

Photographing Landscapes

By *Bill Black*

All of us have done landscape photography--usually while on vacation, and sometimes for a club assignment or while on a field trip. And how often has each of us stood before a breaking scene, utterly awestruck by its beauty? And how often have the attempts to capture it on film proven disappointing? "You have to be there!" people say when they realize their photographs haven't done justice to a great scene.

Nevertheless, you've seen outstanding pictures of natural landscapes, images that make your heart beat a little faster or make you want to abandon everyday cares and head into the wilderness. What enables those photographers to record nature so brilliantly?

To begin your search for the answers to these questions, consider how successful photographers think about taking pictures. While most people respond to what they find visually appealing, personally inspiring, or simply beautiful, experienced photographers respond to something photogenic. To understand the notion of "photogenic," you have to translate what your eyes see into the language of photographic seeing. In other words, you must imagine the visual potential of the scene based on what your camera, lens, and film can do with it.

To be photogenic, the landscape must possess qualities that will record well on film. These qualities include evocative light, graphic lines and shapes, and definable colors. But these elements emerge only when the photographer's vision and technical skill work together. As amateur photographers become more astute, they learn to notice these qualities in scenes most other people pass by. The more you sensitize yourself to the special elements that make the landscape come to life, the more photographic opportunities you'll discover.

Previsualization is the key to creating masterful landscape shots and other photographs of nature. Getting a clear mental image of the picture you want begins with identifying your purpose. Most photographers are so swept away by their emotions that they forget to identify their intentions. It pays to take a few moments to define what caught your eye and why you want to take a particular picture. Focusing your attention on what is most important to you will help you make smart decisions about composition, exposure, film, and other technical choices. In other words, IDENTIFY YOUR GOAL.

If you have trouble firmly establishing your goal, try finishing the statement – "What I want to show is...." You should complete this statement of purpose as precisely as you can. For example, you might say, "I want to document the structure and shape of these magnificent rock formations." In another setting, you might say, "I want to capture the repeating textures in foreground grasses and background trees," or "I want to integrate the mix of brilliant colors in these flowers hugging the cliff that overlooks the sea."

Your purpose may be straightforward documentary photography – to portray the intricate ancient sedimentation patterns in a cross-section of exposed rock, to capture the majesty of a verdant valley, or to reveal the radiance of a coastline at sunset. On the other hand, your purpose may be to create an impressionistic image. You may, for example, want to underscore the romantic mood of a river surrounded by fall foliage, to dramatize the surprising blue of glacial ice, or to create a powerful abstract image using the shapes and colors of the land, sky, and water.

Every photographer's goal is valid and highly individualistic. On our club field trips we frequently photograph but a few feet apart from one another and routinely produce completely different images, primarily because we envision the possibilities in our own unique way. This is why one of the

commandments of nature photography says, “Express yourself: The joy of photography comes from the ability to project a unique vision that you can share with others.”

Once you have a good idea of the image you want to create, you are ready to analyze the technical choices that will help you achieve it. And before you shoot, you must ruthlessly and scrupulously follow one of the other commandments:

Strip away whatever does not serve your purpose, and incorporate only that what contributes to the final image.

Helpful hints

- In general, landscapes require maximum sharpness throughout the photograph. Choose f16 or f22 if conditions and film permit. Use your camera’s review (if camera permits) or focus one-third into your frame for sharpness forward and back from the focus point.
- Have something of interest in the foreground.
- Use trees, shrubs, rocks to help frame your subject.
- Use a polarizing filter to enrich colors and minimize glare.
- Enhance foreground objects by shooting low to the ground with a wide angle lens.
- Landscapes are most frequently done horizontally, but don’t neglect verticals; they can help isolate objects and add an impression of strength.
- Pre-sunrise and post-sunset illuminations can result in magnificent pastel colors of sky, sea, and land.
- For coastal scenes shoot long exposures after sunset to produce magical seascapes.
- Use a tripod and study the scene in the viewfinder.

Bibliography

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