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Plant the foot. Get a grip. Careful, now.

More about perils and safe-shooting tips from agricultural photographers

Part 2

By
Mark Moore

Welcome to the second feature in a series about the risks and safe-shooting sides of agricultural photography. The series highlights behind-the-image stories and tips from eight agricultural photographers who are members of the American Agricultural Editors' Association (AAEA). In this feature you will find some of my experiences and guidelines, along those with those of four other experienced U.S. agricultural journalists: Jim Patrico, Harlen Persinger, John Otte and Wayne Wenzel.

Photographing agriculture? It can be a jungle out there, you know.



Getting lost in the moment

By Mark Moore, freelancer, Mark Moore Communications, Nashotah, Wisconsin

As photographers, we are always in search of that “perfect” photo. Often, getting that great photo involves working in and around moving machinery, in livestock pens, on top of grain elevators or in enclosed spaces.

And because we are viewing our surroundings through a tiny view screen, it is easy to get lost in the moment of capturing that image and being oblivious to your surroundings.

One such situation that I have observed is the use of wide-angle lenses and moving equipment. These ultra-wide images can be striking, but you are often only inches away from the leading edge of your subject...a perspective that can be quickly lost when concentrating on focus, camera settings and composition.

So here's my checklist:

- If I will be in the field when the machine is running, I always talk to the operator beforehand and know how he will be moving through the field.
- If there is more than one piece of equipment moving in the field in close proximity to each other, I always keep the equipment in front of me. It may mean more "creativity" on my part, but it ensures that I know where the equipment is located.
- Measure twice. When composing a photo with equipment moving toward me and a wide-angle lens on the camera, I check once to see the direction of the machine and width of the implement, look through the viewfinder, then look again at my position in the field. It's easy to lose perspective when a planter is rolling toward you.
- I only carry what I need into the field. I am a camera bag collector, and I have several that I use depending on the situation. One system I find incredibly useful is a belt kit that allows me to put extra lenses, bodies, flash in pockets strapped close to my body. That keeps me from having to put anything down in the field, and I can move quickly.
- I wear a stable pair of boots on every photo shoot. And not all boots are made the same. I have thrown more than one pair in the trash because the soles didn't offer me the right traction.
- Think safety. As ag journalists, we preach safety to our audience. It should also be something we do as well. Always assess the situation, always take that extra precaution, and shoot with safety in mind. No photo is worth unnecessary risks.



It makes me really nervous

By Jim Patrico, Senior Editor, DTN/Progressive Farmer, Plattsburg, Missouri

I don't like heights much in any circumstances. But when you throw in a 30-foot-tall ladder on the side of a grain leg on a frosty Nebraska morning, it makes me really nervous.

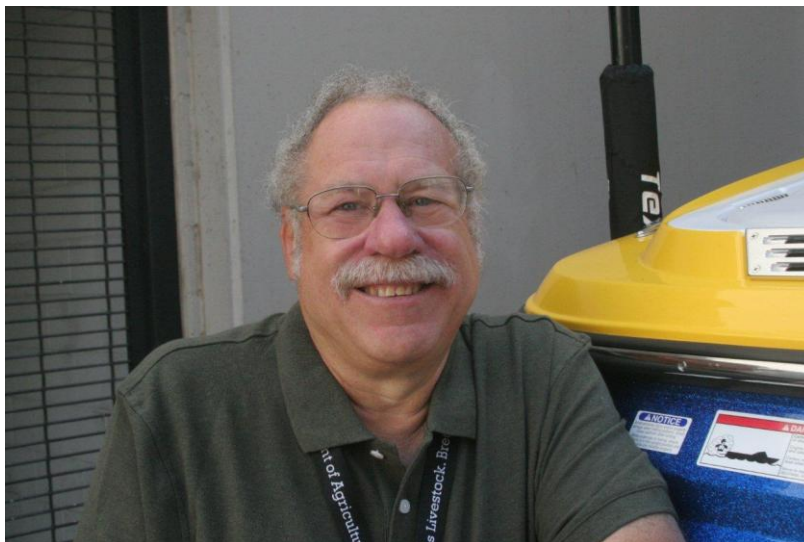
My subject was a farmer who used several grain bins to store his identity preserved grain. To get him and the bins in a photo that had interesting visuals, I decided on a high-angle shot. When I got to the farm, I noticed that there was a tall leg set apart from a cluster of several other bins. On the north side of those bins was a maintenance platform and I envisioned the farmer up there and me on the leg, which was still farther to the north. From that angle, I could get him in the early morning light with the group of bins behind and below.

Before my trip, I thought about the possibility of climbing a bin ladder. So I brought boots with deep cleats for traction and thick gloves with non-skid fingers to grip a cold ladder. I also brought along a backpack camera bag. I usually use a shoulder bag but figured a backpack would leave my hands free to climb. I've tried climbing with a bag or camera on my shoulder and realized that worrying about them slipping was a distraction I did not need.

On this morning, I reminded myself again and again to take the climb slowly, to plant each foot firmly on a rung and to be sure that I had a good grip with both hands and feet before advancing. I found that because the frost made the rungs slick, it was best that I scrape each clean with my hands before moving higher. With this process in play, I made my way up.

I did not count on the small opening to the platform at the top of the ladder; it was a bit of a squeeze to get me and the backpack through at the same time. Once I was on the grated platform, I made sure to move slowly and cautiously. The farmer – who had stairs to walk up, not a ladder – was patient with me. We got the photos and I reversed the process on my way back to the ground.

No harm done; a good photo made. The lesson learned: plan ahead, think ahead and adjust as you go.



Ah, those sudden stops -- and badger holes

By Harlen Persinger, Freelancer and photographer, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

I use the wide angle a lot and get close to the equipment. I always scout the harvest pattern to know which direction the operator is working, and then I talk to him and say that I may be close to the machine. Although I know where he is, the subject needs to be observant as to where I am and maybe slow down a little when passing by.

I have also ridden on the top of a couple combines. It's very risky and my biggest concern is a sudden, unexpected stop -- or hitting a badger hole with one of the wheels. I really try to get a secure spot and don't push my luck any longer than I need to.

Climbing sometimes proves necessary, but it's scary. I only climb with the necessary equipment, and the camera bag is strapped tightly to my body.

I have slipped on the machinery and bounced off the steps a few times but haven't received any serious injuries. But I'm more careful, and I constantly evaluate the overall situation when on a photo shoot.



That gun is loaded

By John Otte, Economics Editor, Farm Progress Companies, Urbandale, Iowa

I was going to Earlham, Iowa, to visit Lewis Morris, a rotational grazing pioneer.

As I entered his driveway, I spied Mr. Morris with his rifle pointing across the driveway. I was driving directly into his line of fire.

He scrambled back into his house with the rifle as I neared. It turned out that he was trying to discourage a pesky ground hog from eating his wife's precious peonies.

Walking on thin air, like Wile E. Coyote

By Wayne Wenzel, freelance agricultural public relations specialist, Burnsville, Minnesota

Here's what I learned with a camera on a 50-foot grain leg:

- If you must climb a grain leg to get that perfect aerial shot, always close the manhole cover on the catwalk behind you. Despite OSHA regulations, it might not close itself.
- Never walk with the camera and shoot at the same time, no matter how secure you feel, or how perfect the shot. Stop, shoot, lower the camera, address your surroundings, and then walk.
- For a fraction of a second, you really can feel like Wile E. Coyote walking on thin air.
- Steel ladder rungs are very hard and will gash your shins if you fall, even if you catch yourself before plummeting the full 50 feet to the concrete below.
- Always keep a roll of duct tape in your bag. Several wraps around a bleeding shin and other body parts can staunch the bleeding when nothing else will.
- Tell your kid the wound and your bloody pants are from a crocodile bite. Scars from a crocodile bite are cooler than those from being careless while getting a picture for a farm magazine that gets thrown in the trash after a week.

Yes, it can be a jungle out there.

So be mighty careful. Here's to your creative agricultural photo coverage -- and to safe shooting.

And special thanks to these agricultural photographers for sharing their experiences and tips.

What "close calls" and safety tips about agricultural photography might you share?

Please send them to Mark Moore at moorecommunications@earthlink.net
Thank you.

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