

THE ZONE SYSTEM -- A very brief primer

by Bill Black

Many times when I have commented on monochrome photographs at the club I have mentioned various “values” commonly known as “zones” of black, gray and white. Those of us who are or have been B&W wet darkroom printers know this system pretty well since it has been around a long time and made prominent by the renowned Ansel Adams. Frequently after the meeting people ask me what I meant by the aforementioned terms. Here, then, is a brief explanation so that you will no longer be in Zone 0.

Zones as tone and texture

Ansel Adam distinguished among three different exposure scales for the negative:

- The full range from black to white, represented by Zone 0 through Zone X.
- The *dynamic* range comprising Zone I through Zone IX, which Adams considered to represent the darkest and lightest “useful” negatives densities?
- The *textural range* comprising Zone II through Zone VIII. This range of zones conveys a sense of texture and the recognition of substance.

He noted that negatives can record detail through Zone VII and even higher, but that bringing this information within the exposure of the print is extremely difficult with normal processing. Adams described the zone scale and its relationships to typical scene elements.

Reference: Ansel Adams, 1948, *The Negative: Exposure and Development*. Ansel Adams Basic Photography Series/Book 2.

Zone	Description
0	Pure black
I	Near black, with slight tonality but no texture
II	Textured black; the darkest part of the image in which slight detail is recorded
III	Average dark materials and low values showing adequate texture
IV	Average dark foliage, dark stone, or landscape shadows
V	Middle gray: clear north sky; dark skin, average weathered wood
VI	Average Caucasian skin; light stone; shadows on snow in sunlit landscapes
VII	Very light skin; shadows in snow with acute side lighting
VIII	Lightest tone with texture: textured snow
IX	Slight tone without texture; glaring snow
X	Pure white: light sources and specular reflections