

KOHOUT'S KLASS

KEY PHOTOGRAPHIC COMPOSTION TIPS

by Lee Agnew

While preparing a "lesson" on photographic composition, I was reminded of an instructor I had for a series of classes on "Close-Up Photography". The instructor and his wife had come to the United States from Bohemia and he arrived here with an inexpensive rangefinder camera manufactured by an obscure company in Europe. The instructor, John Kohout, frequently reminded us that cameras don't make good pictures, photographers do.

He would line the class room with photographs he had taken all over the world and then explain that they were all taken with his funny little camera. As the lessons progressed he would use the pictures as examples and that's when we learned that all of them were winners of prestigious awards from contests in Europe and the United States. John and his wife Kitty, were both FPSA (Fellows in the Photographic Society of America) and worked as teachers and lecturers for the Eastman Kodak Company. Kitty's pictures are in every serious book on nature that exists, including the Encyclopedia Britannica. Just for fun type "Kitty Kohout" in your Google search box and see the list of publications in which she is published.

It was often difficult to understand John. His accent wasn't the problem; it was the way he used words. In one class he was describing how to make good use of overcast days to take nature pictures. He would say, "It is best to take good nature photographs when the sun is out, because then there are no harsh shadows." If you think about it for a minute it sounds like he contradicted himself, but we soon learned that what he meant by "when the sun was out" was the same as when you turn off a light bulb.

Digital cameras can focus much, much closer to a subject than the old film cameras could. Even with a macro lens you couldn't get as close as a digital camera will allow, so we had to resort to extension tubes, diopter lens attachments, and bellows (sometimes all of them at once) in order to get a frame filling image of a "Spring Pink" wildflower like the ones in the lower right picture below. The "Fringed Gentian" in the middle of the top row is not much bigger than the cap from a fountain pen.

Below are a few of the pictures Joni and I took using the lessons from Mr. Kohout.



It was a good class. We learned to take close-ups in the field with extension bellows and tubes and also with 2 flash guns preset to provide a "key" light and a "fill" light. He taught us to compensate for the loss of light when using a bellows extension, so we could get perfect exposures every time. It was from John Kohout that we learned how to get perfect sunset shots without burning out your camera's sensors. Just aim the camera toward the sky **NEXT** to the sun (at least one viewfinder screen away from the sun) and get your exposure reading. Lock the exposure in and compose the picture. The exposure will give you that beautiful orange color and deep brown shadows every time. Don't forget to shut off your meter (for older cameras) before you aim the camera at the sun to take the picture.



The rules for "Nature Photography" are different than the rules for "Pictorial Photography, so don't be surprised by what you see in a "Nature" competition. To begin with, no Nature picture is allowed to show "The Hand of Man." In other words, there can be no fences, concrete, brick or any other material or clue that man was ever at the site. Then there are the types of things that are considered Nature. Only items that exist in the natural world without having been influenced by man are allowed. No roses or pansies. No cows or Labrador Retrievers, or zoo animals that have tags on their ears. Flowers that are created by botanists are called "Cultivars" and the animals are, of course, "domesticated," not natural.

The last thing we learned from John and Kitty Kohout was that the only evidence that you took a picture of an item in nature should be the picture. Leave no cigarette butts or footprints behind. Or as Kitty would say, "Don't step on the habitat."