

Mad Dogs and Photographers

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In 1931, songwriter Noel Coward wrote that only Mad Dogs and Englishmen go out into the mid-day sun. I'd like to make the case that the expression should be updated, because today, the only of God's creatures that venture out into the heat of the day are mad dogs and photographers. Coward was referring to tropical climates, but the same can be applied to the deserts of the Southwestern USA.

For a photographer, the intense heat of the desert sun during the summer months can be a formidable opponent. Temperatures of up to 115 degrees Fahrenheit can be more than uncomfortable, they can be life threatening. This is one reason why most photographers migrate to the cool of the mountains during the summer months. Why would anyone subject himself or herself to that kind of misery when they could be enjoying cool breezes at a much higher altitudes? It's because the common perceptions of the deserts - arid, barren land baking to crispy brown under the intense heat of the sun - is not totally accurate. Come the end of June, the desert monsoon begins. Masses of moist air swirl up from the Sea of Cortez in a counterclockwise direction, bringing that which the landscape photographer covets - weather. When the monsoon is working, cumulus clouds begin to form around 2:00 p.m., building into late afternoon thunderstorms.

If the monsoon works long enough, delivering moisture on a regular basis, the desert is transformed into a photographer's paradise. Towering cumulus clouds at 40,000 feet catch and hold the last light of the day. Thunder crashes and lightning splits the air. Rainbows become ubiquitous. Catchment pools in the slickrock retain the rainfall and reflect the desert mountains. If the pattern of rainfall is consistent over a 2 to 3 week period, Sonoran Deserts grasses will grow and summer poppies cover the hills at various altitudes.

There is a price to pay, however, and payment is dear. If the photographer is working near a town, that price may be from 50 to 80 dollars per day at the nearest motel to ensure a good night's sleep and a place to hang during the heat and (admittedly) long days. But there are many locations that are too remote to allow that kind of luxury. Out in the boonies, the process of survival becomes more difficult.

The first rule of the desert is hydration. The body must replace fluids that it loses to urination, breathing etc. Thirst is not considered a reliable indicator of hydration. Observing the color of one's urine, however, is. Dark yellow urine indicates a lack of proper hydration and the darker the urine, the greater the problem. Thirsty or not, fluids should be consumed at regular intervals.

The desert photographer must also aware of the symptoms of heat stroke. Heat stroke is hyperthermia in its advanced state that occurs when the body absorbs or produces more heat than it can dissipate through perspiration. The body's heat-regulating mechanisms become overwhelmed and body temperatures start to climb uncontrollably. It should be noted that while dehydration can contribute greatly to an advancing heat stroke condition (the body produces less sweat when dehydrated), one can get heat stroke while being well hydrated as well. Symptoms include, headache, dizziness, disorientation, fatigue, rapid heartbeat, seizure, loss of consciousness and death. Precautions to be taken are pretty obvious: a wide brimmed hat to shade the head and neck. The hat should be vented to allow evaporation of sweat from the head. Loose clothing should be worn for the same reason. Hydration is paramount. Sports drinks are recommended to replace the electrolytes lost to perspiration. Excessive exercise during the hottest parts of the day should be avoided.

I had a good friend who experienced heat stroke while working an assignment for *Arizona*



Highways and was able to relate to me a first-hand account. He was well hydrated and aware of the symptoms of heat stroke. In spite of this knowledge, he was hiking a trail in the Superstition Mountains of Arizona during the heat of early afternoon due to business scheduling issues. He was carrying lots of water and a topographical map with trails well marked. The trail he was hiking was less than 3 miles with 500 to 650 feet in elevation gain. He achieved his destination and worked fairly hard, climbing to find his shots. Problems cropped up as he returned.

His first symptom was a headache. Of course a headache might have any number of sources, but when he came to a fork in the trail, and was confused about which way to go despite of the presence of the map and the fact that he had already been through before, he realized that he had a problem. Finding a small bush, he crawled under it for shade. He soaked his shirt and put it under his head as he laid down. He then poured water slowly over his head, repeating the process as the water evaporated. He lay there until an hour after dark and then came out by headlamp. He told me the headache persisted well into the following day.

For me, the summer desert presents two separate issues: how to get a good night's sleep and how to survive the heat of midday. Of the two, I found the latter is more problematic. Away from pavement of the city, the desert cools down at night more than might be expected. Before I had the camper, I would set up a cot outside, strip down to my skivvies and pour a gallon of water over my head. Then I would lie down on the cot with a sheet, as the sudden deluge really does seem to lower the body temperature appreciably. (Wetting the sheet is optional.) Since I got the camper, the sleeping strategy consists of lying on the sheets and praying for a breeze. (The sheets on the camper mattresses are an integral part of this strategy.)

Days are so long at this time of year that I shoot mornings and evenings with down time in-between. During the monsoon, mornings are almost cloudless, and since I'm expecting weather in the afternoon, most of my time in the mornings is spent scouting for the later shoot. Since the advent of the camper, the strategies for this downtime are fairly simple. I hang out in the camper and stay hydrated, drinking 2 to 3 quarts of water. I have found that, with outside temps of 105, temperatures in the camper would top out in the low 90s. Before that, it was not so simple. When the sun is high in the sky, shade in the deserts is sometimes impossible to find, so I would create my own, in the form of a tarp suspended lean-to style from poles. Then I'd plop my tail in a lawn chair and pray for breezes.

I have to admit that in all the time I've worked the deserts in the summer, I've never encountered a dog, much less a mad one. In fact, I don't usually see anyone at all. I know of only a few other dedicated landscape professionals who actively take advantage of photographic opportunities at this time of year. Down in the deserts, I'm pretty sure that the only ones venturing out into the midday sun are photographers, and their sanity is certainly in question.

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George Stocking is a freelance photographer who has been roaming the American West from Canada to Mexico creating unique imagery for over a decade. His award winning images have graced the covers of such publications as *Arizona Highways*, *Outdoor Photographer*, and the *Audubon Engagement Calendar*. George has also won awards in international competitions such as the *Wildlife Photographer of the Year* and *Nature's Best*. Other clients include *Backpacker*, *Sunset*, *Country*, *New View (UK)*, and *America West*. He has been one of the leading contributors to *Arizona Highways* magazine, calendars, and books for over a decade. George is a member of the [Mountain Trail Photo](#) team, where he leads photography workshops. More of George's work can be seen on his website, www.georgestocking.com.

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