

Background Attraction

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For the past 20 years or more there has been a trend amongst wildlife photographers - myself included - to minimise the contribution of the background in their photographs by rendering it as low key as possible. By doing so, the subject can be freed from visual competition and stand out clearly. The photographer's diligence in subjugating the background has, indeed, become regarded as something of a benchmark of their general photographic prowess.

This approach greatly under-estimates the contribution that the background can make to the look and mood of an image. Rather than acting merely as a passive neutral surface, the background can be used to create depth, to set up tension and, under certain conditions, to give sharp edges to out-of-focus subjects. Moreover, by reversing normal expectations of an illuminated subject and shaded background, the viewer can be challenged to look at the subject, literally, in a fresh light.

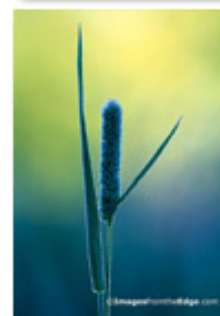
Within the two dimensional space of a photograph, a sense of depth is created not only by constructing perspective but also by juxtaposing warm (advancing) and cool (receding) colours. The effect is heightened when the subject in the foreground is conspicuously shaded while the background is lit. The Swedish photographer, Jan Töve, is the master of this technique and practised it heavily in the 1990's. It is hard to pin-point why, from a psychological point of view, looking from a dark place towards a light one makes the viewer feel positive but the device is familiar to painters and examples of well-known works employing it include Albert Bierstadt's "Sunset in Yosemite Valley, 1868" and "Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California, 1868" and Thomas Cole's "View from Mount Holyoke after a Thunderstorm (The Oxbow)". In the last work, the lighting is also used to make a statement reflecting attitudes towards wilderness at the time; the "civilised" areas bask in bright sun while the savage, untamed parts of the composition lurk in shadow.

When I photograph wildlife I am always on the look-out for these bright backgrounds but in reality there are many more opportunities to use this technique in the macro-zone. A telephoto (I use a minimum of 200 mm) gives maximum control of the background. At any given aperture and magnification depth of field is the same whether you use a 50 mm or a 500 mm lens but the background looks radically different as the 500 mm greatly magnifies out-of-focus, distant elements and makes them appear closer to the subject. The longer the lens, the more diffused the background. In practical terms, a 180 mm or 200 mm macro lens or 300 mm on an extension tube are the most versatile and easiest-to-handle tools for the job. After I find a suitable subject - one shaded under an open sky with a clear view through to an illuminated background - I decide how much background colour to include and adjust the composition accordingly. In these lighting conditions you can expect a strong blue cast, one I normally restrain with an 81b warming filter.

The contrast between the subject and background is crucial in technical and aesthetic terms. If your subject is mid-toned and you want to render it so, the background should not be more than 2 stops brighter - the latitude of slide film. Anything brighter and the background will burn out. This type of picture often looks better underexposed by about one stop - hinting as it does of a shaded subject. If contrast remains excessive use a white reflector (silver or gold can be too harsh) to re-direct some light on to the subject, taking care not to over-light it.

Use your camera's depth of field preview to determine how sharp the background will be. Generally, I use a much wider aperture than I would if framing a close up for maximum detail. It is sometimes wise to back off and sacrifice some magnification for the sake of more depth of field. Keep a low angle to reduce interference from unwanted vegetation just behind the subject.

Shooting this type of picture "into the light" presents other challenges. Firstly, the contrast will be considerably greater as you are looking towards the sun. It is also harder to set up a good contrast



between warm and cool tones. What you can exploit, however, is the sun's own brilliance. A setting or rising sun may itself feature in the background (a 200 mm macro provides an ideal amount of magnification for this) but you'll need to make your compositions and exposures quickly as it is astonishing how quickly the subject moves relative to the sun early and late in the day. An altogether more tricky approach exploits the way a brilliant directional light source creates a false sharpness around the edge of a defocused subject placed against it. As well as the sun itself, sparkling water offers an alternative - and safer - indirect light source as does a silver or gold reflector angled to catch the sun. You will normally need to shoot at quite wide apertures so that the highlights remain large, unless you want to create a pattern of hexagons.



Think in three dimensional colour as well as space and you'll transform restrained, sombre pictures into moody, colourful images.

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Niall Benvie, who runs [Images from the Edge](#), is the UK's most prolific writer on natural history photography, publishing almost 70 articles and a book (amounting to over 135,000 words) between 2000-2002 alone. But the scope of his writing extends much wider into issues of land management and the polarisation of nature and culture as well as travelogues and commentaries on subjects as diverse as species re-establishment programmes and eco-tourism.

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