



Photo Contest Tips for the Non-Hunter

Here are a variety of tips for finding success in the California Waterfowl *Take Your Best Shot!* photo contest, from basic photography tips to pointers for photographers of all experience levels about what to expect in the field.

GETTING READY FOR THE HUNT

If you've never been hunting before, be sure to ask the hunter you're accompanying what to expect. If you think you may have a difficult time watching the hunter shoot birds, ask him or her to consider not using a gun that day.

You also need to know what gear you'll need and how you can acquire or borrow it, what or how much food or drink to bring, and what the restroom situation will be. Knowing all of these things ahead of time will make for a more successful outing.

TAKING CARE OF YOUR CAMERA

Watch the water! Waterfowling involves varying degrees of exposure to water. If your partner is hunting from a boat, your exposure will be limited. If your partner is hunting in a marsh where he or she must walk through water to the blind, this is where you carry the most risk. Walking through the water in waders takes practice and it's not uncommon to fall when you learn.

Ask the hunter you're accompanying *ahead of time* about the best way to protect your camera on the way to the blind, and about what conditions you'll have to deal with. Remember, your hunter must protect his or her expensive shotgun, so he or she will have tips about how you can do the same with your camera, including tips on how to fall without getting everything wet. Unlike shotguns, though, many cameras will fit in zipper lock bags – it might be a good idea to take one for your camera.

Take good care of small parts. Waterfowl blinds, especially late in the season, can be dark and muddy places. When handling small pieces of photo equipment, such as batteries or memory cards, take care not to drop them because you may lose them, or if you do find them, they may be too dirty to use.

CONSIDERATION FOR YOUR PARTNER

Is your camera noisy? You need to know ahead of time if your camera makes noise when taking photos, and discuss that with the hunter you accompany. If your hunter is about to take a shot and you shoot a picture first, the noise from your shutter may alert the bird and the hunter will lose his or her shot. This may be inevitable, but discuss it ahead of time.

Think about the flash too. If you're taking pictures before dawn, that may activate the automatic flash on a point-and-shoot camera, or you may need the flash on your digital SLR. Ask the hunter before taking a flash photo that would give away your position to birds in the area.

TAKING GOOD PHOTOS

Time of day: The best times for shooting photos are the same as the best time for hunting – early morning and just before sunset. The low angle of the sun provides dramatic light and shadow, as well as a golden glow. Midday is the most challenging time – the glare and the shadows cast by a sun that's nearly straight overhead don't make for attractive photos

Watch the sun: Take care to note where the sun is in reference to your subject(s). If the sun is behind the subject, his or her (or its) details will be lost in shadow, and the sky will be a glare of light. Try to position yourself so the sun is somewhere behind you.

Sun v. shade: You can take beautiful photos in full shade or in full sunlight, but be careful when shooting subjects that are in partial shade and partial sun unless you are using “fill flash” – a feature available on digital SLR cameras. Without fill flash, the camera will have a hard time determining the proper setting in mixed light, and parts of the photo will come out either too bright or too dark.

Get close: Unless you have a big lens, shooting wildlife that isn't close to you can be difficult – animals will show up as tiny points on a big photo. If you don't have such a lens, you need to be as close as possible to your subject.

Look for emotion. It's easy to get caught up trying to take a picture of a bird in flight, but remember that some of the best photos show human emotion – in the case of hunters, elation, disappointment or awe. Photos of facial expressions that show these emotions are usually more memorable.

Take lots of photos. Professional photographers know that it can take 100 or more photos to get the perfect shot. Make sure you take extra film or memory cards so you can take as many photos as possible. And make sure those batteries are either fresh, or freshly charged.