

Nature Photography For Kids

It's amazing how an inexpensive camera can open up a whole new world of discoveries.

by Donald Fraser

The world of nature comes alive when viewed through a lens. A simple dew-drop unexpectedly reveals a rainbow of colour. The wing of a monarch butterfly becomes an intricate map, with ink-black trails on a tangerine landscape.

The discoveries are amazing and endless when you slow down and look carefully with a camera. That's why nature photography is so appealing to kids. They are simply "wowed" by what they suddenly find in their own backyard. It is big time adventure on an easily captured scale.

Nature photography is a fun and fascinating hobby that can last a lifetime. It's also a great way to get kids outdoors, and teach them how to appreciate what's around them. They learn patience and persistence as they go after that perfect shot, and develop artistic and compositional skills they can use in school and in their future careers.

So here's how to get them started.

Don't spend a lot

Photography used to be mainly a grown-up pastime. Taking pictures, you see, was an expensive hobby. Not only were cameras pricey, but the cost of film and photo developing put kid-friendly experimenting out of reach for most families.

Thankfully, times have changed – and technology along with it. Digital cameras come in every price range possible. And as for film, you'll never pay a dime for it again. Plus, we now have the advantages of the Internet. Online, you'll find plenty of free software to help your kids edit their masterpieces, as well as safe places to share them with family and friends (*see sidebar*).



But how much should you spend on your child's first camera? Not a lot, says photographer Neil Muscott. "You don't need to buy an expensive digital SLR camera with multiple, removable, lenses."

Instead, "start with something that is both affordable and without a whole lot of advanced manual settings," suggests Muscott.

"It is more important to experiment with simple skills such as finding fun and suitable subjects to shoot, and finding ways to frame them compositionally. This doesn't happen quite as naturally when you are learning the features of a more complex camera."

Even entry level cameras come with landscape and macro settings, says fellow photographer Jessica Melnik. "So kids can practise from really far away or really close up. If it has a zoom lens, that's a bonus."

Parents can also relax a bit more with less expensive cameras. An accidental dunk in a river, lake or mud puddle (which is not uncommon) means you won't be out a lot of money. And believe it or not, these smaller, more affordable cameras are often the most durable. With simple lenses and uniform rectangular bodies, they are quite difficult to break.

You can get good quality digital cameras for around \$50 – particularly if you buy second hand or on sale. Even without the bells and whistles of the more expensive cameras, your children are "still going to produce some fantastic photos," says Muscott.

Nature in your backyard

You don't have to travel far to take nature photos. While you'll find incredible scenery and

backdrops in provincial parks, your backyard, your neighborhood and parks and green spaces close to you are also teaming with natural subjects.

"I recently spent 20 minutes following a bee around my downtown backyard," laughs Muscott. "I ended up taking 35 shots; 30 were out of focus. But a couple of them were fantastic." Kids can give the 20-minute bee experiment a try, and then switch up the subject "to birds, squirrels, and other small mammals."

Another tip from Muscott: "Teach them how to go slow – to look closely at their surroundings, to question what is on the other side of a tree, or underneath a leaf. They will end up finding plants, flowers, animals, and insects they didn't know were there – a huge variety of life just out of sight."

Melnik recommends making a game out of photography. "I'll pretend to be the roots of the tree. I'll lay on my back, become the roots, and shoot upwards. For people looking at the picture, it is a wonderful contrast of leaf and light at an angle that will make them look twice."

Flowers are fascinating subjects for kids, says Melnik. "Every flower has a story. Is there a petal torn off? Does it arch oddly in comparison to those on other stems? Is there an insect pollinating it?"

Her advice to parents is to "encourage children to take pictures from a number of different angles. They'll see that the light will change, the backdrop will change, the flower itself might look completely different from a new perspective. The perfect shot may be hiding behind a different viewpoint."

Tricks of the trade

Here are some tips and tricks for parents and kids from our experts.

Before you start, read the camera manual together. "A big part of learning technique is to know your camera," explains Muscott. So spend some time playing with the camera and



Photo: Gerri Weatherbee

trying out all the settings.

Use the general setting for shots of trees, birds, and animals. Practise focusing the camera and learning the difference between fuzzy and sharp. Then, "turn on your macro setting

and see how close you can get to a flower or insect," says Muscott. "Switch to your landscape setting and take photos of larger settings, such as treelines, rivers, and meadows."

Next, play around with light. Take pictures from several angles to see how the light and shadow are affected, says Melnik. "With the sun behind you, an object will seem bright – depending on the time of day, perhaps too bright. Taking a photo from the side will sometimes offer interesting shadows and allow things like the stamens of a flower to

really pop into view. And a photo taken with the sun behind an object will offer excellent silhouettes."



Experiment with the flash to see how things look different using natural light and artificial light. "Often your camera will default to using a flash,

which can take away from the great natural light offered in many settings," says Muscott. "Other times, when your camera is defaulting to a shot without the flash, manually turning it on can really make things look interesting. Again, it is mostly trial and error."

Another great trick: keep the subject off centre to make the photo more interesting and appealing to the eye. This composition technique is referred to as "the rule of thirds." While "you don't need to follow the exact guidelines," says Muscott, "offsetting your subject is perhaps the best compositional trick kids will ever pick up. It's the first step in having them produce professional looking pictures."

Day to day learning

Encourage your budding photographer to use his/her camera every day. Even a simple walk

Ways to Exhibit Photos

Help your kids show off their photos – it not only inspires confidence in their photographic skills, but also encourages them to take even more.

With many computer printers now able to print onto photo stock, it is easy to create and hang a show for friends and family to admire. Make it an event to remember, with special drinks, tasty treats, and fancy dress. Be sure to have a slideshow rotating through on your TV or largest computer monitor for extra effect.

Or showcase your child's work on a free online site that has easy to use privacy and age-restriction settings. They also allow you to email private links, so friends and family can follow your child's progress.

www.flickr.com – you can store and display up to 200 photos and turn them into slideshows. Users can download Flickr apps for both Apple and Android products. The downside? You need a Yahoo account – which you can easily sign up for while registering.

Picasa is a free downloadable image organizer and viewer – perfect for light editing of pictures. Its integrated photo-sharing website, www.picasaweb.com, is linked to Google, meaning you are signing up for Gmail, YouTube, and more. That said, it has great privacy controls.

www.photobucket.com is the granddaddy of image hosting sites, providing unlimited storage as well as programs such as slideshow and scrapbook builders.

home from school can produce great material for a photo journal.

The skills your child acquires through nature photography will come in very handy at school – in art and computer classes and for all types of projects. And they may just lead to future careers in areas like journalism, marketing, graphic design, communications, architecture, and more.

Until that day happens, let your kids while away many a summer, fall, or winter day outdoors with a camera. It's bound to develop into a fun, educational and lifetime passion. To parents, that should sound picture perfect.

Donald Fraser is a keen photographer, food buff, and outdoors enthusiast.



Photo: Gerri Weatherbee