

Point and Shoot Nature Photography with the Sony RX10 V: In the Field

Tips and tricks

This is the part where I show you how to actually use the modifications we have created in various situations and with various subjects. You can literally just point and shoot and come back with more keepers than you would have otherwise, but you can increase your keeper rate even more, and eliminate some level of frustration with missed shots by taking advantage of some quick and easy adjustments. Some on-the-fly, in-the-moment adjustments.

First steps:

Before we get to the Sony RX10 V tips, let me give you three which will make a big difference in your photography, no matter what camera you use.

1. Adjust the diopter on the eyepiece of the camera. There is a little wheel next to the eye-level-viewfinder (Electronic View Finder: EVF) that focuses the viewfinder—not the view, but the lines and numbers and other information that is displayed. You will be using the EVF for the majority of images. It is simply more stable than trying to look at the LCD on the back with the camera held way from your face, and with practice the camera becomes an extension of your eyes and hands so that when you point, your subject is right there, and you are ready to shoot. If the EVF is not focused, however, the view through it will always be fuzzy even when the camera is correctly focused. Bring the camera up to your eye and twist the little wheel until the lines and numbers and letters are as sharp as you can make them. The wheel is finicky. Persist until you find the right focus point for your



eye. If you wear glasses, do this with your glasses on. You should only have to do this once, though on occasion you will probably knock it off its setting when putting the camera into its bag or getting it out, and have to redo it. One of the improvements of the V over the IV is its larger, brighter, higher-resolution EVF. Use it. Not some of the time, but almost all of the time. (Low-angle landscapes and macro are two exceptions.)



2. Practice holding the camera correctly. The camera should be supported by the bones of your body, not your muscles. If you are right-handed and right-eyed, turn your left shoulder toward your subject. Cradle the camera loosely in your left hand and keep your left elbow in as close to your body as possible. Do not brace it. Keep the arm relaxed but let the body support the arm so the forearm is more or less vertical under the camera. Raise your right hand and loosely take hold of the camera grip with your finger on the shutter button. The right hand is your guide and control hand. It should be as relaxed as possible. The RX10 V has improved image stabilization, which should make shooting even at the long end of the zoom (600mm) manageable, even in low light, but only if you are using the bones of your body as a tripod. Bones, not muscle. Train yourself. (If you are left-handed and left-eyed, you will face an extra challenge. Either you have to adapt your stance or you have to learn to view with your right eye and operate the shutter button with your right hand. Cameras are, unfortunately, all built for right-handed folks.)
3. Always half-press the shutter button and let the camera tell you when it is ready to take the photo. Give the focus time to settle on your subject. If the camera does not find your subject, let off on the shutter button and try again. And again, as many

times as needed until the focus indicator is where you want it on your subject. Body certainly, eye if possible. Or in a landscape, the area you want in critical focus. You may need to adjust the focus area to get consistent results. See the Focus Modifications section. You may need to give the camera a hint as to how far away your subject is—by moving your focus point to some high-contrast object about the same distance as your subject, focusing there, letting off on the shutter to release focus, and then returning to your subject. The point is that until the focus indicator is where you want it, taking the photo will only result in an out-of-focus image. In fact, if you just jam down the shutter button, chances are very good that the camera will not have finished either finding focus or setting exposure, and your photo will not only be fuzzy, it will be over or under-exposed. Train yourself. Half-press the shutter button. Check that everything looks right, both focus and exposure, and then take the photo. You will come back with way more satisfying photos. (The high-resolution EVF on the V will show you a good approximation of how the camera is going to expose the image. Pay attention.)

If I can tell you one thing that will improve your photography overall, it would be: PAY ATTENTION! In order to see the images that need taking, of course, you have to be paying attention. The pros who shoot in Manual and RAW have to divide their attention somewhat equally between what nature is doing and what the camera is doing, or what they want the camera to do. Sometimes it seems they, especially the teachers, spend more attention on the camera than they do on nature. Our goal here is to enable you to spend your attention on what nature is doing, but that does not mean, if you would avoid frustration and get better results in difficult situations and with difficult subjects, that you do not have to pay at least a bit of attention to what the camera is doing, or what you are asking it to do.

The RX10 V and our custom Shooting Modes

Both the LCD and the EVF on the RX10 V are very high quality. And Sony's Live View does an excellent job of displaying what your image is going to look like after you press

the shutter. The camera tells you where it is focused. The display shows you what the exposure will look like. Pay attention. If the image in the EVF or on the LCD does not look the way you want it to, then do not press the shutter. Sometimes it is as good as it is going to get—but sometimes there is a quick and easy adjustment that you can make to improve the image before you take it. I am not talking about a deep dive into the menus. I am talking about the press of a button or the twist of a dial. Simple. Quick. And sometimes effective.



The one thing you will change most is your shooting mode. You will be switching between more or less stationary Birds and Wildlife mode as stored in MR3, and Action and Flight as stored in MR4 (and of course,

Landscape and Macro when you have those sets of modifications stored in MR1 and MR2). This is the reason we programmed the Top Button 1 to change rapidly between them. Set the main control dial to the Star position. Press the top button as needed to select Birds and Wildlife. Leave the camera set to this mode most of the time as it is where you will take most photos, and birds and wildlife often do not wait for you to change modes. The camera will remember where it was even when you turn it off, so when you turn it back on it will still be in Birds and Wildlife mode. If, while observing your subject, you have a flyby, or action suddenly brakes out, a single press of the top button will put you into Action and Flight mode. A second press will bring you back to Birds and Wildlife. I always try to remember to put the camera back in Birds and Wildlife before I turn it off, otherwise it will still be in Flight and Action when I turn it back on. ;)

Exposure



Then let's talk about Exposure. The major limitation of this camera is the way it handles highlights, especially highlights on your subject. You need to be aware of the point when the reds lose definition, the greens block up, and especially when the whites go pure white without any detail. When they do, often all you need to do is decrease the exposure slightly. There is a dial for that.

As I have it set, Dial number 1 on the top of the camera, the one without the locking button. Twisting this dial pulls up a scale in the EVF or on the LCD that allows you to decrease or increase the exposure in thirds of a stop increments. Negative numbers make the scene darker. Positive numbers make the scene lighter. To tame the highlights when they offend, you would dial in a bit more negative Exposure Compensation. You can see the effect as you move the dial. Be careful, if you darken the scene too much, you will lose all detail in the shadows, though shadows are easier to fix in post-processing than highlights. Err on the side of protecting the highlight detail. Again, we are not talking about every scene or subject here. You have already dealt with highlights in Creative Looks and with shadow detail using DRO. Only adjust for bright colors in bright light. If you find yourself fiddling with EV on every exposure, then you are not doing something right :)



At the other end of Exposure Compensation, sometimes your subject will be semi- or completely silhouetted against a bright background. You will see little or no detail in your subject, just a shadow. In this case, you need to lighten the overall exposure by

dialing in some positive Exposure Compensation. Same dial, just turn it the opposite direction, to the positive side. There are limits to what you can do here. Increasing the exposure enough to see detail in the subject often washes out the whole background and produces an unnatural “fog” effect over your subject from the light leaking around the edges. Let your eye make the decision. Adjust the EV to the positive side just enough to gain some detail without fogging the whole image out. Accept the fact that you are probably not going to be satisfied with the results, but they might be better than nothing.

When shooting white birds in the sun, or red Cardinals or Macaws for that matter, changing your metering pattern can help. We have programmed the Movie button to switch to highlight metering for just such occasions.

The other dial on the top of the camera, when using any variation of Program mode, is set to adjust the balance between shutter speed and aperture, while maintaining the correct metered exposure. This is called Program Shift, but for some reason, Sony calls this the shutter dial. You might use this, for instance, if you wanted greater depth of field for a shot at close distance. Rotating the dial brings up the two numbers, shutter speed and aperture. Rotate it further, and you will see the numbers change, at the same time. As shutter speed goes up, aperture numbers become smaller as the aperture opens wider. And vice versa. If your goal is to increase depth of field for a close-up, you want the aperture numbers to become larger—from f4 to f8, for instance. There is a limited amount this dial will do, as it is designed to maintain correct exposure, but it can be useful in specific situations.

Pay attention.

Focus

Then too, while the subject detection, eye tracking AI-driven auto focus on the Sony RX10 V is nothing short of amazing, it is not foolproof. The XL-Spot focus area works

most of the time with most subjects, but you will find yourself in situations where the clutter in the view, or especially the size of the subject in the view, gives the focus system problems. We have programmed the push in on the joystick to cycle between your primary Focus Areas. Rocking the joystick moves the target area around on the screen if you need it other than in the center, perhaps for composition reasons. As your subject and the situation become more challenging, the general rule is to decrease the size of the focus area, down as far as the expandable spot for subjects that are only partially in sight, or very small in the view. Fortunately the camera will recognize subjects that are “near” your chosen area as well as within your chosen area, so you don’t have to worry about making the Focus Area too small.

Remember we also programmed the AF On button to switch to the smaller focus area. Sometimes just hitting AF-On a few times will break the focus lock and find you subject.

Then too, never give up focus on the first try. If the camera does not focus where you want it to the first time, let off on the shutter button or the AF On button (back button focus) and try again, and again. Sometimes it will take 3 to 5 tries before Subject Recognition kicks in. Be patient. Be persistent.



There will be, on rare occasions, situations and subjects that just completely defeat the focus system, good as it is. Generally, this happens when the focus system gets stuck on distant objects when you want it to focus on something closer—especially within a yard or two. The system is just too far out of focus for it to recognize the subject at all. In the Sony Help Guide it says that when this happens the focus system is supposed to revert to normal, non-subject recognition focus, but it certainly appears to me that it sometimes fails to do so. On other Sony cameras, there is a feature called Full-time DMF (full-time direct manual focus) that allows you to override the auto-focus with the manual focus ring at any time, no matter how you have the focus set up. Then, when the camera refuses to

release focus on the far distance and come in to your close subject, you just twiddle the focus control and bring it close to focus manually, and then let subject recognition take over. They did not include full-time DMF on the RX10 V. (Why, oh Sony, why!?). You can select DMF or Continuous Focus, but you cannot select them at the same time.

This is way we programed Top Custom Button 2 to Recall Custom Hold 2, and programed in the switch to DMF. Now when the camera refuses to focus, just hold the button down to engage DMF and focus with the focus ring on the lens until your subject comes into view. It does not have to perfectly in focus. If it is close enough so you can see what the subject is, the camera will recognize it and lock on.

You may also find that DMF is useful in very low light, or when the bird or critter is almost completely obscured by foreground brush, trees, or foliage. If you engage DMF and get just close enough to focus with the focus ring, you will actually be able to see the Recognition kick in.

There is another way around this frustration. Often just tipping the camera down toward your feet and half pressing the shutter button so it focuses close, is enough so that when you go back to your subject it will immediately recognize it as the bug or bird or beaver. Or point the camera at something closer than your subject that has high contrast—a branch, the edge of a leaf, even the bird or critter's legs and fee—and half press to force focus. When you return to your subject and half press again the subject recognition should kick in. The same thing works when shooting birds in flight. The camera can get locked on the sky and not want to move in to find your bird. Pointing the camera at the horizon or, better yet, a bush or tree or sign post 30 to 50 feet away, and half pressing the shutter to force focus will reset the focus system to a closer distance, and when you swing back to your birds in flight the camera will recognize them and lock on and track the eye. This even works for dragonflies and butterflies, but generally your pre-focus should be on something even closer.

Low Light Shooting



There is no doubt about it, digital cameras, like the RX10 V, work best in good light. Low light makes everything more difficult. Focus and Subject Recognition and Tracking struggle. Because low light requires higher ISOs (more gain on the sensor), Image Quality suffers—you

lose dynamic range, highlights clip, colors become muddy or garish, and the whole image looks more or less blotchy and shows a lot of what we call noise—squiggles and swirls and lumps which are not part of the real world. Digital artifacts.

The RX10 V has the latest noise reduction and management software, inherited from the latest alpha series cameras—but what it does not have is the latest sensor technology. The Type 1 Stacked Sensor with Phase Detection Auto Focus was way ahead of its time when the IV was released 9 years ago, but today it is more than a little dated. That means that there are limitations to what you can expect in low light shooting. Modern sensors with the tech in the RX10 V handle ISOs well above the 12800 limit on the RX10 V and handle them well. The RX10 V barely handles ISO 12,800. In fact, I would not use 12,800 at all. That is why I set the upper limit to ISO 8000. The IV had a built-in feature to handle low light, called Multi-frame Noise Reduction that worked very well. For some reason Sony (Why, oh Sony, why?) did not include it in the V, perhaps thinking that the advanced AI exposure and processing tech would compensate. It does not, or at least not well enough.



And they eliminated the built-in flash. What were they thinking!

For really low light work, I recommend a small TTL

speedlight (shoe-mounted automatic exposure flash)—or, for situations where flash is not permitted—or advised—as in photographing nocturnal wildlife at close distances—a shoe-mounted photoflashlight or small video light. There are several models available that will add just enough light to make low light work possible, without unduly disturbing the wildlife.

When using supplemental light, managing highlights will become even more challenging. Get a light that you can adjust to a variety of output levels, and use as much exposure compensation as needed to keep highlights under control. Trust your eye, not your brain. Less extra light is always better than too much.

Finally, remember getting a poor image in low light is better than getting no image at all. With sophisticated noise reduction software now available, you can often pull out a usable, and sometimes satisfying, image from a very dirty file.

And do not think that shooting in RAW is going to give you better low-light performance. The limitations are in the camera sensor, not in the software.

Don't get me wrong. The RX10 V will do well in low light. Do not despair. Images will be quite satisfying right up to ISO 8000, and because of the fast f/4 lens, you will rarely need higher ISOs than that. But do not expect miracles either. Low light will be an issue with any camera.

Macro

Don't forget the third close up sweet spot at 60mm equivalent. You get the same image scale as at 24mm from millimeters and 600mm at almost a meter, but from 6.5-7.5 centimeters. That is a much more comfortable working distance for forest floor macros, like the mushrooms above.

Carrying your camera

Over the years, I have owned and used just about every camera carrying solution offered for sale. My current favorite is a harness strap made by USA Gear and available on Amazon. The camera is supported by both shoulders and hangs in the center of your chest, where it is easy to get up and on target. (Better yet, I can hike or ride my recumbent bike with the camera ready for anything.) It has two battery pouches and one SD card pocket, so it has the basics covered. It is a good strap and a good solution on its own, but instead of attaching it directly to the camera, I add a quick release strap tripod plate socket from Koolehoda (also on Amazon). I remove the existing attachments on the strap and install Peak Design-type quick connects (for added security). I then attach the little doggies to the quick release and the quick release to the strap and install the included standard tripod plate on the bottom of the camera. When I want to release the camera from the strap, I only have to push the button on the side of the quick release and lift it out of the socket. I can then use the camera at ground level or mount it on a tripod directly (using the already installed tripod plate) or put it in the seat beside me in the car, without taking the strap off my shoulders. I have standard over-the-shoulder straps that I have also modified to use the quick release so I can switch straps entirely when the harness is not appropriate. For my style of shooting in the field, it is almost the perfect solution.

