

The Art of Seeing

Robert Berdan, the accomplished Calgary photographer, shares his secrets to capturing the perfect image



Taking a photograph today is easier than ever because digital cameras focus automatically and they do a pretty good job of determining the correct exposure. In fact, photography is so easy now that anyone can take a good picture and view it in seconds.

Some folks may feel because digital photography is so easy that it can't possibly be a form of art. I would argue anyone can draw or paint and anyone can blow a few notes out of a musical instrument – but that doesn't make them artists. ▶▶

Rays of light stream through aspens in the early morning.



Getting good at almost anything takes time and practice, and having an interest and aptitude definitely helps.

While it's possible to take a picture in a fraction of a second, serious photographers know that taking effective pictures can take a lot of time and a bit of luck – especially if you are photographing wildlife.

Taking good pictures starts with seeing. Painters may study a scene for hours, or use photos as a reference for creating their artwork. There is so much detail in nature that most of us see only a tiny fraction of what is before us.



From top: Sunrise over Upper Kananaskis Lake; The Prickly Rose is the floral emblem of Alberta and is common throughout Bragg Creek and Kananaskis.

Photography is unique in that it captures details that you may not even have noticed until you study the photo afterwards. Carrying a camera with you on your outdoor adventure trips can enhance your seeing, whereby the camera can act like a magnifying lens for your mind. Taking your camera with you will encourage you to look more closely. You will also find that if you go out with some ideas of what you want to photograph, you are more likely to find those things. If your interest is in wildflowers, read up on them to find out when they bloom and where they grow – this will make you more successful.

Whether it's birds or bears you want to photograph, learn as much as you can about your subjects, as it will increase your chances of finding them.

Good seeing starts by simply slowing down your body and mind.

Stop talking and start listening and observing – quiet your mind and just look. The more relaxed you are, the more sensitive you will become to what is in front of you. Think of your eyes as a sponge and soak up your surroundings. Look at the shapes, lines, forms and colours in the landscape and, most of all, look at the light and note what direction it is coming from. Is the light soft and diffuse like it is on an overcast day or is it strongly directional, as is often the case in the early morning or late afternoon? Does the light have any colour – is it blue and cold or yellow and warm?

Because light varies in quality, colour and direction, becoming sensitive to the properties of light will enable you to use it to take more effective photos. ▶▶



From top: Grizzly bears are frequently seen along the highway early in the morning; immature Great Horned Owls huddle together waiting to be fed; alpenglow on Mt. James Watson and Mt. Inflexible as seen from Wedge Pond in Kananaskis.

Bad weather often adds a unique character to the subject and can convey mood.



Effective photographs can be taken under a variety of lighting conditions if you have the right equipment and know-how.

In low light, or even at night, you can continue to take pictures if you own and use a tripod. Exposures may last several seconds or even minutes, but the tripod will ensure that your pictures are sharp. Early morning is my favorite time to shoot because the light is directional, casting long shadows, and on some mornings the sky can be filled with brilliant colours.

It is also quiet, and with fewer people around there are no distractions. When the sun is high in the sky and the sky is clear, usually between about 10 am and 4 pm, the harsh light can cast strong shadows. This type of lighting is poor for portraits, unless you use a fill-flash or place your subjects in the shade. Sunny days with bright blue skies do make for postcard quality photos, but the images can often lack feeling.

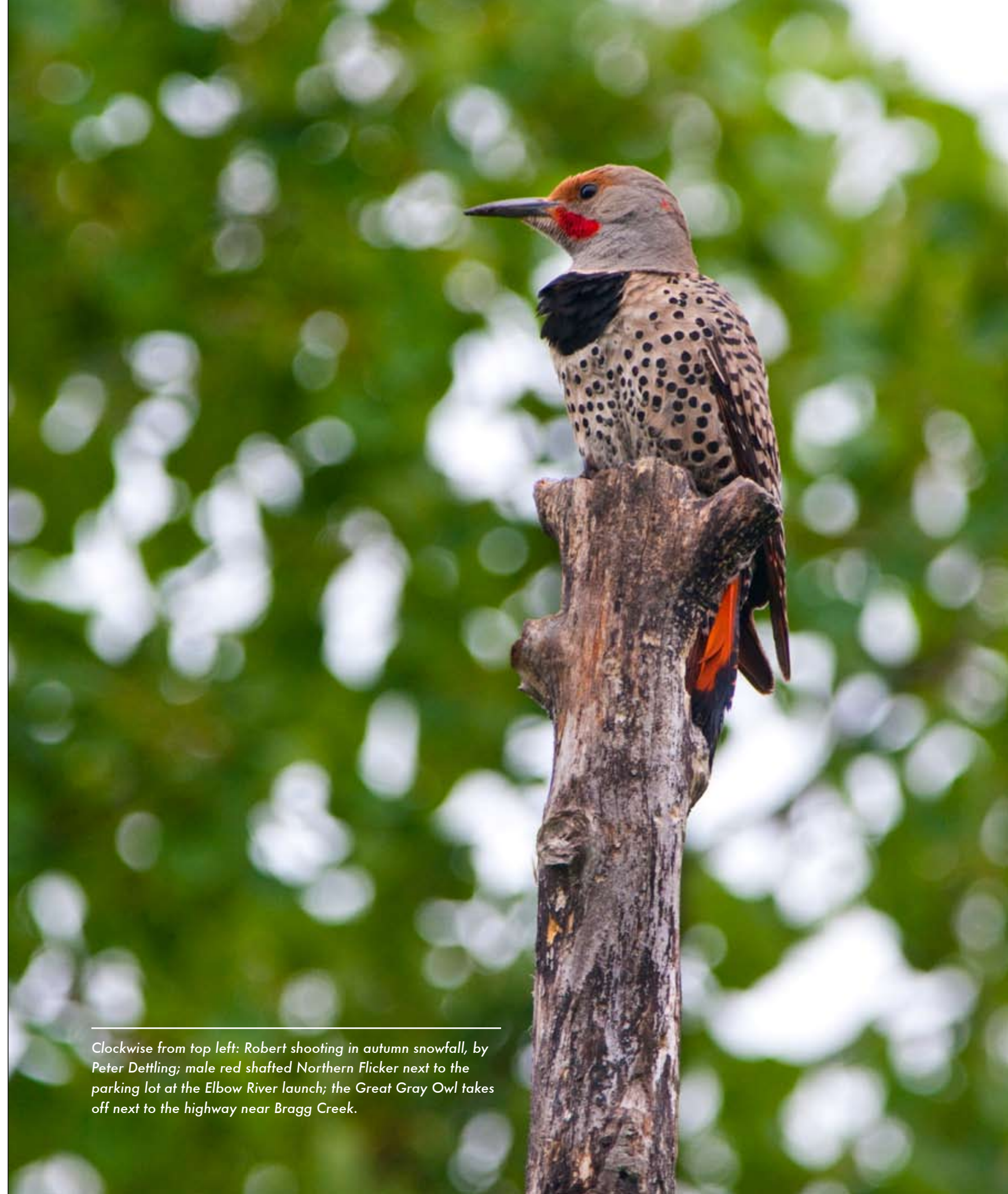
I prefer shooting in bad weather – like rain, snow and even storms – because it often adds a unique character to the subject and can convey mood.

The story behind the shot of the Great Grey Owl below is the perfect example for why I always carry my camera with me, wherever I go and whatever the weather.

Earlier this year, I was driving along Highway 22 just outside Bragg Creek when it started to snow heavily. I had to slow down so I could see the road when my buddy (Hälle Flygare) saw a Great Gray Owl sitting on a fence post beside the road. Luckily I was driving slowly and was able to pull over quickly. We jumped out of the car with our cameras blazing.

I quickly checked my camera playback viewer and noticed that none of my pictures were in focus because the snowfall was so thick that my camera could not lock focus on the bird. I switched to manual focus and popped off a few more photos before the owl flew off, and was able to capture a couple of in-focus shots.

The falling snow creates tiny spots of light, making it reminiscent of works by impressionists such as Monet, Degas and Renoir. ▶▶



Clockwise from top left: Robert shooting in autumn snowfall, by Peter Dettling; male red shafted Northern Flicker next to the parking lot at the Elbow River launch; the Great Gray Owl takes off next to the highway near Bragg Creek.



Modern digital cameras can make taking pictures a snap.

They auto-expose, auto-focus, and some are even able to record movies and voice messages. The downside of these fancy cameras is that there are more controls and buttons than ever before, so that even pros carry their manuals with them to look up how to use some of the complex features. The good news is there are more cameras to choose from than ever before. If you want something compact and lightweight to shoot totally on automatic, you can have it.

If you become more interested in photography, you may want to have more control over the exposure and depth-of-field in your pictures. For this you need a single-lens reflex camera with interchangeable lenses, and you will also have to read those dreaded manuals. Also consider taking a workshop or joining a photo club: they can be a fun way of learning more about your camera and photography. Either way, always carry your camera with you on your trips and outdoor excursions and you will find yourself bringing back some real pictorial trophies that you can share with your friends and family.

This page from top: Robert lies low to get a shot of a Bighorn sheep with the mountains in the background, by Brett Auger; Robert with the tools of his trade. Opposite page: a selection of Robert's prints.

About Robert Berdan

Robert Berdan is a professional nature photographer based in Calgary, AB. His work has been published in numerous magazines, including *Photo Life*, *Outdoor Nature Photographer* and *Canadian Geographic*.

He started taking pictures when he was 15 years old, but commenced his career path in medical research, becoming an Alberta Heritage Scholar and currently is serving as an adjunct assistant professor at the University of Calgary.

In 1996 Robert started his own multimedia business called Science & Art, where he develops websites, offers photography and video services, provides computer training, and runs photography workshops.

You can see a selection of Robert's recent photos at the new Bow Habitat Museum in Inglewood, which opened in September of 2009. You can also contact Robert directly at

(403) 247 2457 or visit www.canadiannaturephotographer.com, where you can see his full portfolio of shots, as well as a selection of royalty-free CDs, prints and details on his upcoming photography workshops. ■



Exceptional Design
Premium Craftsmanship

Chinnick & Co.

With over two decades of combined industry experience, our team specializes in commercial and residential projects, creating cabinetry and custom millwork to your complete satisfaction and our exacting standards.

CABINETRY MILLWORK HOME RENOVATIONS INTERIOR DECORATING

www.chinnick.ca (403) 931 2507