

On Trail

Feature»

Beyond Snapshots

Helpful tips and subtle strategies that will make your nature photographs turn out better than ever



One morning, just after sunrise, I was scrambling up a steep trail in the Colorado Rockies to a spectacular viewpoint when I practically tripped over a family of mountain goats. Pulsing with excitement, I whipped out my trusty disposable Kodak camera and snapped off some shots, thinking that I had just captured the next cover for *National Geographic*.

That month, as I worked at a summer camp in the heart of the Rockies, I had many similar experiences. When I returned home, I rushed to have my film developed so I could show my friends and family the amazing things I had seen. With plenty of hype, I tore open the pack of prints to find that not a single photo represented what I had seen. Too dark, too light. Blurry. Out of focus. Just plain boring. These photos were not the magazine cover shots I'd taken. They'd be lucky to grace the front of my refrigerator.

I suspect that many other outdoor enthusiasts who carry a camera

The hike along Dungeness Spit, located in the Dungeness National Wildlife Refuge, is chock full of abstract driftwood shapes. The added chance of seeing a variety of wildlife makes this a great hike for photography.

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have experienced a similar frustration. After my summer camp experience, I decided I wanted to put more focus and effort into taking photographs that captured the true beauty of the landscapes I encounter. I've learned that by correcting a few common mistakes and putting in a little extra effort, anyone can take pride in the photographs they capture. And it also helps that the state of Washington offers some of the most beautiful landscapes in the country, just waiting to be exposed on your camera's sensor.

Countless books cover photography's basic concepts, such as aperture, shutter speed and camera operation. So if you really want to understand how photos are captured, you should definitely head to your local bookstore or library and do some reading. The point of this article is to help hikers and backpackers take their photos from "meh..." to "WOW!" while they are on the trail this fall. So let's focus on the tactics that will help while you are in the field, tips that will improve your photographs right off the bat.



Shooting from an extra-low angle gives these often-photographed sea stacks on Ruby Beach a different look. Don't be afraid to get a little wet and wade into the water to get new perspectives on the beach.

Composition is difficult to teach. There is no secret formula, no step-by-step process that will result in excellent images time after time. It takes experience and a creative eye to compose a unique and interesting photograph. There are, however, several basic ideas to keep in mind while you are composing an image of your favorite landscape.

Here are four core concepts:

- **Focus.** Every photograph you take should have a point, a reason for being captured. If you just scrambled 3,000 vertical feet to get a view of Mount Rainier, make that view your subject, and frame your shot around it.
- **Look at your framing.** Now that you have your subject, think about what else lies within your frame. Often, as I'm composing a shot, I have to stop and make a conscious effort to check the edges of my frame. Is there a stick protruding out from nowhere? Is the horizon level? Am I cutting the top off the very mountain I am trying to shoot? Keep an eye out

for an eye-catching foreground as well. Is there a never-ending blanket of lupine in front of you, or some interesting rocks, or perhaps a glassy tarn reflecting your mountain peak? Anchor your image with an interesting foreground to give your photo balance.

- **Keep it simple.** Remember to keep your composition simple, emphasizing just a few attributes in the scene. If you try to capture everything around you—mountains, rivers, wildflowers, trees, marmots, hikers and a sasquatch—all at once, you will lose the focus in your image and you'll lose your viewers.

- **Make it your own.** For me, the biggest struggle with taking attention-grabbing photos at beautiful places is that there may already be thousands of photos taken from the same spot. Try to make your images your own. Don't try to copy what has already been done. Give your photo a unique perspective by experimenting. Try using a wide-angle lens. Photographs captured at eye level are generally boring, since that's the angle of view we always see, so try to get extra-low to the ground, or get high above the ground. Try to capture the elements that are truly unique to the scene, fleeting elements that may never be repeated in the same way, such as cloud formations, an amazing sunset, or, if you are truly lucky, a mountain goat that strikes a pose for you.

Now that you have the basics on composition down, let's talk about when to take photos. Unfortunately, the most convenient time to take photos doesn't usually correspond to the best time to take photos. Most hikers are out on the trail in midsummer, usually reaching their destination by noon so that they can be home for dinner. Midday, when the sun is beaming straight overhead, without a cloud in sight, creating harsh shadows, is possibly the worst time to take photos. Photography is all about the light, and good light is most abundant right before and right after sunrise and sunset, during what photographers like to call "the golden hour" or "sweet light." While these are tough times for the average weekend warrior to be out on the trail, they are almost always worth it!

Taking photos during the golden hour means one of three things: a.) you are hiking in the dark to reach your destination at sunrise, b.) you are hiking back to the trailhead in the dark after shooting at sunset, or c.) you are spending the night on the trail. My favorite of those options is to spend the night, as you get the opportunity to take photos at both sunset and sunrise.

After you select your next destination, you might be wondering what to take with you. Integrating photo equipment into your usual hiking equipment can add a ton of weight to an already heavy pack. A camera and lenses, tripod, batteries, filters, remote triggers, et cetera, et cetera, are useful for taking photos, of course, however, not all of these items are essential all of the time. Take a moment before you set out on your hike to think about what you are actually going to be shooting. I will pack with a particular image that I would like to capture in mind, even if I haven't been to the location before. I don't always end up taking the exact photo I saw in my head, but this approach helps me to plan. Do you really need that giant telephoto lens in your pack if you are going to be shooting landscapes? Probably not. Do you really need to have five extra batteries for a single day of shooting? Nope. Sort through your gear before you set out. You'll be really happy you did that when you are 10 miles into your hike. Avoid the temptation to take things like the Ten Essentials out of your pack in order to make room for your photo equipment. If you get lost and don't return from your hike, you'll never be able to show off those pretty photos you took.

And the single most important thing to remember while taking photos on the trail? Have fun. To me, there is something absolutely satisfying about spending time in a beautiful place and being able to preserve that place through photography, so that people generations from now will enjoy what we have been lucky enough to have enjoyed. I hope this article inspires you to get out on the trail and take great photographs, and I hope that you can use the images you capture to inspire others to hit the trails, too!♦

Five Photo Essentials

Here are five pieces of photo equipment that I recommend carrying at all times:

1. **Camera body** – Okay, that one should be obvious! I use a Digital Single Lens Reflex (DSLR) camera. This isn't the lightest camera option, as it is larger than a point-and-shoot camera and requires separate lenses, but the larger image sensor in DSLRs generally produces better image quality than point-and-shoot cameras.

2. **Two lenses** – A super-wide-angle and a super-zoom (mid-range to telephoto). This is my lightest option that covers pretty much any focal length I need.

3. **Carbon Fiber Tripod** – A tripod is essential for taking sharp photos during the golden hour. Leaving the tripod behind may be tempting, but I believe it is a must-have.

4. **Circular Polarizer** – If you are going to take a filter with you, this is the one to take. Circular polarizers will make the sky more blue, make colors more saturated, and take the harsh glare off water surfaces.



5. **Multiple memory cards** – Obviously a memory card is essential to digital photography, but I suggest taking at least two memory cards as they occasionally fail and the added weight is negligible.

Enter Northwest Exposure

Got all that? Good! Because you are invited to submit your very best images from Washington's backcountry in WTA's annual photography contest. Entrants may submit up to five images, one per category. Entries are due by October 10 at www.wta.org/trail-news/photo-contest.

Winners will take home exciting prizes from Lowepro and EverGreen Escapes.