

The Slow Road to Better Photos

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Some lessons take time to learn. I have improved my photography by learning to see like film, by understanding the nuances of light, and by creating strong, yet simple designs in my compositions. But the hardest lesson I have yet to master is the art of 'slowing down'.

In the past, I practiced what would best be called 'combat nature photography'. Whenever I went on a road trip, I had a 'strategic' plan to shoot the widest variety of imagery possible given the time available. For instance, one of my favorite road trips to do in Alberta is the 'Badlands Tour'. Although the Canadian province of Alberta is best known for its mountain parks (Banff and Jasper), there is also a stunning variety of alien looking landscapes along the Red Deer, Milk, and South Saskatchewan rivers in the southern portion of the province.

Every April without fail, I would head off for a week and shoot the bizarre rock formations of the Alberta badlands. My typical plan was to shoot one sunset and one sunrise in each location and then move on to the next spot. This meant getting on location by mid-day, power scouting for a sunset and sunrise composition and then shooting it during the sweet light. After the sunrise shoot I would hop in the car and speed off to the next location in time for mid-day scouting. In my naivety, I thought this was the most productive use of my time. Well... it wasn't.

Although I got some nice photos from each location, the depth of coverage for a particular spot was pretty 'shallow' and worse, it was also predictable. I often shot very similar images in each location from year to year (repeating my past successes). As well, all the rushing around sapped me of energy and thus affected my ability to think creatively while photographing.

This year, Anita, Alex (our son) and I decided to do spring vacation (from school) by camping in the badlands. It was a family vacation first, photography second. So we picked two spots with campgrounds located right in the badlands. Dinosaur Provincial Park (a UNESCO World Heritage Site) on the Red Deer River and Writing on Stone Provincial Park on the Milk River were our two choices, both offer exceptional camping, are family friendly, and both are wonderfully scenic.

In each spot we parked the camper van and spent lots of time hiking, riding bikes, reading, and just hanging out. I went out to shoot mostly at sunrise, and a few sunsets. The simple act of slowing down, immersing myself into the surroundings and putting no pressure on myself to 'shoot, shoot, shoot' resulted in imagery that was stronger and more pleasing than what I had created in the past.

During the trip I also spent time reading a travel book on Ireland. The Irish believe that quality of life is best achieved by doing a few things slow rather than doing many things fast. After seeing my photographic results from this trip I think the same philosophy applies well to photography.

Photo 1 is a typical image created of Dinosaur Park during one of my earlier 'get in, shoot, get out' trips. The shot is OK, it shows an overview of the

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Photo 1



Photo 2



Photo 3



Photo 4



Photo 5



Photo 6

badlands from the scenic lookout at the entrance of the park. Most photographers who visit the park shoot sunrise from this overlook (why should I be different?) and spend little time exploring the details of the rock formations.

Photos 2, 3, 4 and 5 show the more intimate, 'immersed' imagery I created during this trip. For me, these latter shots are much more representational of the dynamic character of the landforms in Dinosaur Park. Photo 1 now seems like a superficial, 'been there, shot that' type of image.

The rock formations at Writing on Stone Park are more pillar-like than the veined, rounded, mound-like formations at Dinosaur. Photo 6 shows a typical sunrise shot with warm light colouring the grayish 'Hoodoos' of Writing on Stone. This image is nice because it is enhanced compositionally by the v-like formation in the clouds. But by spending a little more time and immersing myself in the environment, I came away with more than the just the 'standard' Hoodoo shots (see photos 7, 8, 9 and 10). Photo 10 is a long dusk exposure where I painted light into the scene with a flashlight.

In the future, I plan to spend more time in fewer places and really immerse myself in my subject. I like what I am getting from ambling down the slow road. Next time you see a guy in a camp chair sipping a Guinness, it just might be a photographer wetting his creative juices in fine Irish style.

Darwin Wiggett - NPN 343

Editor's Note - [Natural Moments Photography](#) is comprised of the husband and wife shooting team of Anita Dammer and Darwin Wiggett. Anita has 17 years experience as staff photographer for the Glenbow Museum in Calgary and is currently doing freelance stock photography. Darwin has been shooting stock since 1990, and has two books published by Whitecap in Vancouver ("Darwin Wiggett Photographs Canada" and "Seasons in the Rockies"). Currently Anita and Darwin are Editors-in-Chief of Canada's [Photo Life magazine](#). In addition to their editing duties they specialize in landscape, nature, animal, humor and kid photography.

Comments on this article? Send them to the [editor](#).



Photo 7



Photo 8



Photo 9



Photo 10