

Challenges of Photography 1: Nasty Weather

It's human nature to want to stay indoors during horrible weather - you know, blistering heat, aching cold, gale-force winds, torrential rain - but these conditions can be perfect for fine, thoughtful photography. Many of my really special photographs required frozen fingers, heat headaches, or a good soaking in the rain.

Photographers are unique in their ability to create art on site in less than ideal conditions. (Try painting in the driving rain!) With a little preparation, some know-how and a little mental toughness, you can get busy turning those amazingly bad days into amazing photographs!

Photography in Hot Weather

It's hot enough to make your eyes cross - in fact, they do cross a little every time your pounding headache pulses with your racing heart. You've burned yourself twice by touching your searing hot, black metal tripod, and your sunburned skin feels like it's covered in fire ants. You'd like nothing more than to get out of this heat wave, order an ice cream and 20 litres of water, and jump in the lake.

Hang on a sec, though. Squint your eyes and look around you - the summer can bring some delightful visual treats your way. What if you could take your mind off the baking hot day long enough to actually make some photographs?

Though clothing can't actively cool you off, what you wear will hugely influence how you feel on a blistering hot day. Sunburned skin feels hot, so prevent sunburn by wearing light-coloured clothing or sunblock. A hat keeps the sun off your face, though the brim can interfere with your camera's viewfinder. You can either wear one with a floppy brim or one that can be turned backwards when needed, like a baseball cap. Sunglasses help protect your eyes, and can be pushed up onto your forehead when they're not needed. Cotton or synthetic clothing will keep you cool during the day, but cotton will stay clammy longer once the sun goes down in the evening.

To stay alert and creative in the heat of the day, stay hydrated. Dehydration, while not as dangerous as some think, will make you listless and fatigued, reducing your attention span and making it hard to concentrate. Sweating (which you'll be doing a lot of) purges your body of water, salts, and calories, so make sure you eat as well as drink. Small, light snacks will keep you awake in the heat longer than large, heavy meals. Sports drinks provide much of what your body needs, but are expensive - juice or water along with a small amount of food should do the same job.

In extreme heat, some mechanical camera components can break or malfunction. Aperture blades will occasionally expand and bind, either not closing to the desired aperture or staying closed after the exposure. The blades can sometimes be freed by gently tapping the lens or pressing the depth of field preview button, but often the lens will need to be cooled before it will work properly. Your camera's shutter can be damaged if the camera is pointed at an extremely bright object with the mirror locked up (a vibration-reduction feature found on some cameras). Avoid using the mirror-lock function if you're photographing the sun or a reflection of the sun on a hot day.

Heat waves are a hazard to clear photographs on a hot day. Heat waves are apparent ripples in the air just above the ground, caused by the difference in temperature between hot earth and slightly cooler air above it. Heat waves can confound any efforts to create a clear photograph of a faraway object low on the horizon. This effect is especially obvious when using high magnification lenses. There's nothing you can do to prevent it - you can only focus on other photographs, wait until the day cools down, or photograph the heat waves themselves!

Though heat can feel like a heavy weight on your chest, great photographic rewards can be reaped by venturing out into the desert or up the dusty summer trail. Midday high summer can sometimes feel eerily like the middle of the night - all is sleepy and quiet as everything alive waits to venture out in cooler temperatures. Take advantage of bright light to use unusually fast shutter speeds, or use the harsh contrasty light to create a mindscape of highlights and shadows. As always, you're only limited by your imagination!

Photography in Cold Weather

It's so cold you can see your breath...mostly in the form of thick frost covering your camera's viewfinder and ice around the hood of your jacket. You'd scrape it away, but your gloves froze to your tripod a couple of hours ago and your bare hands are so numb they feel like they don't exist. Worse, your jacket got wet after all that hiking, and now the cold is really starting to seep through and make you shiver.

Before you go home and make that extra-large mug of hot chocolate, realize that there are ways of making your foray into the wild a little more comfortable. After all, the cold temperatures of winter are what make it so beautiful!

Dressing for the occasion will keep you comfortable and allow you to focus on photography instead of your freezing fingers and toes. Long underwear and thick socks are a good start, keeping a layer of warm air close to your skin and wicking away moisture. Insulating layers go over the long underwear - sweaters, jackets, down clothing, and insulated pants, depending on the severity of the weather. Finally, add a wind breaking layer to keep your hard-won heat next to your body where it belongs. If it's raining or snowing, (see below) make sure that the wind breaking layer is waterproof.

Top it all off with a toque (an insulated hat), a scarf or balaclava, and warm gloves.

If you're going to be outside for a long time, running or hiking quickly, (a great way to stay warm!) or getting even slightly wet, make sure than none of your layers are made of cotton. Layers of thinner clothing are better than one bulky layer, allowing you to strip and dress as needed. Fingerless gloves with a foldable over-mitt will let you keep your hands warm and still easily operate your camera's controls.

Camera batteries suffer drastically decreased performance during very cold weather. Keep spare batteries in a pocket next to your body, swapping them often with the ones in the camera. In extremely cold weather, it may be necessary to keep all your batteries in your pocket, only loading them into the camera when you're ready to make a photograph. If you work in the cold often, consider buying (or making) an external battery pack that holds the battery in your jacket and supplies power to your camera through a cord.

Be aware of other limitations of working in the cold too. Metal surfaces can cool skin or even freeze to it, so wrapping your tripod legs with insulating foam or tape is a good idea. Hold your breath while composing a photograph to avoid fogging up your viewfinder and lenses. At northern latitudes, winter days are very short, so get outside before the daylight disappears! If you're using film, be aware that on very cold (and thusly very dry) days, film can break, or worse, build up static electricity from movement through the camera and create bright streaks through your photos. Wind film as slowly as is possible, (a nearly dead battery can be useful here) and don't make more than one photograph per minute.

Bring calorie-rich food and a hot drink in an insulated flask, even if you're only going out for a short time. Hot liquid warming your insides on a cold day is not to be missed! Hot drinks also help warm up frozen hands that spent too much time on tripod duty.

After your arctic adventure, when you bring your camera equipment inside, keep all camera bodies and lenses in their cases until they warm up to room temperature (about 3-4 hours) to prevent moisture from condensing on delicate electronics inside your camera. After your equipment has warmed up, open the cases and allow any accumulated moisture to fully evaporate before using the camera again.

Don't let the unique challenges of cold-weather photography keep you inside! The world can look very different and beautiful on a cold day - ice, snow, and frozen mist have all been favourite subjects for me in the past. Keep your eyes open for hoar frost, patterns in frozen water, and icy steam coming from warm water or underground venting systems. Winter light, especially at northern latitudes, can be very pure and white. The sun sits low in the sky, and lends a very 3-dimensional look to most subjects. With a little foresight, cold-weather photography can provide you with great experiences and remarkable photographs!

Tripod Photography in the Wind

If the wind's strong enough to blow you and your camera away, rip the shingles off your house, or toss large boulders into the air, it might be too windy to spend the day photographing scenery. (Get out of town - that's a hurricane!) But anything less than that is fair game! The wind can produce beautiful patterns in leaves, water, or just about anything pliable. There's only one problem - how do you capture that wonderful motion without the wind shaking your camera?

Unless there's enough light to use a very fast shutter speed, try switching to a short (wide angle), fast lens. Even with your camera mounted firmly on a sturdy tripod, the wind will find a way to shake it slightly. A long lens will show a noticeable amount of blur in the final photo, while a shorter lens will remain relatively sharp. While photographing the motion of leaves, water, or other windy-day subjects, experiment with a variety of aperture and shutter speed combinations to keep parts of the photograph sharp while blurring others.

Take the neck strap off your camera or hold it with your hand so it doesn't whip against your tripod legs during the exposure. If possible, mount the tripod on widely spaced legs close to the ground to keep it stable, setting it up in as sheltered a position as you can find. Sit or lie down if you have to. If the wind is very strong, make sure to keep a firm grip on film, memory cards, and anything else that might blow away. I nearly lost a heavy steel tripod on a very windy day in Oregon!

On a windy day, there is no substitute for patience. Sudden breaks in even very strong wind are common, and can provide a quick-thinking photographer with an opportunity to make the impossible photo. Be ready to trip the shutter as any moment, but be ready to wait like that for hours. If you think the photograph is something special, it might be worth waiting for. Resist the temptation to browse around for other photos - inevitably, the break will come when your back is turned!

I love the wind, and the moving patterns it makes in leaves, snow, water, grass, and many other canvases. Photography displays motion unlike any other medium - don't miss an opportunity to challenge yourself and excite your senses in the wildly moving air!

Photography in Rain, Snow or Hail

When water in any form is falling from the sky, especially in freezing temperatures, it's time to call it a day, right? Well...no. Stop thinking about your numb fingers and the water soaking through the seal in your camera for a moment and look around you. Different than usual, right? Water (or snow, or hail even) can make a plain place fascinating, covering every strand of grass with silver waterdrops, or sublimely, quietly reflecting the world. Some visual wonders disappear as soon as it stops raining, so it's well worth figuring out how to photograph in the wet without getting wet yourself.

Like photography in cold weather, how you dress in the rain or snow will largely determine your comfort and your ability to concentrate on your photography. Of course, if it's cold, dress for the temperatures as mentioned before. Since your hands will get the coldest when they're wet, make sure to wear warm, waterproof gloves. With practice, it should be possible to operate most of the controls on your camera with even very thick gloves on.

Waterproof boots, jackets, and pants will all help you stay more comfortable in the cold. However, even the best waterproof/breathable fabric won't keep you completely dry while you're hiking fast and sweating, so prepare for it. Wear clothes underneath that maintain their warmth when wet - wool or synthetic clothing is best. Cotton will stay clammy and cool your skin, even on a relatively warm day. With rain comes mud, so be sure you're OK with getting dirty!

The most effective tool for keeping rain, snow and hail away from you and your camera is the humble umbrella. I carry a pocket-sized one whenever the weather looks uncertain. Provided it's not windy, an umbrella is the best way to keep water off of your camera and out of your camera bag. Also, under the cover of your trusty umbrella, you won't have to use your jacket's hood, making it easier to look around for photographs.

If you do venture out in the full weather with your camera, protect it from the elements as much as possible, then forget about it. I've photographed with a variety of equipment in pouring rain and dumping snow, and have never had any serious malfunctions as a result. A lens hood will keep a lot of rain off the lens. If bad weather is the norm, try to find a sealed casing for your camera and lens. Most importantly, be very careful to not get any water in the camera when changing lenses or film. When you're not using your camera, point the lens towards the ground with your hand over the viewfinder. Before photographing in a snowstorm, try letting the camera freeze under cover. This will prevent snowflakes from melting on contact and will keep your camera dry.

When bringing your camera inside, keep it in its bag until it warms up to room temperature. Take the camera out of its bag and remove all lenses, lens caps, filters, and eyepiece covers. Let everything dry completely (8 hours or more) before putting it away. Sometimes you'll still see fog on the inside of a lens element. Before you panic and take it to a shop for repairs, try working the focus or zoom rings back and forth for awhile. This will work air through the lens and can help dry inner lens elements.

Enjoy the crummy weather! After a day spent photographing drops of water on delicate grasses, reflections in a rippling puddle, or a clean blanket of new snow, you'll feel the satisfaction of a job well done that no warm fire can give. And you'll have the soaking wet camera to prove it!

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