

# TIPS FOR WINTER PHOTOGRAPHY

Essential considerations for safe and successful photo shoots in cold and wet conditions

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICK SHEREMETA



Figure 1. This is the result of an exposure based on metering the sky.

Winter can be an exciting time to get outside and expand your photographic portfolio. When the ground is enveloped in a blanket of white, even familiar surroundings can take on an entirely different perspective, and there are many opportunities to capture unique images. Winter does present certain challenges that photographers normally don't have to deal with during other seasons, however. This article offers a number of tips garnered from what I've learned over the years through experience, and may be useful for making your winter photo efforts more productive and enjoyable.

50 Outdoor Photographer [outdoorphotographer.com](http://outdoorphotographer.com)

## Snow Can Trick Your Meter

One of the most challenging things in winter is achieving correct exposure. All camera metering systems are calibrated to base exposure on neutral tonality or neutral gray. White, snow-covered landscapes will influence and most likely dominate your camera meter's exposure reading. Consequently, solely relying on the camera's meter to set exposure may lead to disappointing results when you discover that all your snow-covered winterscapes are underexposed and appear a dull gray. While this might be the mood you're trying to capture, you normally would expect snow to appear white regardless of lighting conditions.

Armed with the knowledge of how the meter functions, it's then a simple matter to achieve correct exposure by adding positive compensation (overexposure). I find that even on an overcast day, or in shade, a snow-covered scene will need to be overexposed by +1 stop, or exposure value (EV). Bright sunlit snow scenes may require +2 EV. Be very careful at going beyond +2 EV compensation, though, as things will start to become blown out with loss of detail. Here's how I approach this challenge.

I prefer to work in manual exposure mode and use spot metering. This way, I can get a direct meter reading of any object or portion of the scene that I wish

to be measured. On clear days, I may start by first metering the northern sky at about 45° above the horizon. Then, by adjusting aperture or shutter speed, or both, I'll set exposure for between -1 EV to +1 EV, depending on how dark or light I want the sky to render. Next, I'll meter the snow to see how the meter reading compares relative to the exposure previously set. If the reading is less than +3 EV (or if the overexposure warning isn't blinking on the preview screen), I know I'm good to go. If the snow is too overexposed, I'll go back and re-meter the sky, and reset exposure by one stop less—rechecking the snow metering and readjust again, if

necessary. This is a reiterative process, and no two scenes will be the same; it just requires practice and patience until you get a feel for it. Figure 1 is a good example of an image achieved using this technique.

If it's overcast, I'll simply meter the snow and set exposure for +1 EV. Of course, in either situation, you can always spot-meter something neutrally toned, such as a gray rock or similar object, to set exposure and then let everything else be exposed relative to that. The same principles apply in Shutter or Aperture Priority modes, but it's a little trickier to get a true picture of how different parts of the scene render

compared to each other or which will control exposure. Furthermore, if you don't use exposure lock, the exposure will change if you move your camera—too many chances for error.

When in doubt, bracket shots by one to two stops over and under your initial exposure setting. It's best to do this in 1-stop (EV) increments. With experience, you'll become more confident setting your exposure so that you'll need to bracket less. Always check your histogram and learn how to expect winter scenes to appear: They generally will be skewed toward the right, since the snow will be overexposed.

It's a good idea to have "Exposure Warning" set in your camera's custom functions, too, so any overexposed areas in your LCD preview screen will blink. It's okay to have some small, very bright areas blinking with overexposure, but you don't want the entire snowfield or sky doing so. Should that happen, merely increase shutter speed by one or more stops, or close down the aperture by the same amount, until the blinking area in the preview is within tolerable limits.

Photographing wildlife in winter may be a little more straightforward. Since they're generally the main subjects, having them correctly exposed is essential—everything else can be compromised, if necessary. Again, I find that it's best to spot-meter on the animal, taking into consideration whether it's predominantly white, neutral-toned or dark, and then set respective exposure compensation accordingly—i.e., +1 EV, 0 EV or -1 EV as a starting point, then adjust, as necessary, after checking the histogram. Again, this will become more intuitive with experience, and if in doubt, bracket exposures, then pick the one you like best. More on winter wildlife photography later.

Don't forget flash when shooting in winter. It can be used as an effective tool to highlight foreground objects, provide a catchlight or eliminate undesirable shadows.

## Filters

My one standby filter, regardless of the time of year, is the polarizer. This is a great tool for darkening blue skies, adding definition to clouds, eliminating glare and adding more saturation to colors. The only caveat is that it's easy to over-polarize with winter's low

[outdoorphotographer.com](http://outdoorphotographer.com) January/February 2016 51



**Figure 2.** A winter scene at Glacier National Park's Lake McDonald. A polarizer was used to accentuate the sky and add more definition to clouds.

sun angles, giving the sky an unnatural appearance, so it may be wise to take several frames with varying amounts of polarization to see what works best. Figure 2 shows the effect to be gained with use of a polarizer.

Graduated neutral-density filters are useful when it becomes necessary to equalize variations in exposure between different parts of a scene such as the foreground or the background and sky. I find that a three-stop (No. 8) gray graduated neutral-density filter works well for common situations in winter scenes.

Another filter that's receiving less use in the digital age is a warming filter such as the 81C. The complementary yellowish color will neutralize the snow's bluish cast that can occur on sunny days or in the shade. Setting white balance for "Shade" or adjusting it in post with Lightroom or other software will provide a similar effect.

Filters are typically of two types—those that screw directly onto the end of a lens and those that slide into a holder (such as the Lee and Cokin systems). The latter may be preferable for winter use when fumbling around with heavy gloves.

### Focus Problems

With conditions of low contrast, such as overcast or foggy days, or when snow is falling, your lens may experience difficulty in obtaining autofocus. Figure 3 illustrates such a situation. Under these conditions, the lens may hunt or flutter as it attempts to gain focus. Don't panic—it's not uncommon. The problem is that the lens can't find anything with enough contrast to lock focus. There may also be times when the lens will want to focus on the falling snow, as opposed to the main subject, leaving the subject soft or even entirely out of focus.

When photographing under these circumstances, it's best to switch from auto to manual focus. While using manual focus, hold the shutter button down halfway, and once focus has been obtained, the focusing point(s) in your viewfinder will light up to let you know that you're good to go. Don't forget to re-engage autofocus when you're finished.

### The Correct Shutter Speed to Use

When it's snowing or the wind is howling, a conscientious assessment needs to be made regarding shutter

speed to achieve the desired result. Fast shutter speeds will stop any movement, whereas slow shutter speeds will result in blurred motion.

Falling snow is a good case in point. With a slow shutter speed, snowflakes will appear as streaks of white, whereas a fast shutter speed will render falling snow as white dots. So what's fast and what's slow? While gently falling snow on a calm day may require as little as 1/125 sec. to freeze motion, during blizzard conditions, 1/350 sec. barely will be enough. So, if there's any question, it's advisable to bracket shots using various shutter speed and aperture combinations to find out what works best depending on conditions. Figure 4 shows this effect with falling snow.

### Cold Weather and Batteries

Batteries lose power at low temperature, and the colder it is, the faster the drain happens. While this applies to all batteries, the latest generation fares much better than its predecessors. The best rechargeable performers are lithium-ion followed by NiCad and NiMH. They should all function satisfactorily down to 32° F (0° C). As for non-

rechargeable batteries, lithium-ion is the best choice. Avoid alkalines entirely, as they perform poorly in the cold.

Even though batteries may appear exhausted in cold weather, they will regain their power once warmed back up. The recommendation is to have one or more spare batteries when out in the field. Keep spares in a warm inner pocket and switch them when needed. A hand warmer placed in the pocket with the spare batteries will keep them toasty and help them recover faster.

### Cold Weather and Moisture

Moisture is always a problem where camera equipment is concerned, and winter is no exception. Very cold air is generally dry, but air in heated buildings or vehicles typically contains moisture. While outside in the cold, there's no problem, but when entering a heated space with an ice-cold camera, any moisture present may condense onto or inside your gear. For the same reason, it's also not a good idea to place an icy cold camera under your coat to protect it—don't! The problem isn't so much

the moisture you may see on the outside that can be wiped off, but moisture on internal electrical components. As we all know, electronics and moisture don't mix, so the best thing is to avoid the situation in the first place.

Placing camera gear in an airtight plastic bag, like a self-sealing freezer bag, or in a camera gear bag before going indoors is the first step to prevent the problem. Leave gear inside the protective bag until everything reaches room temperature. If you should happen to get condensation on or in your camera gear, however, remove the batteries and let things sit until all the moisture has evaporated. This can take some time, unfortunately, but the process may be hastened by gently warming your equipment using a hair dryer set on a low setting.

### Protect Your Equipment

Modern DSLRs and associated equipment generally function just fine in wintry conditions. Plastic camera bodies, lenses and components may become brittle in extreme cold, how-

ever, so a little extra caution in handling is advised.

Dry powdery snow shouldn't pose a problem at all and generally will fall off or may be lightly brushed away, but it's imperative to keep wet snow or rain off your gear. To keep things dry in inclement conditions, a rain cover, an umbrella or even a heavy-duty plastic bag (although they can be stiff and a little unwieldy) will work. Keeping the lens hood attached and pointing your camera down and/or away from the prevailing wind direction until ready to shoot will lessen the likelihood that snow will accumulate on the front element of the lens.

In the event that snow gets on your lens or camera, use a lens brush to remove it. Don't try to blow snow off with your breath, as that will only compound the problem by adding more moisture. Sometimes a soft chamois or cotton towel can help if things are really wet, but again, avoidance is the key.

Warm breath or moisture from a hat or balaclava can fog up a viewfinder and get the back of a camera wet in



**Figure 3.** This is a good example of a scene that can cause trouble for autofocus, with heavy snowfall and low-contrast lighting. A fast shutter speed and manual focus will be helpful in situations like this to get the shot.



*Figure 4. Heavy snowfall required a shutter speed of 1/250 sec. to stop motion as shown in the photo at top. The lower image shows the effect of streaked snow at a shutter speed of 1/15 sec.*



short order. A rubber eyecup may be helpful to keep moisture at bay, or the use of Live View may be the best remedy when it's necessary to ensure that moisture is kept totally away.

#### Winter and Wildlife

Winter can be a harsh and critical time for wildlife. Their ability to con-

serve precious energy can be crucial to their very survival. For this reason, it's vitally important that photographers use good judgment and ethical practices to avoid causing wildlife any undue stress that could put them in jeopardy. Learn how to recognize any signs that an animal is uncomfortable, exhibiting stress or stopping its normal activity—if this

is the case, you're too close and need to give the animal space by slowly backing away.

It's obviously best to avoid this situation in the first place by using a telephoto lens, maintaining a respectful distance and not putting wildlife in a "fight or flight" situation. This can be critical in aiding their survival. Keep in

mind that all wildlife photos don't need to be close-up portraits; it's often just as interesting to take wide-angle shots from a distance, placing the animal in its wintry environment.

When photographing animals, focusing on the eye is paramount. Catching that instant when a specular highlight pops will make the image stand out even further, as shown in Figure 5.

#### Personal Protection

If you're not comfortable, you simply won't have an enjoyable or productive outdoor winter experience. More importantly, hyperthermia can be a killer and must be averted at all costs. Being properly attired is therefore of paramount importance.

Garments that are breathable and have the ability to wick moisture away from the body, such as wool or synthetic fabrics like polyester, are desirable. Cotton should be left at home in winter. Outer garments should be wind-proof, water-repellant and breathable. Jackets or parkas should also preferably have a hood. Wool or polyester fleece hats will aid in wicking away perspiration. A face mask or balaclava can keep your face from freezing in extreme cold or windy conditions.

When outfitting for the outdoors in winter, it's always best to dress in several lightweight layers rather than a single heavy layer. Layers then can be removed or added based on activity level. The key is to stay warm, but also keep from becoming overheated—perspiration eventually can lead to becoming chilled, if clothing becomes wet.

In order to operate small camera controls without freezing your fingers, hand protection presents a unique challenge for photographers. I typically use glove liners or lightweight fleece gloves alone or under "glomitts" (fingerless gloves with flaps that transform them into mittens) when it's really cold. In extreme conditions, I'll don waterproof shell mitts as an outer layer over heavier fleece gloves. Getting used to working with gloves by practicing on your camera before heading out into the cold is always a good idea.

Waterproof, insulated boots that are breathable, along with wool or synthetic socks, will help keep your feet dry and toasty. Standing on snow or frozen ground for an extended period of time can lead to cold feet regardless of what you're wearing. Standing on a

foam sleeping pad or even an old door-mat will go a long way toward keeping your feet from freezing.

Snowshoes not only will help keep your feet off of the cold ground, but will make walking in deep snow a breeze. Additionally, they can provide great stability on icy or hard-packed snow when fitted with built-in crampons. Ski poles or trekking poles with snow baskets provide even more stability when walking through deep snow or when climbing or descending steep slopes with or without snowshoes.

Don't forget to add lip balm and sunglasses (keep them on a lanyard) to your list of personal gear. Staying hydrated and nourished is also important for maintaining warmth, so have water and snacks handy.

#### Get Out There!

Don't let the challenges posed by winter conditions prevent you from getting outdoors. Winter is a unique time of year, when numerous and ever-changing photographic opportunities abound. If you take advantage of the tips presented here, you'll be well on your way to a fun-filled winter season with the reward of some great images to be proud of. **OP**

**Rick Sheremeta** resides year-round in the wilds of northwestern Montana, where he lives with his wife and business partner Dody and their two Golden Retrievers. To see more of his photography and learn about upcoming workshops, visit his website at [alpenglowproductions.com](http://alpenglowproductions.com).



*Figure 5. This scene was exposed for the pronghorn, focused on its eye. I waited until it turned before pressing the shutter release to catch the specular highlight.*