

FEATURED ARTICLE

Exposing for Backlit Subjects

By Bill Black

One of the most dramatic techniques and one of the most difficult for many photographers to understand is backlighting. As with all subjects, you must evaluate the overall picture and decide what you want to achieve photographically. *You* are the artist and each photograph is *your* creation. You cannot set your camera on automatic or program and trust it to make critical exposure decisions for you, no matter how sophisticated your equipment might be. The camera and its meter are tools and only respond to your commands. A critical evaluation of each shot is imperative for properly exposed photographs.

Imagine that you have a backlit full-frame solid subject, such as a squirrel in a tree at mid-morning or afternoon with the sun high above the horizon, or a bird in early morning light with a low sun behind it. With backlit subjects you are shooting on the shadowed side. Therefore, the first decision you must make during your evaluation of the scene is to determine the effect you want to capture with your camera. Do you want an artistic image with rim lighting outlining your subject, or do you want a documentary shot in which the subject's detail is clearly visible. If you decide on artistic rim lighting, you can achieve this by either shooting at the meter's suggested exposure reading or by underexposing slightly from that reading. The amount by which you underexpose will depend on the intensity of the sun and the richness of the rim lighting you desire. However, if you only have the chance for one shot, try at about 1/2 to 1 stop less light. Bracket if you can and you may end up with several shots you like.

If you decide you want a documentary shot of your backlit squirrel or bird, then you'll need to open up from your camera's suggested meter reading. Remember, your meter is reading everything in the scene, including the bright light behind your subject. This bright light is much more reflective than 18% gray. In an attempt to make the entire image middle-toned, your camera's meter will suggest an exposure reading that is too dark to register the detail in your subject. Therefore, your subject will be rendered as a silhouette if you shoot at the suggested reading. By opening up by one or two stops, you'll properly expose the details on the shadowed side of the subject, but only at the risk of washing out the sky or background area. Remember, there are compromises in photography.

Photographing backlit translucent subjects (e.g., leaves against the sky, flower petals, palm fronds) that fill the frame requires a slightly different approach in order to create a successful image. With translucent subjects, you underexpose slightly from the camera's suggested exposure reading to enrich the colors. Even though you are shooting on the subject's shadowed side, you can underexpose because light is coming through the subject.

The above was written knowing full-well that our current computer software can do many “correcting” actions, such as lightening, darkening, dodging, burning, toning, etc. Likewise, the high dynamic range (HDR) can produce outstanding results with multiple bracketing and subsequent combining. These computer techniques can be done in mere seconds to a few minutes. Many of us who have engaged in wet darkroom processing have done these things for years. Most of us enjoyed the satisfaction of the time-consuming labor of love. We enjoyed the isolation of the darkroom and even the smell of the chemicals. We also got to know how and why our cameras and film worked the way they did and do.

So the next time you encounter an unusual or difficult lighting situation remember what the camera system “sees.” Pretend that you are shooting with a 4x5 or an 8x10 camera and have only six sheets of film. It will definitely cause you to slow down, analyze the subject, composition and lighting, and remember what the camera can and will do. Then, and only then, gently press the shutter release.

So now, practice.