

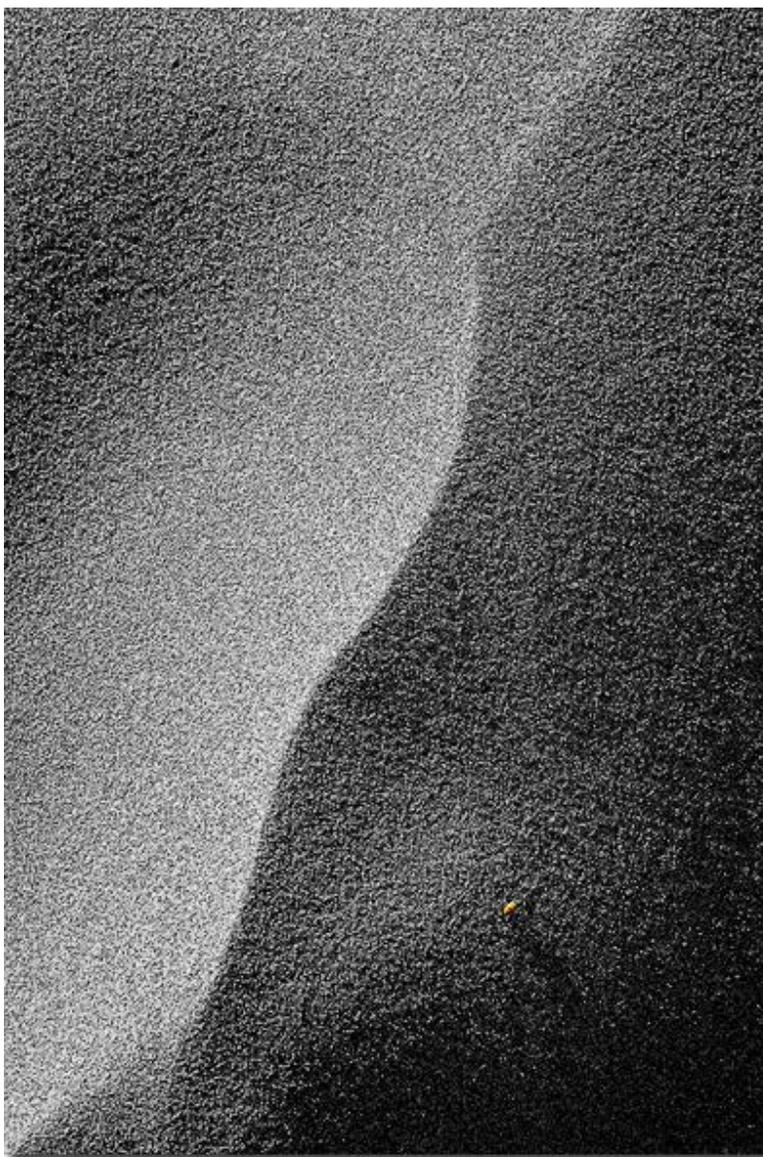


Holding Out For A Hero

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Hero images. That's the term many photographers use to label their very best images. The ones that really stand out. The true keepers.

So, when I entitled this essay "Holding Out For A Hero", I wasn't referring that that cheesy song from Footloose. I'm talking about the extreme lengths photographers - especially landscape and nature photographers - go to make an image that they're truly happy with. A hero image.



Ansel Adams, the most famous landscape photographer in history, once famously quipped, "Twelve significant photographs in any one year is a good crop". Think about the weight of that statement. Here is a man who took tens of thousands of pictures a year and only figured he made a hero image once a month at best.

Why is it so tough, then, for landscape and nature photographers to get hero images? Because we have literally no control over the most important aspect of photography: the light. Which really is to say the weather, because the weather

is what controls the light.

Case in point: two weeks ago, I returned to Great Sand Dunes National Park determined to get the image that eluded me on my previous trip earlier this summer. Upon arrival, I was disappointed to see that once again the sky was completely cloudless and therefore boring for photography purposes.



The weather reports said that clouds would be rolling in later in the week, so I figured I'd scout locations for the next several days in preparation for the dynamic weather to come. I made the grueling 3.5-mile hike to Star Dune, the most massive and tallest dune in North America. Once atop, I cracked a smile as I found a very compelling composition that would work perfectly later in the week.

Three long days later, with the clouds appearing on schedule, I labored to the top of Star Dune again, this time with a 40-pound pack in much colder, semi-rainy weather. It was one of the more tiring hikes I've ever done.

But, it was all going to be worth it! I just knew how it would play out: once the sun started to set, its golden, late-day light would illuminate the dunes and clouds in a breathtaking display that would make grown men weep. All my hard work and days of waiting would pay off in spades.



The sky was thick with dynamic clouds as desired, but, thankfully, just above western horizon there was a horizontal sliver of clear sky -- just enough for the sun to poke through for a few precious minutes. That would be all I needed. I was in position and ready to rock. Bring it on!

As the moment of truth neared, electric nervousness coursed through me -- I had so much riding on the success of this one image. Then, finally, after what seemed like forever, it happened. The sun's rays burst upon the scene like a supernova. They hit the westernmost dunes first, then slowly crawled across the rest of the dune sea. I was beyond ecstatic, yelling over and over. I could not stop smiling as I waited for the sunlight to light up the whole scene.

Then, I noticed something that erased my smile faster than a dead kitten.

A cloud had moved in on one side of the open sliver of sky to the west. It was a small cloud -- a puny cloud -- but that tiny little sadistic clump of water vapor distressed me more than a loaded gun in my face. It was partially blocking the sun's rays just enough so that only part of my image was being lit up. If that evil cloud had been just a tad to the side - literally, just a tad - things would've been ok. But, it was not.

As I watched in horror, the few-minute window of sunlight started to ebb, and the crushing realization that my image would not be illuminated in the way I'd hoped and all my work would be for naught gripped me like a brain freeze. I stood there completely numb for several minutes in a state of disbelief and bitter disappointment. Then, I began uttering a few phrases that aren't appropriate for this essay.



During the long, dark and draining hike back to my car, I tried to put it in perspective. This was nothing new. What had happened to me has happened to countless photographers over the years - just ask Ian Plant - and would undoubtedly happen again. Welcome to the life of a landscape photographer!

And the fact is, I did this to myself. No one made me take this trip. I could've just as easily stayed home and sat in the hot tub drinking beer. Besides, I still got to be immersed in nature for a week, and that's what it's all about. At least that's what I keep telling myself.

Lastly, there's always next time. And, I will be back. Be forewarned, dunes.



Before I go, I thought you'd like to see the image that almost was. As you can see, the sunlight never got where I wanted it. Imagine if that whole scene had been lit like the dunes in the foreground! For comparison, the second image was taken just minutes later, after the partial light show ended. Close, but no cigar.

Ansel Adams once said, "Landscape photography is the supreme test of the photographer -- and often the supreme disappointment." He was right.

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Kory Lidstrom is a professional photographer and successful businessman from Minnesota. He splits his time between Minnesota in the summer and the Caribbean in the winter. He specializes in landscape and nature photography, but can and has shot just about everything. See Kory's work on his website at www.FineImagePhotography.com.

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