# Digging deeper into the art of photography

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Digital cameras have been around for almost 20 years and most all of us now have one. Even our cellular phones have a small digital camera built into them. The original point and shoot cameras have developed into SLR (Single Lens Reflex) cameras which mimic the high quality 35-mm film camera used by professional photographers for decades.

Last August we talked about my new SLR camera I used on our family trip to Alaska where I took over 2,500 pictures of the gorgeous landscapes and roaming wildlife. After filtering out duplicates and low quality shots I ended up with 500 really good digital images. All of those were taken with the automatic setting engaged or one of the preset scenes for low light or landscape.

My main focus last year we just framing the shot and getting the camera setup on the tripod to eliminate all movement. The more stable I got the camera, the better focus and clarity I was able to attain with my Nikon D5000 SLR. I even used a Nikon wireless remote to fire the shutter so to not even have to touch the camera while making the shot.

Since then I have uploaded those 12 mega-pixel landscape images to ShutterFly.com and had them make 20-inch x 30-inch enlargements on high quality paper for around $20 each. Later I took them to a local framer called Uniques across from the skateboard park and had them mount those large hard copies into quality frames.

Over the past year I have been trying to improve my digital photography skills and build on my gear by adding new lenses. First I bought a Nikor 70-mm to 300-mm zoom lens to help me get those far off shots along with a wide angle 10-mm to 20-mm to get a larger view inside rooms or up close shots.

Even though I had a great camera, three quality lenses, and some proven shooting techniques that have produced some awesome digital images, I still wanted to learn more about both the camera itself and dig deeper into the art of photography.

So I decided to take a class from Scott Hill of Brenham Portrait Gallery who I think is the best photographer in town. For a couple of evenings in late July, I and about a dozen other people learned the nitty gritty of old school photography basics accompanied with the in's and out's of advanced SLR digital camera techniques.

We all brought our SLRs along with the accompanying owner manuals so we could learn more about what these modern marvels are capable of since most of us were using only a fraction of the camera's capabilities. Most of us, including me, were still using these highly advanced digital SLR's as $200 point-and-shoot cameras set on automatic.

To fully utilize our cameras, Scott Hill had to explain some basics about photography to us so we could eventually start shooting our photos in manual mode rather than through the automatic SLR settings. It took a few iterations and animated explanations, but Scott finally got it through our heads about two critical components of photography - shutter speed and aperture.

When you push the shutter button on a SLR camera, a small mirror flips quickly to direct the image you see through the eyepiece onto the digital element that captures the image. The faster the shutter speed the quicker that mirror flips and the less time light and motion has an effect on the captured image.

The aperture is the opening inside a photographic lens. This opening is formed by a diaphragm in a camera lens that regulates the amount of light passing through onto the film, or digital element, inside the camera the moment when the shutter curtain in camera opens during an exposure process.

Regulating the shutter speed and the aperture size determines almost everything about the digital picture along with another critical component called depth of field. This depth of field determines which objects are in focus as distance is increased between the objects you are photographing.

Basically the smaller the opening in the aperture and the slower your shutter speed is, the more objects at different distances will be in focus. The aperture in controlled by the F-Stop settings. The larger the F-Stop the smaller the size of the aperture. Learning how all these controls and settings work together within your specific make and model of SLR camera can be a challenge.

Scott gave us another helpful tidbit of information by telling us about EliteVideo.com which produces comprehensive instructional DVDs on most SLR digital cameras. I bought one for $60 about my Nikon D5000 and watched the full two hours detailing every single option and setting on that camera.

The information I learned from that awesome DVD video about my Nikon, coupled with the two nights of great instruction from professional photographer Scott Hill, had me ready to shoot digital photos in manual mode on my SLR. Since then I have shot close ups of garden spiders along with far shots of sunsets and various depth of field shots while manipulating the shutter speed and aperture by hand.

Utilizing these manual settings has enabled me to get some really cool shots which make them look like artwork rather than duplications of reality. The more I experiment with the manual settings of my Nikon SLR, the more I feel I am in control of the photographic effort.

Finally Scott solved a problem I had with the appearance of my enlarged photos that I had framed with expensive non-reflective glass. Regular glass gave off too many reflections but this non-reflective glass dulled the photo. His solution: frame your photos without glass. So I took my large framed photos back to Uniques and had them remove the glass and wow, what a beautiful difference!

Bottom line: If you want to really get into digital photography, take one of Scott Hill's courses, buy the DVD about your SLR from EliteVideo.com, and frame your photos without glass. Happy shooting!

Next week's column: Online ID theft services

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