Surf Photography v2.0

There is something magical, even religious, about surfing - many people become addicted to a surfing lifestyle, and find a oneness with nature in a way that the rest of us can barely understand. I hope that this collection of my best surf photos from 2006 and 2007 will let you absorb some of that mystique. All of these photos were taken in the Morro Bay, CA area along the Central Coast of California. Most are shot at Morro Rock, but a few were taken from the Cayucos Pier. You can see all of my photos on Flickr - go to flickr. bairdphotos.com and surf.bairdphotos.com. I always enjoy hearing from my readers. Michael "Mike" L. Baird mike@mikebaird.com (805) 772-2044 bairdphotos.com mikebaird.com surfmorrobay.com
Surf Photography 101 by Mike Baird

I’m often asked how I get such good sharp surf shots. As explained below, my formula is pretty basic, but what makes a good photo for me may not be what makes a good photo for you... that’s the beauty of photography - it’s an “art” so almost anything goes. It is also a science in that there are many technical aspects to capturing a quality image. When most people ask me how I got a certain shot, they are usually thinking f-stops and shutter speeds, ISOs and focal length, frame rates and RAW versus JPG.

First and foremost, whenever possible, I try to convey in my surfing photos what the surfer is feeling. Is she stoked or delighted? Competitive or relaxed? All alone and enjoying the solitude, or in a crowded line up trying not to be snaked? Very few of my shots embody, for example, extreme blurring to capture “mood” or “speed” - as I largely prefer tack-sharp “frozen” close-up scenes.

To get the kind of shots seen in this particular book, you have to get close. Since for practical reasons most of my shots are taken from dry land, that generally means the use of a long focal-length lens. My most important tool is the image stabilized Canon EF 600mm f/4L USM Super Telephoto Lens for Canon SLR Cameras. When the surfers are close to the Morro Bay, CA parking lot, for example, that is plenty of glass. If the action is a bit further out, I add a Canon EF 1.4X II or EF 2X II Extender Telephoto Accessory. This facilitates a 840mm to 1200mm reach. Surfing is often an extreme action sport, so taking rapid bursts of images is usually highly desirable. Any of the recent Canon SLR “prosumer” cameras (like the 20D, 30D, 40D) work well. For best results, a Canon pro body (like the Canon EOS 1D Mark III 10.1MP Digital SLR Camera) is required. At 10 frames per second, you don’t miss
much. Note this paragraph was written in late 2007, and the reader should be aware that these model references will no doubt soon be obsolete.

A large percentage of my shots are taken using shutter priority of 1/1250 or 1/1600 second. Any slower than that and I find that I introduce motion blur between my inability to stabilize the camera system and the motion of the subject. Depending of course on lighting conditions, I try to use an ISO speed of 400 to 640. I take whatever resultant aperture I can get - and the lens frequently needs to operate wide open at f/4.0 - but I’ll take f/11 if I can get it. The image stabilizer feature of the lens should be engaged, in the optional panning mode, with autofocus set, for the longer distances involved. I usually use a single/few center-point focus pattern, trying to track the subject’s eye in the center of the frame, using the AI tracking mode. A histogram check will often suggest underexposing 1/3rd of a stop or so. I will mildly crop the photo in most cases to give the impression of a leading or trailing space as desired. In this sense centering “composition” is less important than in other kinds of photography involving visual balance by thirds, and flow, etc. I use a Canon 52mm Circular Polarizer Drop-in Filter infrequently, but often with a dramatic effect at the expense of some light gathering ability. I generally use 8GB compact flash cards with the highest speeds available (from 20-40 MBytes per second write speeds) so I can capture 30 to 50 images in a few seconds.

The world’s best camera and most expensive lens is pretty worthless unless it is properly mounted on a strong tripod and head. For the setup described above, I recommend the Gitzo GT5540LS Series 5 Systematic 6X Carbon Fiber 4 Section G-Lock Tripod, with a leveling base (you want to be able to pan and maintain the correct horizon at all times), and a WH-200 Wimberley Head Version II - its gimbal-type design allows you to rotate your lens around its center of gravity and thus easily manipulate very large lenses.

Of course, unless there is good wave action and surfing going on, all the technical tips in the world won’t produce a money shot. I’m often lazy, and take most of my shots mid-day, which, while providing a lot of light, does not provide the most beautiful illumination of the day. Being on the West Coast, morning sun is behind me, and would seemingly produce the best images, but morning fog is also usual on the Central California Coast. Evening sun often produces stunning imagery, but it is a challenge not to get back-lighting situations and glare.

If you don’t have your camera with you the surf will develop for sure - so every time you head for the beach make sure you take your camera gear, and be patient, because some of the best surfers are yet to arrive. Get closer, and try different angles. It is fun to get at the water’s edge and shoot from just a few inches off the sand. You may get dirty, but the results are usually surprisingly dramatic.
Capture action and movement by using your burst mode to get a sequence of images to pick from. The days of high film costs are over, and it costs nothing but time to take more pictures. In a typical day of shooting I will take 1000-2000 images, delete two-thirds of them immediately in the field, and delete all but a few keepers at day’s end.

I shoot only in RAW mode at the highest resolution possible. I never shoot JPGs if I’m after a serious shot. It is too easy to blow out the whites or get the wrong color balance in highly contrasting seas. Don’t let your camera make processing decisions for you - let Photoshop’s (Elements is fine, CS3 or the latest version is better) RAW converter guide you through fine tuning exposure, recovery, contrast, brightness, vibrancy, saturation, temperature, sharpness, horizon level correction, cropping, etc. Post-processing your images properly is every bit as important and as technical and skill-based as is your original image capturing task. Image manipulation is another story. Removing a few blown out spots is often required, but generally, I don’t process my images beyond the initial simple RAW conversion process embodied in Photoshop. Don’t let old-school film purists convince you that photography is all the taking of the image... today processing and converting the digital image for optimal presentation is paramount, just as darkroom skills were to the previous generation. Basic Photoshop skills can make your images legitimately stand out from the crowd.

Some other tips: Be aware of the background - does it enhance or detract from your subject? Changing your position slightly can dramatically change the image, even of surfers in the water. Generally, get the sun behind you - maximize the light on the “face” of your subject.

If using a consumer camera, do use the optical zoom capabilities of your camera, but forget the “digital” zoom which simply replicates pixels. If you can get close enough, use “vertical” shots for appropriate subjects. You can also achieve this effect by cropping in many cases.

Use the fastest shutter speed practicable. One rule-of-thumb is that shutter speed should be equal to or faster than the ratio one over the focal length of your lens - i.e., if you are using a 600 mm lens, the slowest shutter speed should be 1/600th of a second. Of course you can overdo it - shutter speed comes at the expense of depth-of-field (related to your aperture setting) and ISO “film” speed (which will effect graininess). Try to keep the aperture setting at the numerical value of f/11 to f/16 or even higher (knowing that the available light may force the aperture to be wide open at say only f/4), and ISO speeds at the numerical value of 400 or lower. Some of the newer Canon camera bodies are achieving great results at ISO speeds of 800 to 1600 or 2000 and even higher, opening up entirely new possibilities for action-sports photography.
Another rule-of-thumb is that shutter speed should be about one over your ISO, so if your ISO is set to 800, your shutter speed would be 1/800th of a second. Obtaining proper depth-of-field, for many scenes, will make the difference between a good shot and a snapshot. The higher you set the f-stop numerical value, the smaller will be your lens aperture opening, and the greater will be the depth of field. Sometimes you want to blur out the background to focus solely on the face of the subject - at other times you want to capture the detail and ferocity of the waves far away.

If you find yourself enjoying surf photography, consider investing in higher quality camera and optics, and Adobe Photoshop software when you can. Finally, share your photos with others - a photo taken but not shared might just as well never have been taken at all. See almost all of my photos online and at full-resolution at Flickr, via flickr. bairdphotos.com. Mike Baird mike@mikebaird.com, Morro Bay, CA, USA