

A Day of Solitude

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In early June, we had a [terrific discussion](#) in the Pacific Northwest regional forum about how frustrating it can be when we feel as if our artistic eye isn't growing, or we fall into a slump. We've got all the technical skills down pat, but our images seem flat, boring, or lackluster. It was one of the most active threads we've had in a while, with a lot of well-thought-out responses, and words of encouragement for the original poster.

I think most serious artists, professional or amateur, feel the need for occasional solitude - time alone and away from the stress of the world. We need to spare ourselves the day-to-day stress of getting through life; a day to just stop and allow our creative juices to flow freely. For me, a day of solitude provides opportunity to contemplate my life, philosophize to myself and, of course, lose myself in the viewfinder.

To do this, I need a special place where I feel completely comfortable and able to just relax and play with the camera. For me, that place is Gifford Pinchot National Forest, more specifically - the Mt. Adams Ranger District. I literally grew up on the edge of Gifford Pinchot, and have spent most of my life within a 2-hour drive of its borders. This is where I feel truly and completely at home. When I'm there, I am able to completely relax.

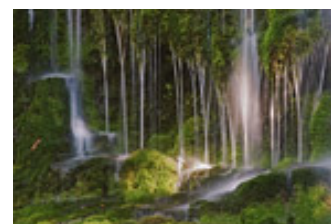
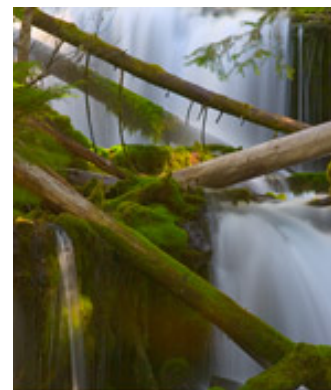
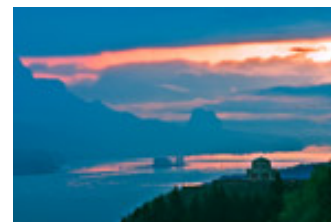
On March 25, 2005, the weekend following my birthday, I took off on one of my days of solitude, aiming my truck for Gifford Pinchot. I had planned this day for weeks. It was my birthday present to myself. By "planning" I mean I knew the date I was going, and that I was going to spend the day in the Mt. Adams District of the Gifford Pinchot. No details for a specific location, no time schedule. Too much detail would have created stress. As my wife can tell you, all too often I don't handle stress well; it usually handles me.

The winter of 2004-2005 had been especially dry and replete with beautiful sunny days. Several high temperature records for February and March were broken that winter. Then, the week of my trip, the weather turned wet and cool. Basically things were back to normal. I kept an eye on the weather in the days leading up to my trip. Luckily, that day was supposed to be the day between storms, and thus partly cloudy and relatively warm. My day was saved - the weather would be perfect for photography.

The night before, I made the decision to get up at 4:00AM and be out of the house by 5:00AM so that I could start my day shooting sunrise in the Columbia River Gorge. From there, I would head straight for Gifford Pinchot for the remainder of the day, and try to catch the evening alpenlight on Mt. Adams before heading home.

I arrived at Chanticleer Point around 5:50AM I got a little wet during my futile wait for the sun to do something spectacular. Don't get me wrong - it was a pleasant sunrise and I enjoyed it immensely, but I just wasn't seeing any photographs. I left Chanticleer around 6:30AM and began to work my way east on the Columbia Gorge Scenic Highway, steadfastly avoiding stops at the many waterfalls in the Gorge. I wanted to get to the peace and quiet of the forest as quickly as possible. If you've ever been down "Waterfall Row" you know just how difficult it was for me to drive by without stopping. I probably should have taken the Interstate.

Around 8:00AM I topped off my tank in Trout Lake, and bought a couple maps at the ranger station. After talking to the forest ranger about the road conditions, I realized that the snow hadn't melted nearly as fast as I'd expected, given the warm weather. I wasn't going very deep into the forest today. I headed toward Bird Creek Meadows on Road 82. After about 5 miles or so the road was blocked by snow. At this point I stopped and studied the map a little, and decided that I would just



wander aimlessly for a while and see what I find.

Eventually, I found a landing and stopped to enjoy the quiet. I'm always overwhelmed by the quiet of the forest, with only the occasional breeze, bird chirp, eagle screech, or a woodpecker hammering away at a tree. I quickly felt myself relax and become part of the environment.

I soon moseyed over to see what was beyond the rise in front of me. Finding nothing of interest, I came back to the truck, unloaded my gear, and set up the camera and tripod. I spent the next 2+ hours just snapping pictures in this one area. I nearly filled up my 2GB memory card. I didn't come away with much, but I got lost in the viewfinder for a while and enjoyed every minute of it.

Knowing that I was relegated to a few roads near the southeast borders of the forest, I spent much of the rest of the day with the truck in 1st gear, and my foot off the accelerator, just letting "Ol' Bessy" crawl along the forest roads, as I kept my eyes open for photo ops.

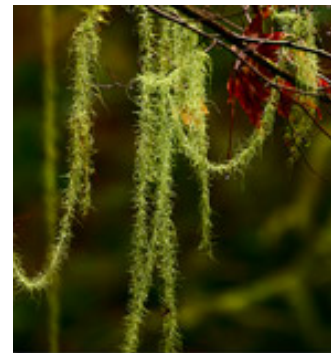
I spent the entire day shooting with my Canon EF 70-200 f/4L, occasionally attaching my newly acquired extension tubes for some close-up and macro work. As it turned out, I didn't shoot the sunset that evening, but I had a peaceful easy day alone, and that's what mattered most. I wasn't on a strict itinerary, and I took what fate gave me that day. Fate didn't give me a sunset.

I ended my day at Trout Lake Creek campground. Being late March, I had the place all to myself. I sat by the water for an hour or so, just snapping comps of the boulders and rapids. By now I was so relaxed, I was ready to crawl in the back of the truck and sleep for the night, but I hadn't packed any camping gear so I had to head for the barn.

I highly recommend this kind of trip to any photographer at least once a year. If you've been struggling through a creative dry spell - get away from life for a day. If the forest isn't your thing - try the desert, or if you're at home in the city - find a street market or a favorite park. Just make sure you're effectively alone, and no one is holding you to a schedule. Feel free to get home really late. On this trip, I left home at 5:00AM and pulled into the driveway 16 hours later. I was too worn-out to even process my images that night. I had a lot of time to think that day and I had some small epiphanies about artistic aspects of my photography. Nothing that I can articulate in words, but it has had a positive effect on my photography, and I'm much more comfortable with the results of my work. Go lose yourself in the viewfinder; it's very rewarding therapy.

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Curtis Knight is an avid amateur nature photographer from the Pacific Northwest. Curtis is a native of Southwest Washington State, currently residing in Vernonia, Oregon. Curtis is constantly learning and building his library of images in hope that when he retires, he'll have gained the experience and build a library sufficient to supplement his income with fine art prints. His camera bag contains a Canon Digital Rebel (300D), and a Canon EOS 300 loaded with a roll of E100VS. To go with the cameras is a modest assortment of lenses, filters and gadgets.

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