The Back Button Autofocus Guide
For Nikon Cameras

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The Back Button Autofocus Guide For Nikon Cameras
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Book Version 1.0.1

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Cameras covered:

Nikon D5, D4, D4s
Nikon D850, D800, D810,
Nikon D750
Nikon D600, D610
Nikon D500
Nikon D7500, D7200, D7100
Nikon D5xxx series, D3xxx series
Forward

Before we begin, I wanted to thank you for downloading this little guide.

This book is designed to not only show you how to set up Back Button Autofocus (BBAF), but also, and more importantly, to explain why so many photographers find the technique beneficial. We’ll look at why it’s needed, how to set it up, how to use it, and answer tons of questions along the way. In the end, you’ll know everything you ever wanted to know about BBAF and how to get the most from it.

Also, note that this publication is only a (very) small adaptation from my *Secrets To The Nikon Autofocus System* book. The bulk of this guide actually comes from a single chapter that includes not only Back Button AF, but also several other alternative focusing methods.

Of course, the full Nikon AF book is 494 pages long so this is only the very slightest taste of what’s in that publication (about 6% of the information, to be exact). So, if you like what’s included here, you’ll really enjoy the full book. Head to the site and give it a peek - I promise, you’ll like what you see. And don’t just take it from me, check out the testimonials page too.

At any rate, I truly hope you find this little publication useful - and feel free to share it with anyone you like.

Thanks so much and happy shooting!

Steve

PS - If you find this publication useful, all I ask in return is that you share it with your friends. Thanks!

Please share this with your friends!
Back Button Autofocus
So, what is Back Button AF (BBAF) anyway and why does my wife keep referring to it as “my mistress”?

Back Button AF uncouples autofocus from your shutter release and moves it exclusively to a button on the back of your camera. I know, this sounds all strange and new-fangled, but when you think about it, this is how focusing has worked for most of our photographic history.

After all, before the advent of autofocus, it was up to the photographer to skillfully twist that ring on the end of the lens to make everything in the viewfinder sharp and crispy. Back then, to handle a stationary subject (like modern AF-S), we’d simply focus the lens, compose, and shoot.

If we were photographing action, we’d attempt to focus as the subject was moving through the frame, popping off shots when we thought the subject looked sharp. Although I must admit, my hit rate for manually focusing moving targets was about the same as Charlie Brown's for kicking footballs.

At any rate, back in the day, your shutter release had about as much to do with focus as the government does with spending your tax dollars wisely. And you know what? It worked just fine (focus, not the government).

Well, they say everything old is new again. And while I’m still not holding out any hope for my wardrobe, it certainly does apply to autofocus. BBAF once again separates AF from the shutter release - the way the camera gods intended.

At first, BBAF seems like it sits somewhere between a lateral move and a step backwards. As such you’d be forgiven for thinking the advantages of this seem a bit obscure - at first. After all, what difference does it make anyway? Focus is focus, right?

As it turns out, it makes all the difference in the world, and it has everything to do with AF-S and AF-C. Each mode has a very specific job when used with shutter release AF. Once you understand those jobs, you’ll see why BBAF is so handy.
(Note that AF-S and AF-C are discussed in detail in the *Secrets To The Nikon Autofocus System Book* prior to this chapter. Included below is a brief description to cover what you need to know for BBAF.)

Here’s how AF-S and AF-C are typically used with shutter release AF:

**AF-C** - This mode is used for subjects in motion and allows the camera to track your subject as it moves through the frame. It will always try to focus on anything under the AF point. While it’s great for action, it’s ill-suited for a focus and recompose scenario.

The problem is, when you focus and recompose in AF-C mode, you frequently have something under the AF point that’s not on the same plane of focus as the subject upon recomposition. AF-C will change focus to this new spot when you press the shutter release to take the photo.

So, you need another mode, AF-S.

**AF-S** - This mode allows you to focus on your subject, and as long as you keep a half-press on the shutter release, it will keep that focus distance locked in.

This makes it ideal for when you need to focus and recompose since, as long as you maintain a half press on the shutter release, it won’t refocus on the background or foreground the way AF-C does.

However, the downside is that AF-S will never allow you to track a subject as it moves through the frame. The second it gets an AF lock, it stops focusing and locks in the distance.

Also, with AF-S, each time your finger comes off the shutter release you must re-focus and probably recompose as well. And frankly, life’s too short for that sort of nonsense.

In short, with shutter release autofocus, AF-C is for moving subjects, and AF-S is best for stationary subjects. When a stationary subject launches into motion, you need to switch to AF-C; when a moving subject becomes stationary, it’s best to switch back to AF-S.
Of course, switching between AF-S and AF-C and then back to AF-S takes a moment, and it’s easy to miss a once-in-a-lifetime shot while you’re fumbling with the camera. That, and what about those times when you forget which mode you’ve dialed in - you know, like you think you’re in AF-C when you’re really in AF-S? Talk about frustrating!

In fact, let’s look at one of my favorite examples.

So, let’s say you’re hiking through the woods one day and happen upon a magnificent owl sitting low in a tree. Well, you’d love yourself a beautiful owl portrait for the wall, so you focus on his eye, recompose, and DRAT! When you move the camera to recompose you notice that it refocused on some leaves right in front of him. Oops, that’s right, your camera was set to AF-C mode, and the AF point always focuses on whatever is directly under it (pesky leaves this time). Hmm…So locking focus on his eye is a no-go.

Hey, no worries, you know what to do. So, you switch to AF-S mode, refocus on his eye and recompose. The camera dutifully keeps the focus distance locked in as your finger sustains a half-press on the shutter release. He’s now framed perfectly and you’re just about to nail the shot when the owl shifts around and takes off, tired of all your tomfooleries.

You try to get a burst of him flying, but guess what? That’s right, you were in AF-S mode and the camera didn’t track him. He’s gone, and your wall is...
stuck with that terrible painting your in-laws saddled you with last Christmas instead of that awesome owl.

Ouch. Here’s a picture of that owl you didn’t get.

Of course, if your camera features AF-A mode you *may* be able to use that, but as I mentioned in the previous chapter, there’s no telling if it would pick the right AF mode when things start to happen quickly.

So, you’re stuck monkeying around with AF modes.

*Or are you?*

What if I told you it didn’t have to be that way?

What if there was a way to have the best of both worlds, no switching modes required?

THAT’S where BBAF comes in. With Back Button AF, you have the best of both worlds (Continuous Servo/AF-C and Single Servo/AF-S), right at your fingertips.
Here’s how it works.

As mentioned, we’ll assign all AF function to a button on the back of your camera and totally disable shutter release AF. Once this is done, the only way to focus is shoving in the button on the back of the camera.

Note # 1 – Some Nikon bodies will have a dedicated AF-On button on the back, for others, you’ll have to assign a button. On Nikon cameras, you usually reassign the AF/ AE Lock button, but I also know people who assign one of the function buttons on the front of the camera (more on that later). The good news is that most Nikons are capable of this.

Note # 2 – To keep it simple, from this point forward I’m going to refer to whatever button you use for Back Button focus as the “AF-On button”, even if you assign the AE/AF Lock button to do your focus bidding.
BBAF Setup Guidelines

Setup for BBAF will vary from camera to camera, so I've listed the relevant bodies for each set of instructions. If a section of instructions doesn’t include your camera, you can skip over to the next step.

Set To AF-C (All bodies)

First, make sure your AF Mode is in AF-C. If you don’t, it’ll cripple the biggest advantage of using this setup.

To switch to AF-C, press your Focus Mode Button and spin the main command dial (the one on the back of the camera by your thumb). You’ll see the mode change on your LCD and in your viewfinder.

Press and hold the Focus Mode Button as you turn the Main Command Dial on the back of the camera to switch AF Modes.
D5xxx & D3xxx users – you’ll need to set AF-C via the main LCD menu on the back of your camera. Press the “i” button and head to the **Focus Mode** option. Click OK and select **AF-C** from the resulting menu.

**AF Priority Selection (All but D3xxx series)**

Next, set your AF-C priority selection ([Custom Settings Menu > Autofocus > AF-C priority selection](#)) to one of the “Release” modes and **NOT** to “Focus”. If it’s set to “Focus,” you won’t be able to use this method in a focus-and-recompose situation, and it kind of defeats the whole purpose of using BBAF.

Select AF-C priority selection and then press your Multi selector center button to get to the sub menu. From there, choose one of the release modes, never Focus.
Next, I’m going to break the instructions down a bit, one set for those with a dedicated AF-on button, the next set for those who will need to reassign a button.

**Cameras With A Dedicated AF-On Button (D4/s, D5, D810, D850, D500)**

If you happen to have a dedicated AF-On button, this couldn’t be easier. Head to the **Custom Settings Menu > Autofocus > AF Activation**. Once you arrive, select **AF-On Only** and you’re all set. Really, that’s all there is to it.

Select AF activation and then choose AF-ON only from the sub-menu. (the main menu item “AF Activation” will read “OFF” when properly setup).
No Dedicated AF-On Button

Don’t have an AF-On button? No worries. We’ll just reassign another button to the task. My recommendation is to use the AE-L/AF-L button since it’s conveniently located near your right thumb. However, the other programmable buttons (Fn & Pv) can perform AF-On duty as well.

This is a handy option if you’d rather use a button to keep AF on the front of the camera, but just not on the shutter release (works the same as using the Back Button – more on this soon, including setup).

Note that setup varies from camera to camera, so we’ll take them on a more or less individual basis on starting on the next page.
D7200 Setup

To program your AE-L/AF-L button for AF-On duty, just head to your Custom Settings Menu > Controls > Assign AE-L / AF-L button.

Once there hit the Press option and select AF-On from the resulting menu.

When you press the option to Assign AE-L/AF-L button, you'll have an option for just Press – that's the one you want. On the next menu, select AF-ON and hit the OK button on the back of the camera.

Next, head to your Custom Settings Menu > Autofocus > AF Activation. Under this option, select AF-On Only.
Select AF activation and then choose AF-ON only from the sub-menu.

**D7500 Setup**

The D7500 uses the new-style Custom Control Assignment menu, so setup is different than any other body at the time of this writing.

To assign your AE/AF Lock button for AF-On, head to the **Custom Settings Menu > Controls > Custom Control Assignment**.

Getting to the new Custom Controls Assignment menu in the D7500.
When you jump into that menu, you’ll see two columns, you want the one on the left. You’ll scroll down to the option for AE/AF Lock and press that. *Note that you can also assign both the Fn1 button and Fn2 button for AF-On duty from this menu as well (we’ll discuss that method in just a bit).*

Once you’re in the sub-menu, simply select AF-On from the list and press OK.

Select the AE/AF Lock button and then AF-On from the resulting menu.

Now, just one last step. Head to the Autofocus section of the Custom Settings menu and select **AF Activation > AF-ON Only** and press OK. That’s it, your D7500 is set to go.

Select AF-ON only and you’re finished with the setup.
D600, D610, D7000 D5xxx Series

Setup for your camera is slightly different than what’s been described thus far. You’ll want to go to your Custom Settings Menu > Controls > Assign AE-L/AF-L button, and then select AF-On from the resulting menu.

That’s it – the camera will automatically switch AF function to the AE/AF-L button and away from the shutter release. Easy!

Switching the AE/AF Lock button to AF-On duty on the D6xx and D5xxx series.
**D750, D7100**

This is just like the D6xx, D5xxx, and D7000 but there’s an extra menu option in the middle that allows you to choose from Press or Press + command dials (you want “press”).

So, you’ll want to go to your Custom Settings Menu > Controls > Assign AE-L/AF-L > Press>, and then select AF-On from the resulting menu.

![Custom Setting Menu and Controls Menu](image)

Switching the AE/AF Lock button to AF-On duty on the D750 / D7100.

That’s it - super easy and you’re all set for Back Button AF!
D3xxx Series

For the D3xxx series, it’s even easier. Head to your **Setup Menu > Buttons > Assign AE/AF-Lock > AF-On.** That’s it, you’re ready to go!

![Setup Menu and Buttons Screenshots](image)

The D3xxx series doesn’t have a Custom Settings menu, but you can turn on BBAF using the instructions above.

**What About AE/AF Lock?**

I’ve had many people ask, “If I reassign the AE/AF Lock button to autofocus, what do I use for exposure and AF Lock?”

The first part is simple, with BBAF, you won’t need AF Lock anymore. As for exposure lock, there are three easy possibilities.

1. Simply don’t use it. This option is actually how I roll. I’ve never used exposure lock (AE-L), so I never miss it. Instead, I either use exposure compensation in an auto mode (like Aperture Priority) or switch over to...
manual mode. However, everyone has their own style and mine certainly isn’t the only way to do things.

2. Reassign another button. On some cameras, you’ll be able to reprogram another button to take over the AE-Lock responsibilities. For instance, with most bodies, you can go to the Custom Settings Menu > Controls > Assign Fn Button (or Assign Preview Button) > Press and choose to have AE-L activate when you press and hold them. (More on Control Customizations in an upcoming chapter.)

In the example above, we’re assigning the Pv button, but it works the same for the Fn button.

D5/D500/D850 users – I know you don’t have an AE/AF Lock button on the back of your camera, but you can still assign AE-Lock to one of the programmable buttons too. Complete info in the upcoming Special Customizations chapter.
3. The other option is simply to assign AE-L to a half-press of your shutter release. This option is under the Custom Settings Menu > Timers / AE Lock > Shutter-release button AE-L. (On the D3xxx series, you can find it under the same Buttons menu we used to reassign the AE/AF Lock button.) From there, you can turn it on or off.

However, note that you’re locking exposure every time you’re half-pressing the shutter, so be careful.

Note – you may find two or three options for AE-L. The first is AE-lock (hold). The “hold” option allows you to press and release the assigned button and the camera will lock in the exposure until the meter deactivates - or you press the assigned AE-L button again. The exposure stays locked as you shoot. With “AE-L Only,” the exposure is only locked in for as long as you maintain a press on the button. If you have a D5/D500/D850/D7500, you’ll also have an option called “AE lock (reset on release)”. This will hold the exposure only until you take the photo (or the meter shuts off) and then it will reset.

That’s it, you’re all set.
Battery Grips Without AF-On Buttons

So, what if you have a battery grip on your camera with an AE/AF lock button? The first thing you’ll discover after setting up BBAF is that when you try to use the button on the grip to initiate focus it doesn’t work. Extremely frustrating if you discover this when you’re on a the cusp of snapping a once-in-a-lifetimer.

Fortunately, the solution is easy. The grip’s AE/AF Lock button is set up separately from the one by your thumb.

Head to the Custom Settings Menu > Controls. Now, look for a setting called Assign MB-Dxx AE/AF Lock Button. Note, where you see the orange “xx” above, you’ll see a number on the camera that corresponds to your battery grip, like MB-D12 or MB-D15 or whatever MB-Dxx grip your camera happens to use.

Anyhow, click that option and, on the next page, find the AF-On option. Select that, click OK, and your grip’s AE/AF-Lock button will now autofocus just like it’s counterpart by the viewfinder.
How’s it work?

For action, BBAF is just like you’d expect since the camera is already in AF-C mode. Simply get your AF area over your subject and hold in your AF-On button for as long as you’d like to track. The camera will continue to focus using your selected AF area as you fill your card with future magazine covers!

NOTE – People ask all the time if you need to keep pressing the AF button as you shoot and track or if you just press it once and the camera takes over. **The answer is that you MUST keep pressing the AF-On button until you’re done with the burst.** As soon as you let off the AF will disengage and tracking will cease.

But here’s the real trick.

When you need to shoot a static image, you just focus – **AND THEN RELEASE THE AF-ON BUTTON.** Now you can recompose and shoot.

As long as you keep your finger OFF of the AF-On button, the lens won’t refocus, effectively keeping it “locked in” at whatever distance it was the last time you pressed AF-On.

This is like using Single Servo (AF-S) with shutter release AF - only you don’t maintain a half-press on the button once you achieve focus. (Note – this isn’t to say the lens will automatically refocus if the subject moves. You must push the AF-On button again to reacquire focus as needed).

The only downside for some people is that they like the confirmation beep they get in Single Servo AF and since we’re in Continuous Servo, the camera will remain silent even when you lock on. (The reason for this is that the camera beeps every time it gets confirmed focus. Well, this happens and re-happens constantly while tracking a subject, so the camera would constantly squeal if the beep function were allowed in AF-C.)
BBAF made it easy to keep up with this active cub. I had AF-C when he was on the move and could quickly shoot and recompose when he decided it was time to be adorable again.

**Let's look at the advantages:**

1. You have more control. With the standard setup of autofocus on the shutter release, every time you take your finger off that button and then put it back on again, the camera must refocus. If you do a lot of focus, compose, and shoot, then every time your finger comes off the release, you must go through that process again, since the camera is going to want to focus again. Arrgh – that’s no way to live!

With Back Button AF, you focus once, and when you take your finger off the AF-ON button, the focus distance is “locked” in. Now you can take a series of shots without worrying that your camera is constantly refocusing in the
wrong place just because your finger had the audacity to wander off the release between shots.

2. It's great for action - Back Button AF gives you a LOT of flexibility in an action situation. See, with Back Button AF, as long as you're pressing the AF-On button, the camera is attempting to focus.

If the subject stops and you want to take a second to get critical focus on the eye, just focus on that spot and then release your AF-On button. The focus is set at that distance until you press the AF-On button again. If the action starts again, or the subject moves, just press the AF button to reacquire focus or start tracking.

It’s like a combo of single and continuous AF that allows you to react instantly to any situation.

Many photographers, myself included, believe that there’s simply no better way to capture action than BBAF!
3. It’s great for stills - I know, people generally associate BBAF with action, but it can help with landscapes, cityscapes, or any type of photography where your subject is motionless. Let me give you an example of how I did landscapes with shutter release AF vs. how I do it with BBAF:

The bad old way for me to focus a landscape was to use AF-S, as Nikon intended. So, I would focus, recompose, and then turn off autofocus.

Why?

Simple – when I recomposed the shot, it moved my AF point to a new location – a location that I didn’t want the camera to focus on. Sure, sometimes I could just move the AF point to where I wanted it, but in most cases I needed to recompose.

With AF-S, I would need to hold my finger at a half-press while I took my photos to lock in the focus. If you’re bracketing or even taking multiple images over a period of time, this gets old really fast! So, by turning autofocus off, I could prevent the lens from refocusing - effectively “locking in” the focus - so I didn’t have to keep that half-press on the shutter release for the duration. (I could also press the AE/AF Lock button prior to pressing the shutter release, but that’s easy to forget.)

With BBAF, it’s far simpler. I decide where I want the focal point located in the scene, hover my AF point over it, and press the Back Button to focus. Now, I can recompose and not worry if the AF point is in the wrong place. I don't have to agonize about the camera refocusing because I was in AF-S mode. This way, I focus, take my finger off the button, and my focus distance stays right where I want it.
In this image, my focus point was on the foreground trees. However, none of my AF points were over that location, so I had to focus and recompose. Using BBAF made this easier since I didn’t have to hold a half-press of the shutter release as I photographed the changing clouds over the course of ten minutes or so (although the light in this photo only lasted a few moments).

Now, what do you say we try that owl example again, this time using our AF-On technique?

So, we have our owl on a branch and we’re working on a nice portrait to replace that horrible painting we mentioned earlier. We put the AF sensor on his eye, focus, and release our AF-On button. Now, we recompose and notice that, once again, the AF point is over some foreground leaves. However, that doesn’t bother us one little bit. As long as we keep our finger OFF the AF-On button, the focus distance we set when we focused on his eye stays locked in. If he moves, we simply focus on his eye again. Nailed the shot.

Once again, he decides to take flight, only this time you don’t have to worry about switching AF modes. Simply mash down on the AF-On button and you’re instantly tracking his flight. Now you have two wall-hangers. Congrats!
Not an exact match for our hypothetical scenario, but BBAF constantly helps me get shots like this. Just prior to capturing this image, I was taking portraits of the owl as she sat on the fence post. When she took flight, I instantly started tracking her and grabbed the action as she took off and flew away.

I'll admit, on paper, the difference may seem subtle, but I can't tell you the number of action shots this method has enabled me to put on my cards. I no longer think about whether I'm shooting action or stills or if I need AF-S or AF-C. With Back Button AF at my disposal, I can do both – instantly. One less thing to worry about is always a plus if you ask me!

Also, I've received thousands of comments and e-mails over the years from people who switched and just couldn't believe the impact it had on their photography. So, if you're hesitant to try it, remember there are thousands of people out there who took the plunge and discovered it's a far better way to shoot than shutter release AF – at least for them.

By the way, the first time you use this you may find that it seems more awkward than a middle school dance. Don't worry, that's normal. It IS going to feel odd for a few weeks and you will initially miss some shots.
My advice is to go somewhere and photograph something that doesn’t matter much to you. Just pick a place that gives you the chance to shoot something easy that varies from moving and stationary. My suggestion? Find a beach or waterfront area covered with seagulls. You’ll have a blast as they fly around and you’ll be comfortable with BBAF in no time.

(NOTE – I also have a free video about this on YouTube which may help explain if you’re still not sure. You can find it here.)

Of course, BBAF isn’t for everyone and there are some downsides.

The first is if you’re left-eye dominant. In that scenario, your left eye is at the viewfinder while the knuckle of your right thumb attempts to dislodge your right eyeball.

The second disadvantage is that you can’t switch AF points as quickly. Since your thumb needs to find either the Multi selector pad or the little Joystick (if equipped), you’ll need to temporarily give up focusing to make an AF point switch. In practice, I don’t think I’ve missed many shots because of this, but there are times I have considered having another thumb added to my right hand, creepy or not!

**Back Button AF - Frequently Asked Questions**

**Which Is Faster – Shutter Release AF or Back Button AF?**

I get this question quite frequently, and I wanted to make sure I address it here. Many people notice an “increase” in AF performance when they switch to BBAF (either with the Back Button or the Pv/Fn button).

*However, I want to make this perfectly clear* – there is NO increase in the performance of your AF system just because you switched focus to a different button.

The camera’s AF system remains the same as it was. Now, there may be a difference in **YOUR** performance – you may be faster with one method over another, but the speed of the AF system is the same. So, even if you’re
using the traditional shutter release AF system and switching back and forth between AF-S and AF-C as needed, you’re not losing any AF speed because of it – at least not from the camera.

**How is VR Activated With BBAF?**

The answer to this is going to depend on your camera. If you have a newer Nikon body (like the ones covered in this book), pressing your AF-On button (dedicated or assigned) will activate VR when pressed. For older cameras, it's only activated with a half-press of the shutter release.

However, don’t let that stop you if you're using an older body!

I was using VR and BBAF *long* before the AF-On button activated VR. It's really not that tough since when you're about to take a photo, you're probably half-pressing the shutter release anyway. Again though, not a problem for newer bodies.

**What about using AF Areas? Like d9, d21, Group, or 3D tracking?**

No worries – it works exactly the same as if you were using your shutter release for AF. (We’ll discuss these AF Area modes in the next chapter.) For now, just keep in mind that the camera doesn’t care where the AF command input comes from (AF button or shutter release), everything will work the same as it did before.

**What about using a cable release with BBAF?**

This one is tricky. Most Nikon cable releases will allow for both a half-press to focus and a full-press to release the shutter. *However, the cable release will mimic how you have your shutter release set up.*

So, if you have Shutter Release AF enabled, the cable release will focus with a half-press. If you have BBAF setup, then the half-press will activate the meter and such, but it won't focus - you'll have to do that with the Back Button.
For some people, this seems to be a major issue, but remember, it's very simple to go back to shutter release AF for those times you need to focus with a cable release.

Is there ever a reason to use AF-S with Back Button AF?

Before writing this book, my answer would have been a resounding “NO” but it was pointed out to me there is a time when AF-S can be helpful - and that’s when you’re using AF Illumination (on the flash or camera).

When the camera is in AF-C mode, AF Illumination will not function - you need to be in AF-S for it to work.

That said, remember that in AF-S mode we lose the main advantage of Back Button AF (having it act like both AF-C and AF-S at the same time).

So, I would only switch to AF-S if I needed to get a lock using AF Illumination in a dark venue and then I’d go right back to AF-C when I was back to normal shooting. There’s more on AF Illumination coming up in the Custom Settings chapter.

Conclusion & Thanks

At any rate, that’s the basic setup and usage for BBAF and I hope this publication proved helpful.

Also, remember that this is just a tiny part of my e-book, Secrets To The Nikon Autofocus System. That book covers not only BBAF but also goes deeper into AF-S, AF-C, covers all the AF area modes (like Group, Dynamic, etc), all the AF custom functions settings and so much more.

However, the book isn’t all just camera settings and how to use them. In addition, it’s also a guide to getting sharper photos. In fact, nearly half of the book is overflowing with tips and techniques for getting sharper images on your memory cards.

So, if you’ve enjoyed this little publication, you’ll love the full book. Check it out at the link below - hey, it’s free to look!
https://backcountrygallery.com/secrets-nikon-autofocus-system/