

Nature Photography Makes Me A Better Lawyer

By **Brian Willett** (December 18, 2025)

In this Expert Analysis series, attorneys discuss how their unusual extracurricular activities enhance professional development, providing insights and pointers that translate to the office, courtroom and beyond. If you have a hobby you would like to write about, email expertanalysis@law360.com.

In an instant, countless tiny sinews sever. Joints brittle from bathing in the sun suddenly, violently releasing their pent-up tension. Wincing, I feel the rupture reverberate up from the ground — through my sole, calf, knee, thigh — before I even register the sound.

With a flood of adrenaline, alone in the vast, verdant forest, I know I've made a fatal mistake.

Well, newly alone. The crack from my careless step onto a hidden branch acts as the downstroke of a conductor's baton initiating a cacophony of sound and motion.

First, the red fox I've been patiently tracking darts away. I'm then distracted by the departure of a brilliant blue jay I hadn't noticed; I hear its coarse cry cut the air and watch the dazzling feathers of its tail taunt me as it, too, seeks shelter. Another missed opportunity.

But there will be others, and I will be ready for them. My camera is on, phone notifications are off, and my hike has just begun. While the primary motivation for wandering through the woods this morning is relaxation, I've discovered many additional benefits from the activity.

The most surprising and unintended benefit, though, is that nature photography makes me a better lawyer. At first glance, zooming in on a butterfly might seem to have nothing in common with Zooming into a hearing or deposition, but photography offers skills transferable to the practice of law. In my experience, the primary examples are focus, preparation, embracing different viewpoints and patience.

Focus, Focus, Focus

To begin with the obvious, focus is critical for both photography and practicing law. Amid onslaughts of emails and competing client obligations, focusing on a single task is difficult. However, our brains weren't made to multitask, so investing your full focus into one assignment at a time is well worth the trade-off for the feeling of being productive by dividing your attention.

And even if you are dialed in on one undertaking, focus can always be further refined. Just like turning the focus ring on a lens to highlight one area in your depth of field at a time, it's helpful to spend time analyzing each individual portion of a brief to ensure it makes the



Brian Willett

point you're trying to relay, before zooming out and ensuring every paragraph is in harmony.

You can have an incredibly well-flowing argument, but if each piece doesn't serve its purpose — from background context to key subject — your advocacy won't be as effective as it could be.

You should also avoid taking your eye off of the ball if you've achieved a good interim outcome, but haven't yet reached the conclusion of your current stage of litigation. I can't count how many times a picture-perfect scene has unfolded while I was busy looking at my camera's display screen to admire a shot that suddenly doesn't seem so impressive.

Appreciating accomplishments and commending your team is important, but don't get sidetracked celebrating or complaining before you dig into every word of a judge's opinion. There may be something you or your adversary can latch onto for later use in the instant case or another.

Focus also demonstrates the importance of setting boundaries. No matter how many megapixels you're packing, you have literal boundaries within which to work. If you can't fit both the stunning sunset and the beautiful boat in the frame, you're going to have to choose to focus on one at a time. If you have difficulty saying no, try a reframe: You're saying yes to going all-in on one task, and saying no to half-heartedly tackling multiple tasks with divided attention. And if you're looking to avoid burnout, yes — going for a walk and leaving the phone behind is a task worthy of your full attention.

Be Prepared and Embrace Improvisation

One of the most demonstrable overlaps between Brian the photographer and Brian the lawyer is that I use the same backpack when wandering through the woods and marching across Manhattan. And it's not just because I'm frugal. It's because I want to make sure I have all the tools I need.

Few things are more frustrating to a photographer than having a battery run out while a subject is in focus, or setting up a great timelapse shot and realizing your tripod is standing sentry on the kitchen counter.

How to combat this problem? Build in time to prepare and double-check that you have backups of everything you need. Despite this being an era in which you can have an entire case file at your fingertips, I still take multiple paper copies of anything I might possibly need to reference in court. This includes local rules and procedures — an area some practitioners used to practicing in a particular jurisdiction can overlook.

Being prepared obviously extends to legal research as well. The day of an argument or submission, I always check each case to make sure I haven't missed any new citing sources or appellate decisions, much like I always check to make sure my memory card isn't full, and that I'm prepared for the weather before heading out for a long day of hiking.

Of course, no one is perfect, so you have to learn to be comfortable improvising. With outdoor photography, that may look like using some rocks to keep your camera still for a long exposure. With a trial, it may look like lead counsel slowly asking an array of not-so-critical questions to get to a lunch break, while second chair submits a print job for newly needed exhibits to be delivered during the recess.

Both of these have happened to me, and both turned out well, but if we had frozen and accepted the situation as impossible in the latter scenario rather than improvising, the picture would have looked a lot different. Don't let anxiety impede improvisation.

Appreciate Diversity and Explore Every Angle

Some photographers are known for their particular style — mine is amateurish. But I find that embracing different styles is more effective and enjoyable. Having a diverse array of lenses and filters can create stirring and stunning images that can transport a viewer and transform a landscape. Likewise, while it is tempting to remain stationary if you can frame an attractive scene, moving and exploring different angles opens up new possibilities and can help uncover hidden gems.

What are your lenses and filters in lawyering? Your team. Having lawyers with different ages, upbringings and experiences — legal and otherwise — provides opportunities to look at an issue or case through a different lens and often brings new ideas to the table.

Often, we mentally sort cases into boxes and shape strategies around what has worked in the past, but every case is different, and nuances matter. Sometimes the least legally experienced member of the team has the most creative and innovative ideas. The importance of different viewpoints and specialties is even more important with the rise of artificial intelligence tools, because tasks that were once highly time-consuming and resource-intensive are just a few prompts away, and can assist in developing creative arguments.

Likewise, looking at a case from a different angle often pays dividends. Take off your advocacy hat and try to see an issue from your opponent's perspective or that of a potential juror. Doing so can help you identify weaknesses in your position and your adversary's that you may not have noticed otherwise.

And don't forget to appreciate the whole picture. Sure, you're hoping this deposition will pay dividends at summary judgment, but what would you like to get on record to confront this witness with at trial? Having different viewpoints can help uncover insights on these and other issues.

Patience

You already know that patience is critical in law and beyond, but I highlight it here because patience takes practice. The temptation for litigators to create a "gotcha" moment is strong, but letting a witness or adversary dig their hole deeper can be better in the long run, much like pouncing on the first "good enough" scene will cause you to spend more time sifting through subpar pictures after you find better framing later on. And when the payoff isn't what you expect, it's important to have patience with yourself, too.

Patience with others is particularly vital — a lesson any wildlife or portrait photography knows. In law, there are times when not everyone is working with the same set of facts, or viewing the facts in the same way, so keeping your cool and taking a breath before firing off an email that could end up as an exhibit to a sanctions motion is wise.

You may have immense patience, but unfortunately we are often judged by our most hasty moments. Studies show controlled breathing can help lower heart rate and blood pressure, so you may wish to incorporate that strategy when you're seeing red.

Conclusion

Like most hobbyists, I have no illusions about going pro in any field other than law. However, that doesn't mean your pastimes can't improve your practice, so finding time to do what you enjoy is beneficial for your contentment and career.

For me, nature photography ticks both of those boxes because it rewards discipline and creativity and reminds me to focus on what is in front of me, slow down to achieve success, and embrace the value of viewing situations through different lenses and vantage points.

Brian Willett is counsel at Saul Ewing LLP.

The opinions expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of their employer, its clients, or Portfolio Media Inc., or any of its or their respective affiliates. This article is for general information purposes and is not intended to be and should not be taken as legal advice.