

Overcoming Winter Photography Obstacles

Text and photography copyright © Samantha Chrysanthou. All rights reserved.

As an outdoor photography beginner, I discovered there were many obstacles to being comfortable while capturing that sweet, white, winter scene. Overcoming obstacles such as frozen fingers, numb toes, and that cumbersome parka/camera pack connection is critical to good photography. Without functioning fingers or with frozen toes and inaccessible gear, one cannot shoot effectively. What follows are some solutions I've learned to tackle these common winter conundrums.

Freeeeeeezzziinnngg Fingers!

The first winter obstacle is the most critical. There are, to my knowledge, no voice-automated cameras (now there's an idea! As Captain Picard would say, "Camera: tea, Earl Grey, hot."). This means fingers are still essential for winter photography. But most of us have experienced how metal feels in freezing temperatures! The only solution is a gloves/hand-warmer combination. The best I have come up with is putting a chemical hand warmer directly against my palm in my thin, fleece gloves. A loose, thicker over-mitt allows you to hold your camera and tripod without your hands and fingers freezing to your gear. I keep both the gloves and the mitts on when handling the camera on the tripod then take off the over mitts when I need to precisely finger a camera dial. A cord or lanyard attaching the mitts to my coat is handy so I do not drop my mitt into a churning river or down a snowy embankment.

Another tip is to be sure your tripod has insulating material over the upper part of the metal legs. I use pipe insulation wrapped with hockey tape to cover the metal on my tripod but you can also buy insulated tripod pads from [here](#). These pads do the same job as my home-made concoction, although you pay a higher price for this more attractive-looking solution.

Of course, you are not warm with this system if the temperature is below zero degrees Fahrenheit. I offer only my humble solutions to difficult problems. I also find it helps to jokingly tell myself that I am not out here to have fun while trying to become a better photographer. I am, in fact, engaged in the serious pursuit of memorable images. In other words, this is work, and work usually involves some amount of suffering.

Perhaps this particular winter photography obstacle is common only to me. I have poor circulation, which I blame on my ancestors.

Numb Toes (Or The Search for the Ultimate Winter Boot)

In what other profession could the requirements of footwear be so diverse and demanding? In my winter shooting, I have become obsessed with finding the perfect winter boot. The boot must be supple enough to allow me to work the gas and brake pedal as I drive from location to location, yet insulated and warm enough to protect my delicate feet from Arctic conditions while standing for hours in snow banks. The boot must be sturdy enough that I can scramble down a ditch, yet relaxed in fit to allow an extra pair of socks or two.

What I have learned is that the true secret is not in the boot itself, but in the socks. In this case, more is not better. A thin, insulating (not cotton) sock under a loose, thicker insulating sock will do the trick. I prefer a synthetic blend for the thin sock and wool for the outer sock. Both fabrics wick away moisture so my feet stay dry. Wet feet and cold temperatures are not a comfortable combination! For really cold days, I may even put in a chemical foot warmer on the tops of my toes between the two layers of socks to heat up my little piggies.



The Parka/Pack Conundrum

Whoever designed camera bags and packs did so without cold weather in mind. When you are dressed to survive in your thickest, goose-down winter parka, struggling into some sort of backpack harness is a real bit of exercise. If you need to change lenses or filters, chances are the item you need is inconveniently in the pack on your back. This means you must set your pack down in the snow, open it up, and retrieve your gear without dumping the contents into the snow. You soon begin to appreciate having a simple, easy-access camera pack system that you do not have to remove every time you change a lens or add a filter.



Perhaps not the most fashionable option, a large, loose belt pack/vest system with large lens pockets can be a lifesaver in winter. It fits over even the most generous winter coat and allows access without having to struggle out of the pack or risk getting snow into the pack when it is open on the ground. I use a belt and harness with padded lens and filter pouches that allow me to access everything I need without removing it from my insulated torso. My weapon of choice is a Lowe Pro S&F Vest Harness (see www.lovepro.com.) while other photographers I know are happy with the harness system from Think Tank (see www.thinktankphoto.com.)

Cold Batteries

Lastly, I discovered my digital camera batteries dislike cold as much as I do (must be the camera's ancestors!). To keep my camera going in the cold, I keep a spare battery in a pocket inside my parka where the battery will be warm. When the battery in my camera starts to get low on juice, I replace it with the warm battery from my coat. The cold battery then goes to my warm pocket and after a half hour or so, it is warm and ready to be used again. I can easily go all day alternating batteries as needed. But chances are I will give up before my batteries do!

The Final Word

Most of the above solutions are probably common knowledge to veteran photographers. But as a beginner, I had to experiment with fitting the gear to the weather in order to succeed. If you are too cold to shoot, then you won't be outside on that gorgeous, still morning capturing images of hoarfrost on barren winter trees.

Or perhaps there is a reason why people don't get out much during winter. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that it's really cold. But then again, I am a stubborn person (which I blame on my mother) and continue to enjoy framing up photographs in the frosty, winter air.

Comments on NPN nature photography articles? Send them to the [editor](#).

Samantha Chrysanthou was born in Lethbridge, Alberta. After moving for a period of time to northern Alberta, she returned in 2000 to southern Alberta to pursue a law degree in Calgary. After becoming a lawyer, Samantha began to realize her heart was more engaged in capturing the beauty of the landscape around her than debating the nuances of legal arguments in court. She has since left law to pursue writing and photography full-time. She particularly enjoys shooting the prairies, foothills and Rocky Mountains within an hour or so of her home in Cochrane, Alberta. Visit Samantha's website to view more of her work at www.chrysalizz.smugmug.com.



[Site Map](#) • [NPN Membership](#) • [Front Page](#) • [Reader's Forum](#) • [Links](#) • [Gift Shoppe](#) • [Terms of Use](#)

Copyright 2000 - 2008, Nature Photographers Online Magazine, Inc. All rights reserved.