

Automation Bugaboos

By Tom Furlotte

The handler tossed the eagle into the air and I pressed the shutter release. Click... then nothing! The bird flew on as I tracked it. Nothing. I let up on the shutter button and pressed it again. Click. I started pumping the shutter and trying to keep the majestic bird in the frame. Click....pause....click. The bird disappeared into the trees.

What happened? Why did I not get the shots I wanted? I remember that I changed the focus to continuous, and I set the focus area to dynamic and – oh, crap! I forgot to change the drive function to continuous. I fell victim to the very things I warn other photographers about. I was a victim of the over reliance on technology.

I spent years shooting sports photos with various motor driven cameras and usually came away with a good take from each event. And this was in the days of manual focus lenses. But my new digital wonder is so packed with technology that the controls for certain functions are layered in menus and represented by tiny icons in tiny displays. The control settings that I could previously check with a glance are now obscured in a jumble of information; and easy to overlook.

If you're expecting me to start railing against technology you're wrong. I find the convenience of automation to be liberating. Automation lets me concentrate on the image itself and not on the technical aspects of image making. But automation has been applied to so many tools that sometimes it slows down the creative process and even, as in the above scenario, hinders it. Designers of photo equipment have extended automation to flashes, lenses and accessories with no end in sight. In my work at Memphis Photo Supply customers who asked "What's wrong with my camera?" have brought an amazing array of automation issues to my attention. Here are some of them.

- A customer's camera was locked up and the display flashed "Fee". The lens on his Nikon no longer uses the aperture ring but sets the aperture electronically from one of the Command Dials. The aperture ring must be set to the minimum and locked there. His wasn't.
- A customer's lens stopped focusing. The lens was set to limit the range of focus to the area around which it was already focused and thus prevented from focusing all the way out to infinity. In several other instances the AF was unknowingly switched off.
- A customer's camera would not recognize that the lens was mounted. In one instance the lens was not fully locked in place thus not making the electrical hook-up to the camera. This was an easy fix. In another instance the lens had a damaged contact that prevented successful communication with the camera. This required a trip by the factory for repair.
- A customer had underexposed pictures. His exposure compensation adjustment for his auto exposure was set to minus 3 stops. Another had variations in exposure because the bracketing function was unknowingly set.
- And of course the digital camera has added to this list strangely colored images due to the erroneously set white balance.
- A customer suddenly found his flash not properly exposing his shots. His digital camera was in the commander mode and the flashes from his built-in flash were no longer for exposure but they controlled the exposure of his off-camera flash. He had forgotten to change it back to normal operation.

This list is by no means exhaustive. I'm sure there will be some that are not here you might have experienced yourself. And as technology continues its advances there will be others to be discovered--the hard way.