



Early morning, Rangipo Desert, Tongariro National Park. In this case the photographer had to work fast before the dramatic lighting conditions disappeared.

Another rule of thumb that is useful to remember concerns the focal length of lenses and whether or not they can be hand held, without camera shake, which results in blurring. The rule is this. The minimum shutter speed for a hand held photograph should match the focal length, ie, a 200mm lens requires a minimum of 1/200th of a second. The rule applies particularly to telephoto lenses.

Let's return to photographing the forest. What are we trying to achieve? Do we want forest scapes? If so we will need a wide angle lense, say 20 or 28mm, and in most cases a tripod, because with many films we will need a 1 to 5 second exposure. Try hand holding for that long! If on the other hand we want to photograph details in the forest floor, or a tree trunk, we will need a standard or macro lense, but we will still need a tripod. A tripod allows for longer exposures which in turn means that a smaller aperture of around F11 to F22 can be used. The advantage of a small aperture is a sharper photograph with greater depth, and this is usually desirable in close ups.

Wildlife – special problems

Birds and animals pose special problems for the photographer and while a standard 50mm lens (for a 35mm camera) can secure some photographs, telephoto lenses are generally necessary. Again, if we ignore the more exotic lenses, a 200mm telephoto lens is a useful tool if combined with a hide or good field technique. When photographing animals there is again no substitute for experience and knowledge of the subject. Some birds, for instance, are reasonably tolerant of humans, while others can only be approached with the use of hides. Insects, in my experience, require studio or similar settings, plus electronic flash to freeze their movements, as well as provide enough light. Seldom is natural light sufficient with these small moving subjects. A great deal of patience is required here, and very careful handling of specimens, especially butterflies or moths, that become damaged so easily.

Nature photography is a journey of discovery, with new and fascinating places or species continually refreshing one's enthusiasm. As we look for subjects to photograph, our visual senses are sharpened, and we actually begin to observe more clearly. With this heightened awareness we are better able to take advantage of those special occasions when they occur. While finishing a book on Tongariro National Park recently I was flying over the Rangipo Desert at dawn in a helicopter. Very aware that these vehicles are expensive to hire, I began working very quickly. The photograph accompanying this article captures the drama of that August morning. In fact the lighting only lasted a few minutes before the scene was transformed to dull tones, but I had the shot – forever. 🦋

That's fine, but I am not writing for those people now.

Be prepared

"Do you photograph to a shot list or do you just go out and look for subjects," is a question I am often asked. The answer is – both. When on assignments I have a list of specific subjects to work to, and obviously try my best each time. However, one doesn't wake up in the morning and say "today I am going to create a masterpiece;" it doesn't work that way. Remember what I wrote about preparation and warm up. My best photographs are usually opportunistic, but I have nearly always been through the warm up stage – I am on location; I've prepared my gear; I've been working hard for some time. When the chance comes I am prepared – well mostly. As Lois Pasteur said "Chance favours the prepared mind".

Many readers I am sure will share my fascination for our wonderful forests and many will have taken photographs with disappointing results. Photographing inside forests is often difficult because of the contrasts between the dark shadows, and the light which penetrates the canopy. In spite of the tremendous improvements, modern film still has difficulty holding detail in the shadows while exposing correctly for the canopy. As photographers, we have to choose what part of the photograph is more important, and be prepared to sacrifice the rest. One of the basic rules of photography is that it is better to underexpose for colour photographs than to overexpose, and the reverse applies to black and white. Most readers will have experienced the bleached out look of an overexposed colour slide, and realised how unsatisfactory it is.