

Flash discussion with examples by Jim Urbach 9/7/05

Why use flash? If you're shooting landscape, and the light is coming over your shoulder so you're shooting in the line of your shadow, flash may not be needed at all. However if the foreground is in shadow, flash maybe very helpful similar in many ways to a split neutral density filter.

For about 24 years I never used flash, but now am prepared to use it about 80% of the time. When there is adequate light, I prefer to set the camera in AV mode. I set my flash to high speed sync always and for the most part set the flash compensation to $-1 \frac{2}{3}$ to provide catchlight for birds and mammals. In these situations I set the flash to ETTL rather than Manual mode.

In low light situations, however I prefer to shoot setting the camera to manual exposure mode and setting the flash to either ETTL or Manual. My Canon 20D camera syncs at 1/250 with the flash. So although I may have underexposed for the ambient light according to the LCD and histogram, I can set the flash to provide main light. This is key to understanding why flash is so important and allows one to get more keepers. If the overall image is somewhat dark then allow more light in by shooting at lower speeds which may necessitate use of a tripod..

In general, I want my image to be tack sharp and the BG be blurred. Many times this is not possible if the BG is right behind the subject and cluttered. In controlled situations, I try to place my subject way in front of the BG so I can obtain this blurred BG.

To reduce redevye, set your flash above the camera. With owls, you may have to hold the flash at arms length away from the camera via an off shoe cord.. To have your flash recycle faster always refreshen your batteries the night before you shoot and use a TurboZ. A Better Beamer with it's fresnel will project the flash almost 3 times as far or 3 times as strong. Do not use one if the subject is within 20 feet.

If the BG is bright and the subject is in the shade, I will routinely underexpose my camera by -1 to -2 stops and set the flash at $-1/3$, sometimes more than full flash. I definitely avoid setting the flash at "0" compensation.

Another technique I have recently learned includes setting both the camera and the flash manually so that you may be using the flash at only 1/16 power for instance.. The ambient light maybe obtained using an incident light meter. (Know your sunny 16 exposure settings.) With loons the distance to obtain proper focus was read off the 600 lens and then the flash was set at $\frac{1}{2}$ this distance adjusting the amount of flash power. Using this same technique I recently shot a wedding setting the speed to 1/160 to 1/250 and setting the flash power to 1/8 to 1/32 power using the histogram, LCD and trial and error. Don't be afraid to experiment and shoot with different settings. You may need to record the amount of flash used manually. My camera does not supply this information in Breezebrowser.