



Jim Zuckerman's

PHOTO INSIGHTS

May 2026

Post-processing landscapes
Sky Replacement: Uploading your photos
Harsh midday lighting
Photo Tours
Photography quiz
Ask Jim
Student Showcase
The Story Behind the Picture
Back issues



Table of Contents

- 4. Post-processing landscapes
- 8. Sky replacement: Uploading your skies
- 11. Harsh, midday light
- 17. Photography quiz
- 19. Jim's eBooks
- 22. What's wrong with this picture?
- 25. Short and Sweet
- 27. Ask Jim
- 28. Photography tours
- 30. Student Showcase
- 36. The story behind the picture
- 38. Past issues
- 46. Subject index

On the cover: A drone shot of the Bentonite Hills, near Torrey, Utah. *On this page:* Long Dong Silver, near Hanksville, Utah.



The recent photo tour I led to Utah made me think about what people who love photography will put up with to get wonderful pictures. One of the mornings during the tour, for example, we left the hotel at 3:45am to photograph the Milky Way. In the Spring, the galactic core is best photographed between 3 and 5 o'clock in the morning. When we all got great shots, we then returned to the hotel, packed up, and left at 5am to drive about 45 minutes to an incredible sunrise location called the Moonscape Overlook. The last few miles to the overlook was on a hellish gravel road.

During all of this, no one complained because they were here for one reason only: to take great pictures. On all of my tours, my clients put up with long drives, bad roads, extreme heat, brutal cold, uncomfortable humidity, and stressful airports just to take amazing pictures of amazing subjects. When they get back home, the physical discomforts is a distant memory. What stays poignantly in their minds is the experience of seeing great things, taking incredible pictures, and the lifelong pleasure they get of enjoying the images and sharing them with family and friends.

The picture on the opposite page is an example. From the parking area we had to walk a mile to get here and then climb a slope to position ourselves for the 'money shot.' Again, no one complained because what we were seeing and photographing was so unique and so beautiful.

The truth is, I feel sorry for non-photographers. They miss so much.

Jim Zuckerman
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POST-PROCESSING

LANDSCAPES

The photograph below is a RAW file right out of the camera with no tweaking at all in post-processing. It is a formation called Factory Butte near Hanksville, Utah. I include this site in my Bentonite Hills photo tour because it's a dynamic subject when seen from pretty much any angle.

I took this shot with a 400mm focal length from a significant distance, and the dust in the air reduced contrast and desaturated the colors. But the truth is that RAW files are not intended to be

the end product. They come out of the camera with reduced contrast and saturation. Unlike film, they need to be 'processed', which basically means moving sliders back and forth until you like the results.

The software programs most people use to process RAW files are Lightroom and Adobe Camera Raw. I use the latter because, before Lightroom was introduced, all we had was ACR and I just stuck with it. Both programs do the same thing and have, essentially, the same or similar

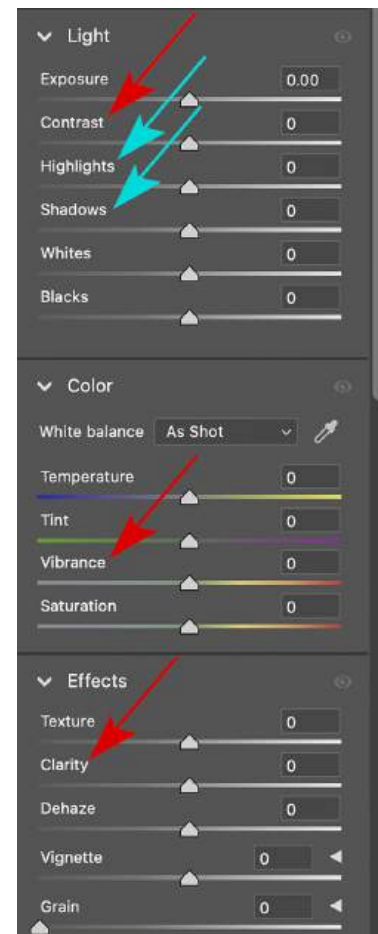


tools. If you shoot in jpeg mode, which I don't recommend, you can tweak the images using the same sliders, but the detail in highlights and shadows is not as good as if you'd chosen to take pictures in RAW mode.

The difference between an original RAW file and its modified version is dramatic. See in the image below and on the previous page. It's the difference between mundane and awesome!

For landscape photography, the sliders in Adobe Camera RAW -- and they are the same in Lightroom -- are shown at right. The three red arrows point to the sliders I use first and in this order: *Contrast*, *clarity*, and a small amount of *vibrance*. The contrast slider makes the biggest difference, then clarity adds drama and punch, and vibrance (not saturation) makes the colors really pop.

I usually find it necessary to then use the *shadows* slider because when contrast is applied, shadows become darker. The shad-



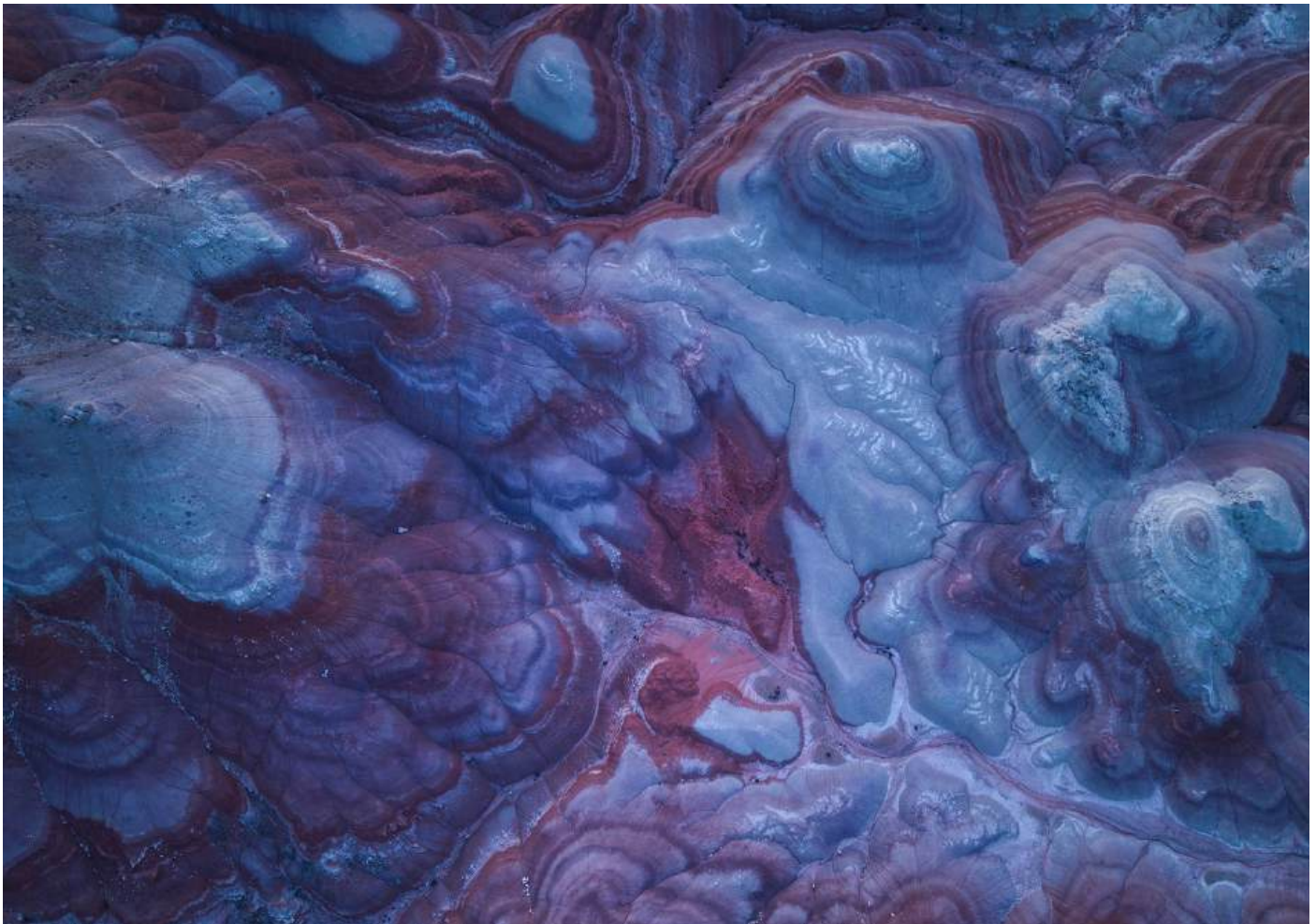
ows slider mitigates that problem. At the same time, increased contrast lightens highlights, so I have to apply the *highlights* slider. If you have a light sky, this same slider brings out more detail in the sky by reducing exposure in the bright areas of the image.

With respect to skies, there's nothing that dramatizes a landscape more than a beautiful and complimentary sky. The original picture of Factory Butte had a common blue sky, and while that is ok, the replacement sky I added in the final image is much better. Actually, that was the sky in the morning seen in the east; I was facing west to shoot the butte, so I simply used the eastern sky and composited it above the butte in the west. To do this, I used *Edit > Sky Replacement* in Photoshop.

[See the next artical beginning on page 8 to learn how to upload your own skies into the Sky Replacement dialog box.]

For those of you who enter contests in which this kind of manipulation is not allowed, I understand. But how many times have you heard "photography is an art"? If that's true, then you can be as creative as you want with your 'art', just like Picasso, Van Gogh, and Chagall did to their art . . . and Ansel Adams did to his images.

Another remarkable comparison between the original RAW file that came out of the camera and its tweaked version is shown below and on the next page. This is a shot from my DJI Air 3S drone with a 70mm lens. To go from



the original to the final version, I moved the *contrast* slider, the *clarity* slider, the *shadows* slider, and the *vibrance* slider. You have to be careful using vibrance because the image can quickly become garish and unreal. In this instance, I only used a small amount of vibrance. I know the colors in this picture look artificial, but that's actually how they look in diffused light. Drone photography in the Bentonite Hills is breathtaking, and ground-based shooting is also amazing.

The strong bluish hue comes from using daylight white balance with diffused light at dawn. Unlike most landscapes, these mountains look best in soft light. As soon as the sun comes up, they are still very photogenic, but the real magic happens before sunrise and after sunset. I know that's counterintuitive to photog-

raphers because we've been taught from the beginning of our involvement in photography that golden light is the best case scenario for landscapes and most nature subjects.

If a landscape is too bluish for your taste, the best way to address that issue is to use the *color temperature* slider in ACR or Lightroom. Moving the slider toward the warm (yellowish) end of the slider brings the colors back to what we would normally see in the middle of the day. The bluish cast can be eliminated completely.

Personally, though, even though we don't typically see this kind of blue in nature, I think it's a compelling color in landscapes. No one ever said you have to photograph what you see. There is nothing wrong with photographing what you imagine. §



Sky Replacement

How to Upload and Use Your Own Images

Years before Adobe introduced the Sky Replacement feature in Photoshop, I was replacing boring or mundane skies to drastically improve photographs. The difference in the before and after is remarkable.

For example, compare the original shot of Ogdzieniec Castle in Poland, right, taken with a boring white sky to the modified version below. The difference is night and day. Similarly, the jabiru stork on the next page was photographed



against a white sky as it was flying to its nest to roost for the night in the Pantanal region





of Brazil. I added the pastel sunset colors and now the picture is much more compelling.

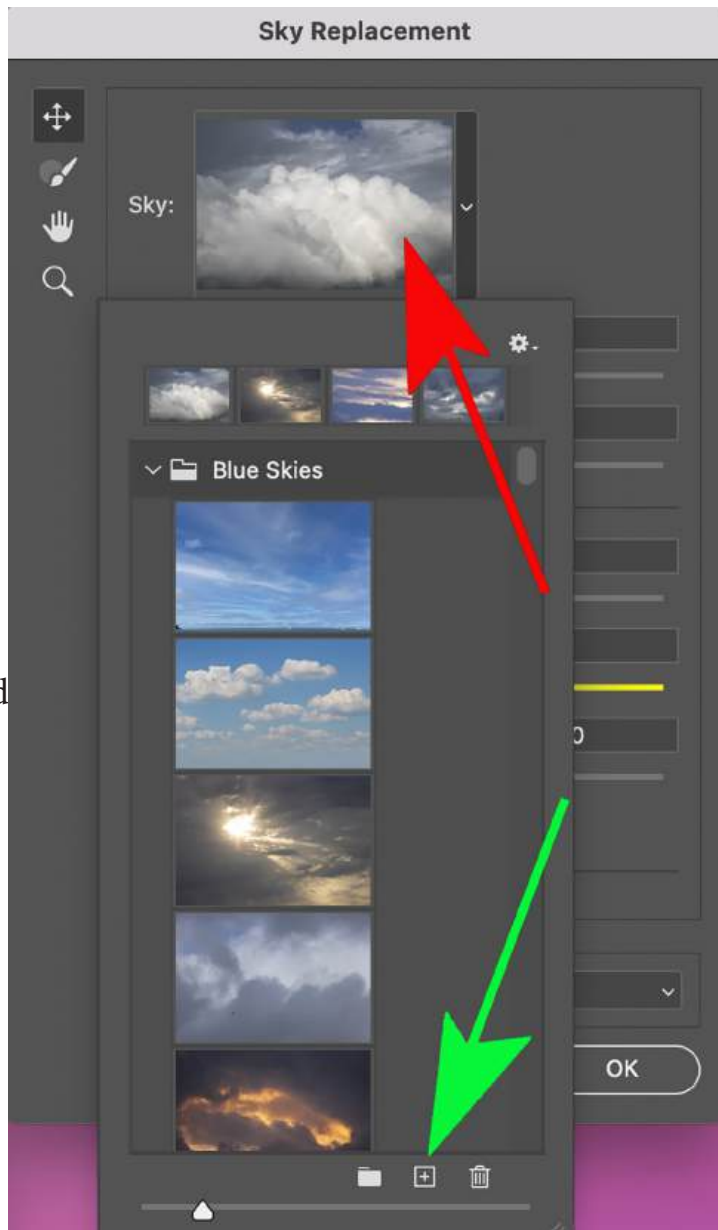
It's so easy now to add a sky thanks to the pull down menu command, *Edit > Sky Replacement*, in Photoshop. Most of you probably use this feature already.

The problem, though, when you first open Photoshop, the list of skies available as you scroll down the dialog box belong to other photographers. They come from Adobe Stock. We as Photoshop subscribers have permission to use these images, but there is something that really bothers me about using other people's images in my composites. My policy is if I don't push the shutter button, the picture isn't mine. And if the picture belongs to someone else, I don't want to use it.

Loading your own sky images

The screen capture on the next page shows the Sky Replacement dialog box. To upload your sky pictures here, click on the first photo (red arrow) -- whether it's yours or an image from Adobe Stock. A submenu opens up. At the bottom of that submenu, there are two important icons: a + and a trash can. To delete the skies from Adobe Stock, simply click on each sky picture, one by one, and then touch the trash can (purple arrow). That particular sky photo will be removed from the list of skies. Continue the process until all of them are gone.

To upload your own skies, select which images you want to upload. You can put them on your desktop or in a folder. They should be hi res, and you can use any type of format. Then, click



on the + icon (green arrow) and navigate to the place where your skies are located. Select the individual skies and then hit *return* or *enter*. This will upload all the skies you've chosen and they will appear in the list of images you can now use to replace any sky.

At any point, you can add more sky images using this same procedure. You will want to include skies with puffy white clouds on a blue background, storm clouds, sunrise and sunset clouds, rainbows, and even lightning if you have it. This

will give you a lot of options.

When replacing the sky, it's important to match the lighting with the landscape or cityscape. For example, if the light on the ground is midday sunshine, it wouldn't make sense that the sky is full of clouds taken at sunset.

On the other hand, with sunset lighting on the land, you could have a cloudy or stormy sky above. That does happen. The composite, below, shows this. The golden sunrise light at Moonscape Overlook near Hanksville, Utah, is framed by natural looking rain clouds that replaced a bland and pale blue sky.

Nature photographers are concerned about capturing a scene or subject with a complimentary or dramatic sky in the background. But once you learn to use the Sky Replacement feature in Photoshop -- with your own images loaded -- it won't matter what the sky is because you can make it perfect in post-processing. Sure, it's always great to capture a great scene without manipulation, but you know that doesn't happen often. This technique puts all the odds in your favor. §



Dealing with HARSH, MIDDAY LIGHTING

My recent photo tour to the Bentonite Hills in Utah was essentially a landscape tour. Everyone knows that the best images are taken at sunrise and sunset, so we'd get up early for sunrise, then come back to the hotel for breakfast. This was followed by a midday siesta to avoid the harsh light of an overhead sun, and then we would go out again in the late afternoon for low angled sunlight. We were tired for sure, but this also produced the best images.

On the 5th day of the trip we moved from one hotel to another, and on the way we visited Goblin Valley State Park. Due to our schedule, we had no choice but to shoot in the middle of the day. In fact, it was 12 noon when we entered the park. I was hoping for overcast, but instead the light on the intriguing land forms was disappointing. It was harsh and definitely unattractive.

In this kind of situation, there are only two things you can do to make it look better. It will never look as good as sunrise or sunset,



Iceland Drone Tour

August 24 - September 2, 2026



or even overcast light. But it's better than nothing. The first solution is HDR. Only this technique will fill in the shadows with detail and prevent the highlights from becoming overexposed.

The picture on page 11 is a 5-frame HDR composite. Unlike a single capture in which excessive contrast would force shadows to go black and overexpose highlights -- the multi-frame composite reveals as much detail as possible. The more contrast in the scene, the more frames you need to mitigate the problem. I use 5 frames instead of 3; in some situations where deep shadows or brilliant highlights (like reflections on water) are present, I'll use 7 frames.

The only other possible approach to midday light is to have the sun at your back such that you are photographing subjects front lit as in

the hill below. There is still contrast; you can see dark shadows with little or no detail. But the majority of the image is illuminated well. On the hill itself, there is virtually no shadows at all so we can see complete detail throughout the landform. I could have done HDR here to bring out the detail in the shadows, especially those in the lower left portion of the image, but in this instance I felt it wasn't necessary.

Photography is all about showing detail. Sure, there are times when shadows are an important part of an image, but in most of the photograph -- especially in nature -- we want to see and appreciate the detail in the scene. When we are forced to take pictures in harsh, midday light, the only two solutions to deal with garish pictures is HDR and front lighting. The images won't be as attractive as when shooting in low angled sunlight, obviously, but it's the best we can do in a difficult situation. §



Frog and Reptile Workshop

June 13 - 14, 2026



Exotic Birds of Colombia

Sept. 23 to Oct. 3, 2026



The Pantanal, Brazil

Nov. 11 - 19, 2027



Photography Quiz

1. In black and white photography, a color filter:
 - a. Lightens its own color and darkens its complementary color
 - b. Darkens its own color and lightens its complementary color
 - c. Has no effect on the tonal relationships in the image
 - d. Darkens the overall image uniformly
2. You can't photograph the galactic core of the Milky Way in the Northern Hemisphere from November to February.
 - a. True
 - b. False
3. Using a lens hood on a wide angle lens with a small f/stop like f/22 is not a good idea because
 - a. Vignetting may occur
 - b. The image resolution suffers
 - c. Light reflects off the edge of the lens hood causing unwanted streaks of light
4. Dust on a telephoto lens will show up as dust specks in your pictures.
 - a. True
 - b. False
5. The best shutter speed for birds in flight to freeze even the wing tips is:
 - a. 1/2000
 - b. 1/2500
 - c. 1/3200
 - d. 1/8000
6. The best exposure mode when shooting the Milky Way is:
 - a. Program mode
 - b. Shutter priority
 - c. Aperture priority
 - d. Manual mode
7. The worst thing that can ever come in contact with your camera is:
 - a. Excessive heat
 - b. Extreme cold
 - c. High winds
 - d. Salt water spray
8. Is it possible for a flash card to accidentally go through a washing machine cycle with images intact?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
9. The best type of microscope for photography is a:
 - a. Monocular scope
 - b. Binocular scope
 - c. Trinocular scope
10. When using a tripod, you should turn off the image stabilization feature.
 - a. True
 - b. False

Answers on page 51

UPCOMING PHOTO WORKSHOPS



FROG & REPTILE WORKSHOP in Kansas City

This is an exciting macro workshop in which you will be able to photograph about 40 species of colorful dart frogs and exotic reptiles. Held in a hotel conference room, Jim sets up natural backgrounds for outstanding photos. The photo at left shows a Jackson chameleon with the background replaced in Photoshop.

June 13 - 14, 2026



GREAT GRAY OWLS, CANADA

Get up close and personal with these spectacular birds flying with their magnificent wing spans. The slow flying owls are easy to photograph, even for beginners, and you will absolutely love your pictures!

February 13 - 18, 2027



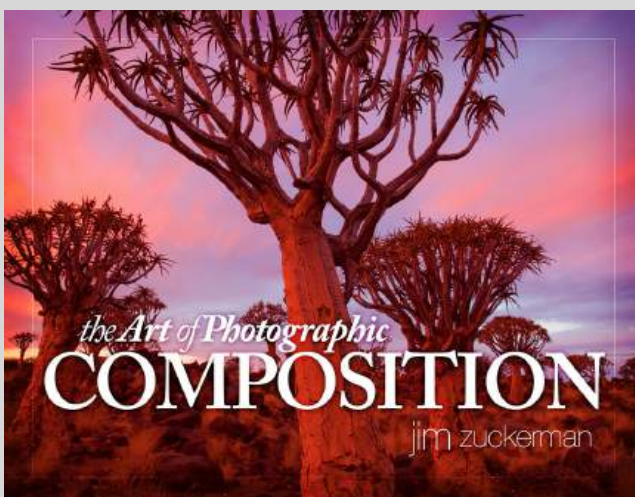
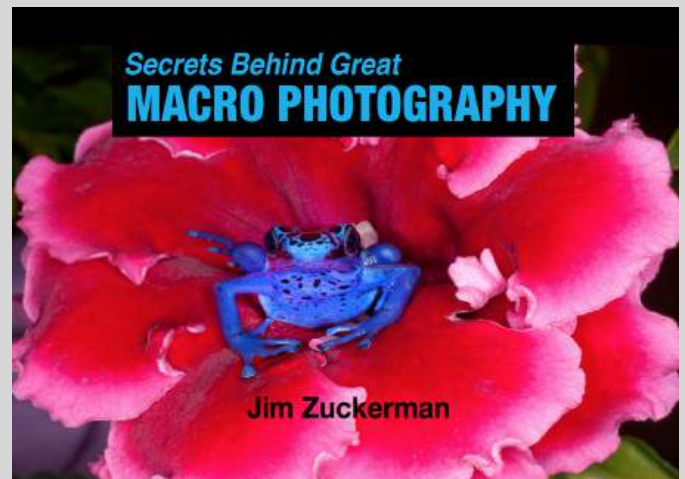
TEXAS BIRDS

Get up close and personal to many species of exotic and colorful birds. We shoot from a blind and get frame-filling shots of cardinals, green jays, crested caracaras, painted buntings, and more. Based in McAllen, Texas.

May 12 -15, 2027

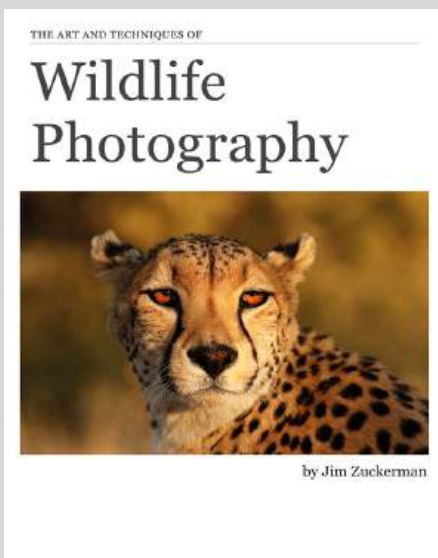
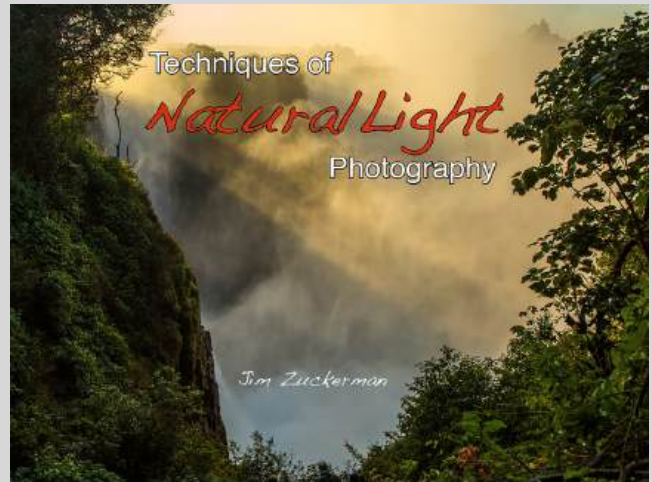
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eBooks continued

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Carnival in Venice

January 30 - February 5, 2027



What's Wrong with this Picture?



I photographed this jaguar on the hunt in the Pantanal region of Brazil. At the time, I was using a Canon 500mm f/4 super telephoto. The advantage of this lens is the large maximum aperture of f/4, but the disadvantage is its rigidity in terms of composition.

It's impossible to zoom in and out for the best framing of a subject, and that's what happened here. The jaguar was unexpectedly close to the boat I was in and I couldn't zoom back to include the cat's entire head. Therefore, I clipped the top of its head in an unattractive way. This is largely why I now use as my main telephoto the Canon 100-500mm zoom. Besides being lighter and less expensive, it gives me tremendous compositional flexibility.

I was able to save the picture by using Photoshop's brilliant AI algorithms. In



this case, I used Generative Expand to extend the area of the frame above the jaguar. By doing this, the software expanded the image area and filled it in with the top of the cat's head plus additional foliage was added. The result looks perfect -- there is no telltale editing at all.

This is one of the most useful tools in photography because, as you can see, it can solve all kinds of problems.

If you clip a bird's wing, cut off a person's feet, or inadvertently cut off part of a car, that's not a problem now. All of those things can be accurately re-built in Photoshop. In the past, we'd throw away those images. Now we can save them and even make them award winning photos. \$

Indonesia Wildlife

October 29 - November 8, 2027



SHORT AND SWEET

1. In most situations when photographing landscapes, sunrise and sunset lighting is best. Golden light and long shadows plus pronounced texture make great images. But with the remarkable colors in the Bentonite Hills, Utah, diffused light is the ideal to bring out the amazing colors in the land formations.



2. People who love photographing animals want to do so in the wild. The experience is exhilarating and the pictures reflect the natural behavior of the subjects. We can't always travel to exotic places to photograph animals, so don't overlook zoos. They are convenient and they house hundreds of exotic species like this panda I captured in the Memphis zoo.



3. If you like to work in Photoshop to create unique and compelling composites, photograph all kinds of backgrounds for future use. You never know when two images work perfectly together until you try them. This is the Paris opera house and a model I combined in Photoshop.



4. The general consensus in photography is that you don't put subjects in the middle of the frame like this red barn in the Palouse region of Washington state. Sometimes I agree with this, but other times a centrally composed subject works perfectly. Rules are merely guidelines to be followed . . . sometimes.



Ethiopia photo tour

Go back in time 20,000 years

January 5 - 18, 2027



Surma tribe



Dallol Depression

ASK JIM

Every month, Jim answers a question from his online students, from people who participate in his tours and workshops, or from subscribers to this magazine. If you have a question you'd like Jim to answer, please drop him a note at photos@jimzuckerman.com.

Q: Jim . . .When I have a foreground element close to the camera position, I'm including in the composition a landscape in the distance, and I'm using a wide angle lens, where do I focus for maximum depth of field? On the foreground or the background?

Katherine Holton, Ann Arbor, Michigan

A: Some photographers would answer you with a formula for the hyperfocal distance. While this would be correct, I have a much easier formula I've used for my entire career and it works perfectly. Take the focal length of the lens -- let's say it's a 24mm -- then divide that by 3. The answer, 8 in this case, is the number of feet from the camera where you focus for maximum depth of field. If you are using a 14mm lens, then you'd focus just under 5 feet for complete depth of field.



Partial List of Photography Tours 2026 - 2027

EXOTIC COLOMBIA BIRDS
Sept/Oct 2026



ASIA for BEGINNERS
Oct 2026



DUBAI & ABU DHABI
Nov 2026



WINTER WILDLIFE WORKSHOP
Dec 2026



ETHIOPIA
Jan 2027



CARNIVAL in VENICE
Jan/Feb 2027



GREAT GRAY OWLS
Feb 2027



TEXAS BIRDS WORKSHOP
May 2027



CHILE: THE DESERT to the SEA
Sep 2027



VIETNAM
Oct 2027



INDONESIA WILDLIFE
Oct/Nov 2027



THE PANTANAL, BRAZIL
Nov 2027



WINTER WILDLIFE WORKSHOP

December 16 - 20, 2026



Mountain lion



Arctic fox

STUDENT SHOWCASE

Each month, Jim features one student who took beautiful and inspiring images on one or more of his photography tours or workshops. It's really fascinating how photographers see and compose such different images even though we may go to the same places. Everyone takes great photographs on Jim's trips.

John Benitez, Bend, Oregon. **Winter Wildlife Tour.**



© John Benitez

Student Showcase, continued



Student Showcase, continued



© John Benitez



© John Benitez

DUBAI & ABU DHABI TOUR

November 14 - 22, 2026



Great Gray Owls workshop

February 13 - 18, 2027

spectacular action shots



The Story Behi



nd the Picture



This is the remarkable Bentonite Hills in Utah taken from my DJI Air 3S drone. Bentonite clay was formed from volcanic ash that covered the area 150 million years ago. The first rays of early morning sun can be seen hitting the top of the hill.

What's interesting here is that the golden color we love so much in landscape photography doesn't work here. The blue and red colors in the clay are drowned out by the intense yellow hues from the sun. While the texture and forms are still attractive, the beautiful natural colors that show so well in diffused light are lost after sunrise.

My photo tour group based in Torrey, Utah, left our hotel at 5am to arrive at an elevated vantage point about a half hour before sunrise. Both land-based photography and drones were able to capture these incredible colors before the golden light completely changed the color palette. In my career, this is the only time I've seen that sunrise colors reduced the visual impact of a landscape.

The camera settings were 1/1600, f/1.8, and 80 ISO. §

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Nov. '12



Dec. '12



Jan. '13



Feb. '13



Mar. '13



Apr. '13



May '13



Jun. '13



Jul. '13



Aug. '13



Sept. '13



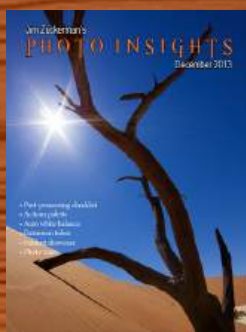
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Jan. '14



Feb. '14



Mar. '14



Apr. '14



May '14

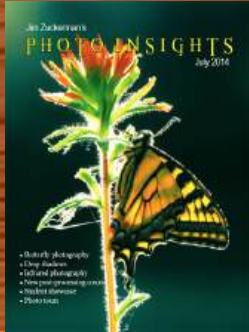


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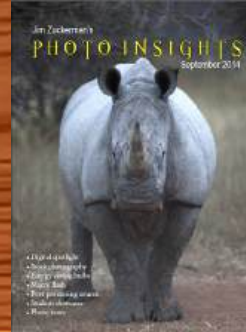
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Nov. '14



Dec. '14



Jan. '15



Feb. '15



Mar. '15



Apr. '15



May '15



Jun '15



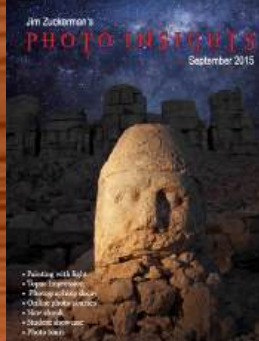
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Sept. '15



Oct. '15



Nov. '15



Dec. '15



Jan. '16



Feb. '16



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Apr. '16



May '16



Jun '16



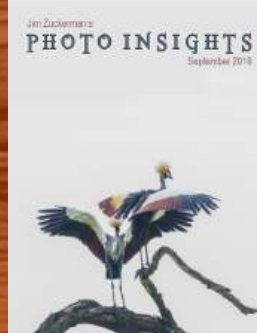
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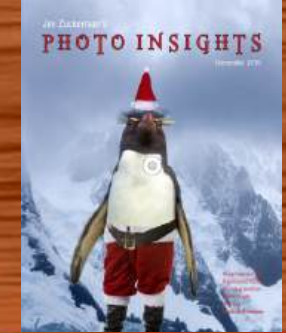
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Jan. '17



Feb. '17



Mar. '17



Apr. '17



May '17



Jun '17



Jul. '17



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Sept. '17

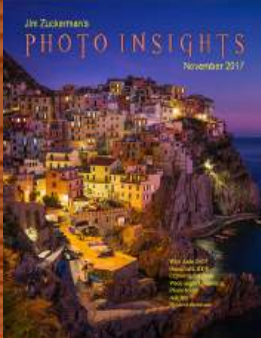


Oct. '17



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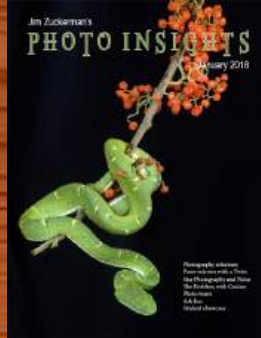
Nov. '17



Dec. '17



Jan. '18



Feb. '18



Mar. '18



Apr. '18



May '18



Jun '18



Jul '18



Aug '18



Sept. '18



Oct. '18



Nov. '18



Dec. '18



Jan. '19



Feb. '19



Mar. '19



Apr. '19



May '19



Jun '19



Click on the past issues of
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Jul. '19



Aug. '19



Sept/Oct. '19



Nov. '19



Dec. '19



Jan. '20



Feb. '20



Mar. '20



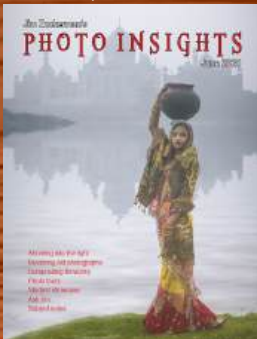
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May '20



Jun. '20



July '20



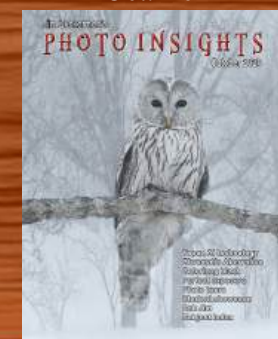
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Oct. '20



Nov. '20



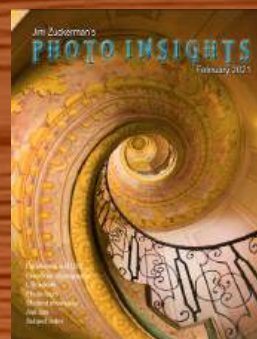
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Jan. '21



Feb. '21



Mar. '21



Apr., '21



May '21



Jun. '21



Jul. '21



Aug. '21



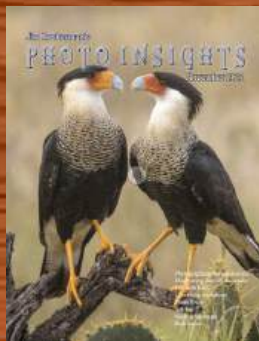
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Nov. '21



Dec. '21



Jan. '22



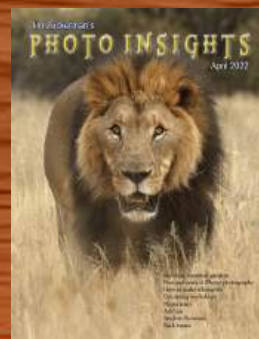
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Mar. '22



Apr. '22



May '22



Jun. '22



Jul. '22



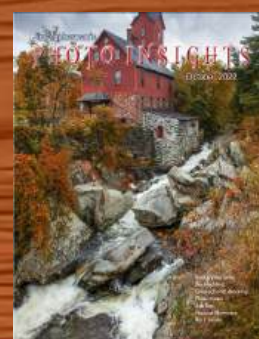
Aug. '22



Sept. '22



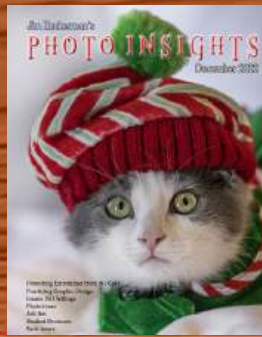
Oct. '22



Nov. '22



Dec. '22



Jan. '23



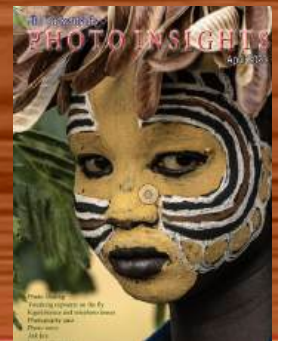
Feb. '23



Mar. '23



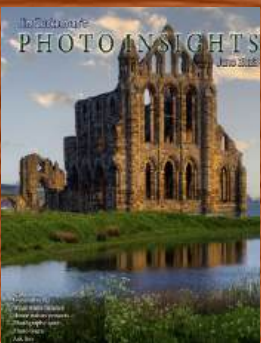
Apr. '23



May '23



Jun. '23



Jul. '23



Aug. '23



Sept. '23



Oct. '23



Nov. '23



Dec. '23



Jan. '24



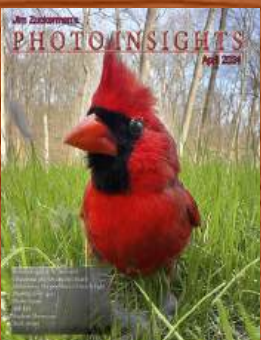
Feb. '24



Mar. '24



Apr. '24



May '24



Jun '24



Jul '24



Aug. '24



Sep. '24



Oct. '24



Nov '24



Dec '24



Jan '25



Feb '25



Mar '25



Apr '25



May '25



Jun. '25



Jul '25



Aug. '25



Sep. '25



Oct. '25



Nov. '25



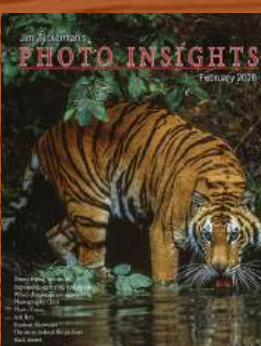
Dec. '25



Jan. '26



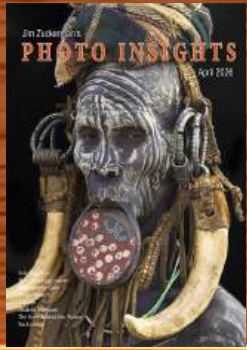
Feb. '26



Mar. '26



Apr. '26



May '26



Subject index for past Photo Insight issues

1/3 focus law Jul. '15
 3D sphere Mar. '16
 90 degree finder Mar. '13
 Abstracts in soap Feb. '15
 Abstracts, Shooting Mar '19
 Aerial photography Jun. '13
 Aerial photography Jan. '21
 African safari May '16
 AI plus Photograpjhy Oct. '23
 AI, Photos-to-AI Oct. '24
 Airplane windows Mar. '16
 Alien landscapes Jan. '13
 Anatomy of 8 photographs Jan. '16
 Anatomy of an Action Shot Feb. '24
 Angled perspectives Jan. '19
 Aperture vs. shutter speed May '14
 Aperture priority Sept. '14
 Aperture priority and other modes Jul. '24
 Aurora Borealis Apr. '17
 Autofocus, When it fails Aug. '25
 Auto white balance Dec. '13
 Autofocus, when it fails Apr. '15
 Autofocus failure Aug. '15
 Autofocus failure Jan. '17
 Autofocus challenges Apr. '18
 Auto ISO Nov '17
 Auto White Balance Mar' '21
 Autumn Foliage Sep. '18
 Autumn Color Sep. '20
 Autumn foliage photography Oct. '21
 AWB versus Daylight WB May '24

Back button focus Oct. '18
 Backgrounds, wild Nov. '12
 Backgrounds, busy Apr. '13
 Backlighting Apr. '16
 Backlighting Oct. '22
 Birds in flight Aug. '13
 Birds in flight Jan. '14
 Birefringence May '18
 Birefringence Dec. 24
 Birds in flight Mar. '16
 Birds in flight, camera settings Jan. '23
 Birds in flight, camera settings Dec. '24
 Birds in flight, Strategies for shooting Dec. 25
 Bird Photography Jun '19
 Black backgrounds Aug. '23
 Blacklight photography Feb. '21
 Black velvet Mar. '14
 Black and white conversions Mar. '17
 Black and white infrared Apr. '24
 Black and white solarization Sep. '17
 Black and white with color Jan. '20
 Black and white plus color Mar. '23
 Blown highlights Feb. '18
 Blue monochromes Jan. '22
 Black Plexy Aug. '22
 Blur, field Nov. '18
 Blur technique Oct. '17
 Bokeh Jun. '15
 Botanical gardens, shooting Apr. '22
 Butterfly photography Jul. '14
 Buying nature Jul. '24

Camera buying guidelines Dec. 21
 Camera settings for landscapes Feb. '23

Camera setting priorities Jun. '17
 Canon R5 Mar. '21
 Capturing lightning Jun. '13
 Capturing lightning Jun. '24
 Capturing what you don't see May '21
 Catchlights Jul. '16
 Changing perspective May '21
 Cheap flash stand Apr. '13
 Chemical crystals, photographing Mar. '27
 Children photography Jun. '14
 Choosing a telephoto lens Dec. '20
 Chromatic aberration May '13
 Chrome Dec. '18
 Cityscapes Aug. '14
 Cityscapes May '16
 Clone tool, fixing an issue Sep. '17
 Clone tool technique Jul. '20
 Color theory Nov. '23
 Composites and Light Dec. '17
 Composites, Secrets to perfect Jun. '24
 Compositing images Apr. '19
 Compositing, 7 steps Jan. 22
 Composites, How to make Aug. '25
 Composition, different approach Jan. '15
 Content-aware, New Aug. '20
 Content aware move tool Jan. '23
 Contrast vs. exposure Jul. '15
 Contrast, When it is good Sep. '24
 Converting to black and white Mar. '22
 Correcting keystone Jun. '21
 Creating a star field Jan. '14
 Creating Art out of Motion May '22
 Creating a Sketch Dec. '17
 Creative blurs Jan. '14
 Custom functions Jul. '23t

Dark backgrounds Nov. '19
 Dawn photography Jan. '17
 Dawn photography Feb. '17
 Dead center Jan. '13
 Dead center Oct. '23
 Dealing with smog Oct. '16
 Decay photography Sep. '15
 Define Pattern Sep. '18
 Define Pattern Sep. '24
 Depth of field Aug. '16
 Depth of field confusion Jan. '20
 Depth of field and distance Dec. '18
 Depth of field and obliqueness May '21
 Depth of field, shallow Apr. '20
 Depth of field vs. sharpness Nov. '20
 Diagonal lines, Using Aug. '25
 Double takes Apr. '20
 Drone flying in winter Feb. '26
 Drone photography Mar. '23
 Drone, Lessons from a tour Oct. '24
 Drop shadows Apr. '19
 Dust, Minimizing Aug. '19
 Dust specks May '25t
 eBook, how to make Jan. '13
 Elevated vantage points Aug. '23
 Eliminating people from photos Jun. '22
 Embedded in Ice Oct. 17
 Energy saving bulbs Sep. '14
 Equidistance and telephoto lenses Apri. '23
 Exploring the power visuals of AI Mar. '23

Subject index for past Photo Insight issues

Exposing for the sun	Sep. '16
Exposing for silhouettes	Mar. '26
Exposure, the sun	Jul. '13
Exposing for snow	Dec. '24w
Exposure technique	Sep. '13
Exposure, snow	Jan. '14
Exposure triangle	Nov. '14
Exposure, to the right	Apr. '15
Exposure compensation	Sep. '16
Exposure compensation	Mar. '21
Extension tubes	Dec. '13
Extension tubes	Jul. '23
Face sculpting	Apr. '21
Face sculpting	Feb. '22
Festival photography	Sep. '20
Fill flash	Sep. '13
Filter forge	Feb. '13
Fireworks	Jul. '13
Fireworks, Compositing	Jun '20
Fisheye lenses	May '13
Fisheye lenses	Feb. '15
Fisheye fantasies	Oct. 21
Fixing parallax	Oct. '24
Flash backlighting	May '15
Flash, balancing exposure	Oct. '15
Flash, balancing off-camera	Dec. '18
Flat art	Sep. '16
Flexify 2	Mar. '20
Flood fixes problems	Nov. '19
Floral Portraits, Indoors	Aug. '21
Flowers	May '15
Flower photography	Apr '21
Flowers in harsh light	Jul. '16
Focus on the eyes	Dec. '20
Focus points	Mar. '15
Focus points	Sep. '20
Focus stacking	Mar. '17
Focus stacking	Aug. '19
Fogged lenses	Jan. '26
Focusing in the dark	Oct. '16
Foreign Dancers, Photographing	Nov' 17
Foreign models	Jun. '13
Fractals, generating	Sep. '13
Fractals	Jul. '19
Framing	May '17
Framing	Jan. '24
Freezing ultra action	May '17
From Terrible to Beautiful	Aug. '19
Fun with paint	Oct. '16
Fundamental ingredients	Apr. '13
Fundamentals That Make Great Photos	Jan. '19
Fun With Christmas Lights	Jan. '21
Fun with Food	
Graphic Design	Jul. '20
Garish imagery	Dec. '15
Generative fill	Jun. '23
Getting money for used gear	Jan. '22
Getting the blues out	Dec. '23
Great subjects	Apr. '15
Great ceilings & HDR Panos	Jul. '19
Green screen	Mar. '13
Ground level shooting	Oct. '22
Grunge technique	Feb. '13
Harsh light, the problem of	Apr. '24
Harsh, Midday light	May '26

Heavy Lens Debate, The	Feb. '23
Helicopters, Shooting from	Mar. '25
HDR, one photo	Apr. '13
HDR at twilight	May '13
HDR, realistic	Jun. '15
HDR, hand held	Dec. '16
HDR, hand held	Nov '17
HDR, hand held	Jul. '18
HDR panoramas	Jun. '16
HDR, choosing the number of frames	Jun. '22
High wind	Apr. '17
Highlights	Apr. '14
Highlights, overexposed	Feb. '15
Histograms, Why I Don't Use	Jun '19
Histogram problems	Apr. '20
Home nature projects	Jun. '23
Hotels with a view	Mar. '20
Humidity	Oct. '13
Hummingbird photography	Apr. '13
Hyperfocal distance	Jul. '13
Image resizing	Aug. '18
Implying motion	Sept. '14
Impossible DOF	Feb. '16
Impossible DOF	Jan. '17
Impossible metering situations	Feb. '26
Indestructible camera bag	Dec. '14
Infrared photography	Jul. '14
Insane ISO settings	Dec. '22
Interiors	Oct. '15
iPad: Loading photos	Aug. '17
iPhone photography, pros and cons	Apr. '22
Jungle photography	Dec. '14
Kaleidoscopic images	Jan. '15
Kaleidoscopic images	Aug. '20
Keystoning	Nov. '23t
Keystoning, correcting	Aug. '15
L Bracket	Feb. '18
L Bracket	Feb. '21
Landscape photography	Dec. '12
Landscape photography	Apr. '14
Landscape photography	Nov. '16
Landscapes, Post-processing	May '26
Layer Masks, The Power of	Feb. '22
Leading Lines	Aug. '24
Lessons Learned from Extreme Cold	Feb. '24
Light fall-off	Feb. '14
Light painting	Dec. '21
Lighting a face	Oct. '13
Lightning photography	May '20
Liquify	Feb. '18
Liquify Distortions	Sept/Oct. '19
Lenses, Essential	Aug. '23
Long lens portraits	Oct. '18
Long Lenses for Flowers	Jul. '20
Low light photography	May '15
Luminar 4	Jan. '20
Macro flash	Nov. '12
Macro flash	Sep. '14
Macro flash	Aug. '15
Macro flash	Aug. '22
Macro flash advantage	Feb. '25

Subject index for past Photo Insight issues

Macro photography and DOF	Feb. '22
Macro trick	May '19
Managing soft focus	Jul. '21
Mannequin heads	Apr. '16
Metering modes	Nov. '16
Meters, How They Work	Jul. '18
Meters, when they fail	Dec. '16
Metering situations, Impossible	Jul. '19
Middle gray	Nov. '15
Midday sunlight, The Challenge of	Feb. '25
Milky Way, Photographing the	Aug. '25
Minimizing dust on the sensor	Nov. '21
Optical infinity	Jun. '16
Mirrors	Jan. '19
Mirror images	May '23
Model shoot	Jan. '17
Moon glow	Oct. '16
Mosaics	Jun. '17
Mundane to Ideal	Nov. '19
Museum photography	Mar. '13
Museum photography	Aug. '25
Natural Light Portraits	Aug. '21
Negative space	Jan. '16
Neon edges on black	Aug. '14
Neutral Density filters	Jun. '18
New depth of field preview	Mar. '24
New shooting style	Mar. '24
Neutral Density filters and water	Mar. '22
Night photography	Feb. '14
Night Safaris	Jun. '18
Night to Twilight	Dec. '17
Noise reduction	Feb. '17
Off-camera flash	Jan. '24
Oil and water	May '20
Online Nature	Mar. '25
Organization of photos	Mar. '18
Out of focus foregrounds	Jan. '20
Out of focus foregrounds	Nov. 25
Paint abstracts	May '13
Paint abstracts	Aug. '21
Painting with light	Sep. '15
Pan-blurs	Sep. '24
Panning motion	Dec. '16
Pano-Mirrors with a twist	Jan. '18
Parades	Sep. '13
Parallax, Correcting	May '25
Parallelism	Nov. '19
Parallelism and DOF	Feb. '21
Perspective, Super Exaggeration of	Dec. '21
Photo sharing	Apr. '23
Photo terms	Nov. '22
Photographing Christmas	Dec. '23
Photographing insects	Apr. '26
Photography to Art	Dec. '17
Photography solutions	Jan. '18
Photoshop, content Aware	Nov. '12
Photoshop, sketch technique	Apr. '13
Photoshop, replace background	Apr. '13
Photoshop, actions palette	Dec. '13
Photoshop, layer masks	Feb. '13
Photoshop, the clone tool	May '13
Photoshop, soft foliage	Oct. '13
Photoshop, mixer brush tool	Sept. '14

Photoshop, b & w with color	Jun. '14
Photoshop, drop shadows	Jul. '14
Photoshop, creating texture	Feb. '14
Photoshop, face mirrors	Feb. '14
Photoshop, liquify	Mar. '14
Photoshop, face mirrors	Aug. '14
Photoshop, digital spotlight	Sep. '14
Photoshop, enlarge eyes	Nov. '14
Photoshop, darken the periphery	Dec. '14
Photoshop, mirror images	Dec. '14
Photoshop, beam of light	Apr. '15
Photoshop, polar coordinates	Mar. '15
Photoshop challenge	Jan. '26
Photoshop, chrome	May '15
Photoshop, actions palette	Nov. '15
Photoshop, cut and paste	Nov. '15
Photoshop fixes problems	Jan. '26
Photoshop, geometrics	Oct. '15
Photoshop, plugins	Oct. '15
Photoshop, multiple selections	Apr. '16
Photoshop, sharpening	Apr. '16
Photoshop, Flood plugin	Apr. '16
Photoshop, Desaturation	Aug. '16
Photoshop, making a composite	Aug. '16
Photoshop new tool	May '20
Photoshop, place one element behind	Aug. '18
Photoshop, the pen tool	Feb. '16
Photoshop, canvas size	Jan. '16
Photoshop, using the earth	Jun. '16
Photoshop, define patterns	May '16
Photoshop, paste into	Nov. '16
Photoshop, b & w with color	Feb. '17
Photoshop, open a closed door	Apr. '17
Photoshop, palettes	May '17
Photoshop, My favorite plugins	Jan. '20
Portrait options	Jan. '19
Portrait techniques	Nov. '15
Portraits	Mar. '13
Portraits, mixed lighting	Aug. '14
Portrait Professional	Nov. '19
Portraits, Lens choice	Sept/Oct. '19
Portraits, side lighting	Sep. '17
Portraits, window light	Mar. '15
Portraits, outdoors	May '17
Post-processing checklist	Dec. '13
Post-processing: Contrast	Aug. '17
Practicing graphic design, Part I	Dec. '22
Practicing graphic design, Part II	Jan. '23
Practicing graphic design, Part III	Feb. '23
Pre-capturing technology	May '23
Predictive Focus	Sep. '18
Problem/solution	Apr. '17
Problem Solving in Photoshop	May '22
Problem with cruises	Jan. '18
Protecting extremitities from the cold	Dec. '22
Protecting highlights	Dec. '12
Puppies	Jan. '15
Puppy photography	Feb. '18
Rays of Light	Mar. '25
Reflections	Feb. '13
Reshaping faces	Oct. '22
Restoring old photos	Jun. '20

Subject index for past Photo Insight issues

S-curves	Aug. '24
Safari	May '13
Safari strategies	Jul. '15
Seeing as the lens does	Nov. '14
Selecting faces	Apr. '26
Seeking Cool Snow Photos	Jan. '21
Selective filtering	Mar. '18
Selective focus	Jun. '15
Self-critiques	Jul. '13
Self-critiques	Oct. '13
Self-critiques	Nov. '20
Sensor cleaning	Jun. '18
Sepia and dark contrast	Jun. '15
Sepia, Traditional look of	
Shade	May '14
Shady side	Jun. '18
Shadows define the shot	Dec. '23
Shadows, Paying Attention to	Mar. '18
Sharp, 6 reasons why photos are not	Apr. '24
Sharpness problems	Mar. '14
Shooting from helicopters	
Shooting in Inclement Weather	Nov. '22
Shooting thru glass	May '24
Shooting through textured glass	May '23
Shooting through wire mesh	Sept. '14
Shooting into the light	Jun '20
Shooting through glass	Nov. '25
Side lighting	Jan. '24
Silhouettes	Jun. '13
Silhouettes, How to make	Apr. '22
Silhouettes, Exposing for	Sept/Oct. '19
Silvered landscapes	Mar. '20
Sketch, How to Make	Jun '19
Skies make or break a picture	Aug. '21
Sky replacement	Nov. '20
Sky replacement: Uploading photos	May '26
Sky replacement strategies	Aug. '22
Snow exposure	Nov '17
Snow exposure	Nov. '19
Soap abstracts	Aug. '23
Soft light	Jan. '13
Smart phone photography	May '19
Some people are clueless	May '25
Stained glass	Mar. '17
Star photography and noise	Jan. '18
Stock photography	Sep. '14
Sunrise & sunset	Jan. '19
Symmetry	Aug. '24
Tamron 150-600mm	Apr. '14
Ten reasons photos are not sharp	Jan. '19
Texture, Adding	Mar '19
Texture Mapping in 3D	Jul. '21
To Polarize or not to Polarize	Jun. '25
Too much lens	Jul. '24
Topaz AI Gigapixel	Mar '19
Topaz glow	Jan. '15
Topaz glow	Sep. '17
Topaz Impression	Sep. '15

Subject index for past Photo Insight issues

Topaz Remask 5	Oct. '17
Topaz Simplify 4	Dec. '12
Topaz simplify 4	Jun. '14
Topaz Studio	Apr. '18
Total solar eclipse, How to shoot	Mar. '24
Translucency & backlighting	Nov. '18
Travel photography	Feb. '13
Travel portraits	Mar. '14
Travel tips	Apr. '14
Travel photographer's guide	Jun. '17
Traveling Lighter	Nov. '25
Tripods, not allowed	Jun. '24
Tweaking exposure on the fly	Apr. '23
Twilight photography in the rain	Apr. '19
Twilight, Creating	Oct. '23
Two subject rule	Dec. '25
Tripods	Mar. '18
Two subject sharp rule	May '14
Two subject focus rule	Jan. '20
Two subject focus rule	Jun. '21
Urban heights	Jun. '21
Ultra distortion	May '18
Unusual Panos	Nov. '22
Upside Down Reflections	Aug. '21
Warm fingers in winter	Nov. '15
Water drop collisions	May '18
What NOT to do in photography	Apr. '18
When diagonals are distracting	Feb. '26
When You Needed a Zoom	Aug. '21
White on White	Dec. '20
White on White	Nov. '23
White vignette	Aug. '15
White balance	Feb. '15
White balance, what's the best	Jun. '25
White balance, custom	Mar. '16
White balance, What	Jun. '23
Wide angle conundrum	May '19
Wide angle distortion, correcting	May '24
Wide angle landscape technique	Aug. '25
Wide angle lenses	Mar. '13
Wide angle portraits	Nov. '14
Wide angle lenses	Jun. '17
Wide angle lenses: Outside the Box	Jun. '22w
Wide angle keystoneing	Nov '17
Wildlife photos with wide angles	Mar. '15
Window light	Dec. '15
Window light portraits	Aug. '18
Window light portraits	Feb. '24
Window frames	Feb. '16
Winter photography	Dec. '12
Winter bones	May '13
Winter photography	Dec. '15
Winter photography	Nov. '18
Wire Mesh, Shooting Through	Jul. '18
White balance	Mar. '26
Workflow	May '13

Quiz answers

1. a
2. a
3. a
4. x
5. c
6. d
7. d
8. a
9. c
10. a

Your score

90% - 100%: You could have been a pro

80% - 89%: Your glasses probably need a new prescription

70% - 79%: Just don't quit your day job

< 70%: You should really be using an iPhone

CHILE: THE DESERT to the SEA

The Atacama and Beyond

SEPTEMBER 14 -24, 2027



Atacama Desert



Marble Caves



PHOTO INSIGHTS

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Repairing fishing nets, Hanoi, Vietnam