



Catching the Cold

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Winter photography gives us an opportunity to capture scenes that are unique to many viewers. Streams, rivers and lakes can be covered with pancake layers of ice or blanketed with pillows of powder snow. Animals covered in hoary frost appear ghostlike in early morning ice fog. Even in the southwest you can find icicles hanging against the red rocks. The variety of subjects is only limited by our imagination. So let's get out, shoot away, and make great art. We can show the subjects of our photos in a way that they have never been seen before.

Easy to say isn't it? But there are challenges to overcome, or at least cope with, before you can effectively make great photos in the winter. Just a few speed bumps, little things such as: frostbite, dead cameras, fogged lens, and those gray skies. But hold on before you give up and head to San Diego or Fort Myers - let me make a few suggestions.

First, take care of yourself. It doesn't matter how well your equipment is prepared if you can't function in the cold. You can be comfortable at most normal winter temperatures if you dress right. For the sake of argument let's say normal would be down to 10 below. I think most would admit anything below this is extreme and calls for extreme dress, such as arctic suits and the like.

For normal days I recommend layering with the latest synthetics from your favorite outdoor retailer. That would include thin gloves layered with heavier ones, rubber-bottomed felt-lined boots and a cap that will pull down to protect your ears. . Check out the catalogs for the clothing that meets your needs. Don't forget to look at chemical hand warmers too - I bet you feel warmer already!

So now you can layer up or down as the conditions require to remain comfortable. You have plenty of liquid to keep from becoming dehydrated. Your pockets are lined with your favorite high-energy snack to keep you going. Now you need to be concerned about how you are going to keep your equipment working in the cold.

I like to start the day with the vehicle warmed up and then let it cool down inside as I head towards my destination. This way I am comfortable when I first head out into the cold, and I can adjust to spending the day in a vehicle with the heater off or on low. Remember, when getting in and out of a vehicle over the course of the day, every bit of snow that comes in with you and is melted will turn into water vapor that can put your equipment out of business.

There are only a few things you need to keep in mind to help your equipment continue to work in the cold -

- Keep your camera and lens from getting warm too fast after they have been in the cold or they will become covered in condensation
- Keep batteries warm or they will rapidly loose energy
- Don't breath on the camera or lens

Simple but how do you do this and still use your equipment?

To keep equipment from becoming a victim of condensation, I use two techniques. First - when you are outside using your gear, try to keep it as dry as possible. I prefer to use plastic garbage bags and rubber bands. You can find the big plastic bags anywhere these days - I have picked them up at Hudson's Bay Company stores near the Arctic Circle.



After any "cold soaking" time outdoors, my gear goes in the plastic bags before it is brought back into a vehicle or warm room.

The other technique is just as simple. Keep your gear cold once it gets that way. When I bring my camera and lens back in the vehicle, it is immediately covered with a dry coat, sleeping bag or other insulation. The same applies when my gear enters a warm room.

Most modern cameras need battery power. Digital imaging needs lots of battery power. Bring spares. Keep your batteries warm and they will hold their charge longer. These days I carry a DC to AC power converter that is small and easy to bring along in a vehicle. The converter plugs into the cigarette lighter and I usually have a battery being charged when I am shooting.

When you leave the roadside to capture that perfect shot, there are a couple things you can do to get to your location with less trouble. Even if you are not using skis or snowshoes, you should consider using ski poles to help your balance and give that added lift when you hit a low spot or drift. In deep snow there is a special consideration - don't spread your tripod legs wide and stick them in the snow. This can lead to a bent or even broken tripod. The snow will cause the legs to be pushed further apart as weight is applied to the tripod. Keep the legs close together as they enter the snow. The snow will help spread the tripod legs and support your gear.

Following these suggestions should keep you and your equipment going on your cold weather photo shoot.

So how do you make great photographs with winter's sometimes gray overcast sky?

Like any other season, if the sky is drab and boring, keep as much of the gray out of the composition as possible. Remember we are really photographing light and how you use its quality will make or break your photograph. Dark foreboding skies can be more interesting than blue skies with puffy clouds. If there is a storm coming or leaving, watch for those spotlights breaking through the clouds. Catch one of those beams of light on a subject with a dark background and you have magic. Use shutter speeds above 1/250 to catch falling snow flakes. If the light is flat giving little texture to scenes, think about shooting that intimate still life on snow or frost covered ground cover. Let the lack of shadow work for you in flat light.

Another thing to consider would be those pesky exposure problems brought on by all that light bouncing off a white surface and being measured by a meter intended to look at neutral tones. The quick and easy way to solve this problem is to take your meter reading directly off the snow and adjust with positive compensation. Somewhere between plus 1 and 2 should do the trick. On bright sunny days, plus 1-2/3 works well with my Canon cameras. Higher elevations with haze seem to require plus 2 while overcast can bring proper compensation down to plus 1 stop. These are the times that make that digital camera invaluable. Don't clip your histogram and you should be good to go.

So there you have it. Stay warm. Keep your gear dry and your batteries charged. Let your imagination run wild. The low raking light of winter can bring the sweetest images of the year.

I am looking forward to seeing yours.

JL-NPN 1136

About the author...

Over the past 30 years Jess's photos have appeared in a diverse range of publications from *National Geographic* and *Paris Match* magazines, to specialized publications such as *Defenders of Wildlife* and *Peterson's Hunting Annual*. While past experience is one measure of skill, Jess believes that what you are doing today is more important. With that in mind, he continues to record the evolving culture, lifestyles and especially the wildlife and wild places of the North American West and beyond. You can view more of his work at <http://jesssleepphotos.com>.

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