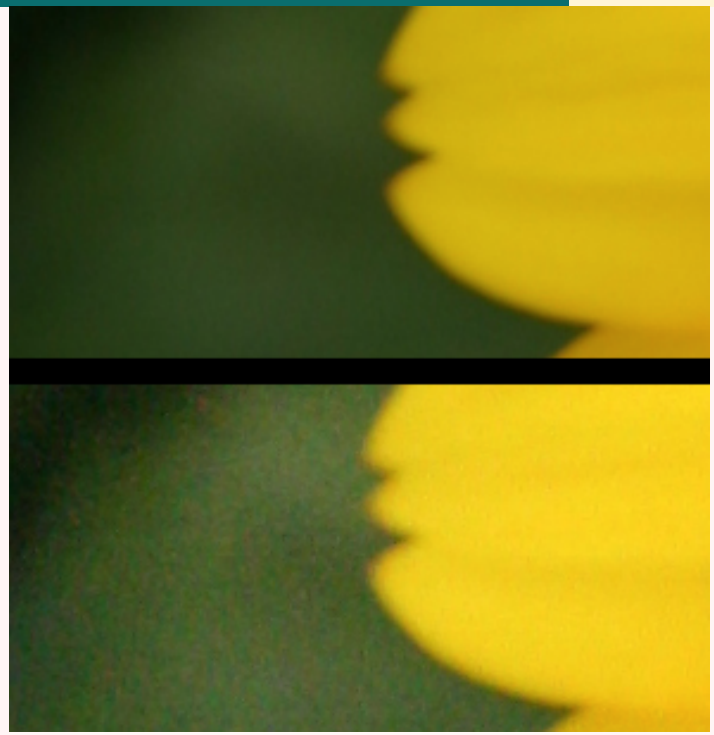
For instance, the background is a distraction if you want to take a close-up of fungi on the forest floor. Aperture will give you the depth of field you need to make the photo work.

If you like to take these types of photos, then aperture-priority mode is for you.

Aperture priority lets in more light over a wider area instead of time like with shutter speed.



Aperture is expressed in fractions where the larger fraction (smaller denominator) is a wider pupil to capture more light. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia user KoeppiK.)



Compare low ISO (top) and high ISO (bottom). Note the graininess in the bottom, but the brightness makes it more obvious. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia user HuttyMcphoo.)

ISO

You might be thinking, “But high ISO adds graininess to photos. I don’t want that. That’s hardly better than blurriness.”

Yes and no. You want to adjust shutter speed and aperture to get the look you want. If that’s not enough, you should have a tripod or a good flash rig.

See how quickly that situation escalated? You need equipment if you can't conquer low-light with shutter speed and aperture. That extra equipment needs time to set up and weighs you down on a hike.

But the point of this discussion is to NOT overwhelm you with time and equipment. High ISO helps with this.

High ISO in daytime situations isn’t as sacrilegious as it might sound. There are two ways to notice high ISO grain.

1. You zoom in on the photo in editing software on your computer, or
2. You compare the same photo shot twice with widely different ISOs

Graininess even has an aesthetic that many photographers respect.

Why fuss over the stigma?

Amp up the ISO. In a forest setting, the graininess won’t kick in until 3200 depending on how shaded the scene is.

Post-Processing

Armed with Adobe Photoshop or Windows Photos for editing, you can make up for issues in the forest.

The principle here is less is more. Mild adjustments can help a lot. Major adjustments might look fine at first but can look awful when you see the image days later.

Before and after of a post-processed photo. (Photo courtesy of Flickr user McMac70.)

Better yet, keep original copies of all your photos. Then, make new copies that you edit. If those copies don't work out, you still have the originals.

Also, the more times you save an image as a JPG, the more data gets lost. So if you keep coming back to edit that image, it'll become grainy even if it was sharp initially.

Especially in the case of low-light photography, shoot your images in RAW if you can. JPGs condense—and thus lose—data. RAW retains all information. So when you go to your computer to edit, you can make more adjustments without overdoing them.

For instance, say I want to saturate the image more. I have one red flower. Subtle greens, grays, and browns surround the flower.

If I increase color saturation in JPG, that flower might lose information. It may become a single red mass instead of having its original texture or subtle variations of red. RAW would spare me that and pick up more data on darker areas.

Prime Lenses

Prime lenses have a secret talent. They make up for their locked focal length by being the best at letting in light.

If we compare lenses at the same settings, prime lenses get more details, contrast, and color.

Prime lens have one focus length. That allows more light than large zoom lenses. (Photo courtesy of Flickr user heipei.)

Prime lenses achieve this with streamlined machinery. You might like telephoto lenses like your 18-55 mm kit lens or your 55-200 mm standard zoom lens. But changing the focus means a lot of machinery has to move around.

Prime lenses locked at 50 mm, for example, lack those obstructions. That lack means more light, faster.

So if you don't mind sacrificing zoom, prime lenses work wonderfully in low-light situations.

Conclusion

A few general adjustments to your camera settings can get the job done. The adjustments you choose will let in more light for the type of photos you like to take. That light helps the camera understand the shapes and colors in the scene.

And then you can move on. Get in some mileage. Spend time with your friends and family.

You don't have to take forever getting the "perfect" settings. Or lug around a tripod or a large flash contraption like the professionals. They are in the forest for one reason—just the photos.

Different purposes mean different approaches. With the simple rules I shared with you, you can overcome your photography problems in forests while also getting on with your day.