

Feature Photo...

Alpine Sunrise, Upper Young Lake, Yosemite National Park

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- Camera: Pentax 67II
- Lens: Pentax 55mm
- Support: Bogen 3001
- Film: Fuji Velvia
- Exposure: Unrecorded
- Filter(s): Singh-Ray 2-Stop and 3-Stop Graduated ND

The Tuolumne Meadows region of Yosemite National Park is one of the most spectacular places in California's Sierra Nevada Range, if not on Earth. Due to its rugged alpine topography, the Sierra Nevada lays unbroken by road for almost two hundred miles from its southern tip. That is, until you reach Tuolumne Meadows.

Tuolumne Meadows sits like an emerald jewel amidst the beautiful white granite domes and peaks of its surroundings. Arranged (naturally) almost like a large urban park, Dana Meadows and Tuolumne Meadows combined present a few miles in length of nearly flat meadows, wildflowers, creeks, rivers, forests, trails,well, you get the idea. It's paradise.

I have cumulatively spent weeks in the region climbing and photographing over the last few years. Doing so has allowed me to become more intimately connected with the topography, geology, and biota of the region. In 2001, while descending from a technical climb of 12,590 feet Mt. Conness (the highpoint of the region), I spotted a hanging alpine meadow at approximately 11,000 feet. I set my sights on July 2002 to return for the peak of green and wildflowers at the site.

Fast forward to July 14, 2002: I have made my way to upper Young Lake, approximately 10,400 feet in elevation. I am hoping this will provide the access I seek to the hanging meadow, but after the seven mile approach here with seventeen pounds of photographic equipment and an equal amount in camping gear (sleeping bag, stove, food, etc.), I find disappointment. I discover

that the additional distance and elevation gain required to reach the hanging meadow looks quite difficult, and I am not even sure I can make it back to upper Young Lake (my camp for the night) by headtorch on this near moonless night. Instead, I make the best of it by designating upper Young Lake as my photographic destination and begin scouting for compositions in the afternoon light. Come sunset, I've made a few good photographs, but none in the fine alpine light I really seek.

I awake at five a.m. (only in the mountains do I naturally awaken this early without an alarm!), and am alarmed by my first glance at the sky. Even though it is still quite dark, what I can make out of the clouds in the sky looks ominous. Initially, my thoughts are that we will get showered upon as we did the day before. Monsoon conditions have moved into the Sierra for a spell, which is a large part of the reason why I chose to be here this weekend.

As the sky lightens even further, I can now see the detail in the clouds and instantly realize that magic will happen. I take inventory of cloud shapes and positions, and make the best determination I can as to where I should place myself. I recall one of my favorite spots from the evening before and realize that these reflecting ponds just off the edge of the lake will be perfect as foreground material. I rush to the edge of the lake and await the magic. I wish I had my 45mm lens to capture an even greater piece of the sky, but I'll have to make do with the 55mm.

I quickly take stock of the scene. The cirque which encloses upper Young Lake is still in deep shadow, but the sky is going to light up brilliantly. The only chance I have at accurately capturing this scene is by stacking my Singh-Ray graduated neutral density filters. I have only two: the 2-stop soft grad, and the 3-stop soft grad.

The magic arrives, and I quickly meter the scene...perfect...roughly five stops of difference. I slightly overexpose for the foreground to open up the details, and let the rest fall where it may.

It was certainly one of those moments where I pray that all my practice and study of photography pays off. Did I meter the *right* foreground object? Will the sky end up being overexposed? Will I get the photo?

The magic happened.

Editor's Note - Michael E. Gordon lives in Long Beach, California, climbing and photographing landscapes of the western U.S. -- mainly the beauty in his home state of California. Stay tuned for his upcoming NPN article on the use of and special techniques for graduated ND Filters. You can see more of his work at www.mgordonphotography.com.

MG-NPN 492