

Timing is Everything

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It's a late Saturday afternoon and I just finished closing my show booth after a poor day of sales on the municipal wharf in Santa Cruz, California. The rigors of exhibiting and selling your photographic work leaves little time to photograph on a regular basis, so this time I decided that after the show I would make a trip along the coast to one of my usual haunts for some much needed one-on-one time with my camera. I left Santa Cruz at about 6 PM with plenty of time to get to my favorite coastal beach to find and set up one or two good compositions. As I drove north, thinking about what images I might be able to compose given that the lunar cycle was on its last day before the moon transited the sun, I knew that low tide would occur about an hour before sunset exposing a world of rocks, grasses, plants and undersea life that is not often seen. I was excited.

On the way I passed by one of my lesser-visited areas, Ano Nuevo State Reserve. This area is famous for the Elephant Seals that come to shore in winter for mating. There are some lesser-known paths that lead to secluded beaches that I had not visited for quite some time. I stopped and contemplated what I might find there but decided to continue on my way to my original destination, Pescadero State Beach, as time was waning and it would take at least half an hour to get to the beach at Ano Nuevo to check it out and get back. If nothing "good" was there, I would have wasted my time - so I continued. I then stopped at another of my haunts, at the northern tip of Ano Nuevo, which is only about ten minutes round trip to the beach. I checked it out but to my disappointment, I found a family enjoying the seclusion of that beach. So back I went with my sights set on Pescadero. It was now almost 7 PM and the good light was fading fast. As I continued north, I started to notice an offshore fogbank getting closer and closer. As soon as I hit Bean Hollow State beach, 3 miles or so from Pescadero, I was under the blanket of fog. Oops! A slight miscalculation on my part neglected the possibility of fog, which is a common condition at Pescadero. So I turned around and decided that maybe Ano Nuevo was as good a choice as any since it was far enough south from the fog that I might actually get some good light there. Suddenly to add to the aggravation, as I was heading back south, the call of nature came beckoning. I stopped at Bean Hollow to use the facilities.

It was now 7:15 PM with just a little more than one hour before sunset, I arrived at Ano Nuevo at 7:30 and headed for the beach. Reaching the beach at about 7:45 did not give me much time to find a suitable composition as the sun was low in the northwest sky and was playing hide and seek among the remnant clouds of a tropical storm that was passing through. The beach was clean and void of any footprints due to its relative obscurity. I scrambled along the bluff just above the sand looking for a compelling composition. To the south, a large thunderhead seemed to be forming with telltale signs of rain. I decided that I wanted to include it in whatever composition I came up with. Then suddenly I spotted a partially buried branch of driftwood. Perfect! So I composed the branch among the ripples of sand and the cloud and waited for the sun to come out from behind the clouds to the northwest. Suddenly as the cloud peeked out, its light started to diffract in the falling rain and a partial rainbow started to form. Over the next five to ten minutes the intensity of the rainbow increased and I took one exposure after another adjusting the exposure as the light changed. Then after the sun set, the clouds to the northwest ignited in a blush of color and intensity that is rarely seen. I managed to compose the field camera again in time to get two more exposures.

As I hiked back to my truck that evening, feeling very fortunate to have witnessed such grandeur completely alone without another soul in sight, I heard, in the distance, the howling of a pack of coyotes in the hills east of Highway 1. Then an owl jumped off a Yerba Buena bush and flew off, disappearing among the grasses on the coastal plain. The feeling of being a part of this marvelous world instead of being apart from it is very satisfying. And so in my effort to find some one-on-one time with my camera, I found myself one with the world and contemplation took over.

It has been said that timing is everything, but what about fate? Why didn't I walk out to the beach an hour earlier? Would the thunderhead have been there dumping its rain and would I have seen it at all? Would I have composed with that branch of driftwood



"Repentance"



"Postscript Light"

had I not seen that thunderhead? And what about those incredible clouds, the howling coyotes, and the owl? At the end, I just sat there and soaked it all in and thought to myself, timing is everything, but it's nothing if we don't take the opportunities that fate hands to us. What I thought was a backup plan due to fog was after all the real plan all along, only I did not know it.

About the images...

Thumbnails link to large images.

"Repentance" - Ano Nuevo State Reserve, Shen-Hao 4x5, Nikon 75mm f4.5, f/32.5, 1-second, 1-stop GND, on Fuji Velvia 100F.

"Postscript Light" - Ano Nuevo State Reserve, Shen-Hao 4x5, Nikon 75mm f4.5, f/32, 4-seconds, 3-stop GND, on Fuji Velvia 100F.

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