

# B&W In HARSH LIGHT

The often-shunned midday conditions can yield surprisingly good results—when you're thinking in black-and-white

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my camera away in the middle of the day. I just look at that time as an opportunity for new and different work. So my concentration, during the middle of the day, is on black-and-white imagery.

Can you make black-and-white images during the Golden Hours or at any other time? Absolutely. Will they be any better than those made midday? Not necessarily. But black-and-white images made in sunny midday light certainly will be better than color images taken at that time!

Figure 1a illustrates this point very well. It's an image of Arches National Park's Broken Arch taken in harsh midday light. It's a nice subject, but the color photo is pretty uninspiring. The black-and-white conversion takes advantage of the conditions with a much more interesting result (Figure 1b).

So let's look at the process for creating dramatic black-and-white images. Luckily, for us, in today's digital age, the photographer is presented with many good options. We'll start with taking the actual image, and then we'll look at options for postprocessing in the digital darkroom.

## Considerations At The Point Of Capture

Depending on the final product, there are certain considerations to be made that will help yield a more interesting image. Scenes or subjects that rely strongly on hue, saturation and luminance will make color images stand out, whereas photos consisting of shapes, forms, textures or patterns may not be as interesting in color. However, those same photos may render exceptionally well in black-and-white. By the same token, harsh lighting with sharp contrast that provides distinct separation,

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As outdoor photographers, it doesn't take us long to find out that nature's lighting can be very fickle, differing greatly day to day and even over the course of a day, from that of the controlled lighting available in a studio setting. For that reason, we learn to adapt and be flexible, not only in what we shoot, but when we shoot it. There's

no doubt that the best light for color landscape imagery is during the magic Golden Hours—early in the day, first thing after sunrise and late just before sunset. Overcast and rainy days, when colors are more saturated, are best for flowers and close-up work, and misty or foggy conditions are best for moody, ethereal shots. But what about the rest

of the time, when it's sunny and the midday light is harsh and contrasty? You may be inclined to say those are the worst conditions for doing color work, and you'd be absolutely right. When you give it a little more thought, however, those are some of the very best lighting conditions for black-and-white photography. That being the case, I don't stash





depth and dimension, from and between objects and edges, works very well for black-and-white—not only does this hold true for inanimate objects, but also for wildlife, especially where a lot of detail is present.

Figure 2 is a good example of a black-and-white wildlife image. Here, the color photo of an Alaskan brown bear was taken at 1:00 p.m. in mid-June when the lighting doesn't get much harsher. The black-and-white rendition takes advantage of the severe light—the animal's fur pops out, drawing the eye, whereas the light background becomes darker and less obtrusive.

In landscape work, the sky often takes up a good portion of many images. Thus, it becomes an important element to consider. Does it have dramatic clouds, is it sunny or totally overcast, and how will it contrast with its surroundings? These things can bear heavily on how well an image works in black-and-white. Gray overcast skies will appear anywhere from light gray to pure white in black-and-white. This may not be desirable or visually appealing unless the sky is set against a very dark foreground or mid-ground. On the

other hand, a solid blue sky will render dark or even black, and this can be quite dramatic, especially if set against white snowcapped mountains or other lighter foreground elements (as in Figure 1). My favorite, as shown in Figure 3, is a bright blue sky with lots of billowing cumulus or foreboding storm clouds—the juxtaposition of all the light and dark tones in the cloud detail will yield the most striking and interesting of black-and-white renditions.

What about the use of filters? In the pre-digital film days of old, black-and-white photographers possessed an array of assorted color filters. They were used to control black-and-white tonality depending upon subject matter in order to achieve certain desired results—a red or yellow filter, for example, was used to darken a blue sky, as only the color of the filter would be transmitted and other colors blocked, i.e., darkened or turned black. Color filters may still be used to control hue in a color photo. Personally, I don't use them because I prefer to have the full gamut of color hues available in the original image in order to achieve the best results in the black-and-white conversion in the computer.



There's one filter that's recommended, however, and that's a polarizing filter. A polarizer will darken blue sky, provide contrast and detail to clouds, eliminate natural glare and add saturation—all desirable effects regardless of whether the final image will be in color or black-and-white. The polarizer doesn't work in all conditions; its effectiveness is greatest when the angle between the sun and subject is 90° and diminishes as that angle approaches 0° or 180°. Figure 4 is a midday winter scene of the Mission Valley in northwestern Montana that illustrates the effect on the sky very well.

A graduated neutral-density filter can be another useful tool in the field to help even out excessive exposure variations within a scene, eliminating undesirable over- or underexposure; for example, there may be times when a 3-stop or more difference between the sky and foreground exists, which can be beyond the dynamic range of many digital cameras. And, speaking of dynamic range, don't overlook HDR images when looking to convert to black-and-white; they can serve as a great foundation from which to start. [Editor's Note: For tips on working with HDR black-and-white conversions, see Rick's article "B&W Transformation" in the August 2012 issue of *Outdoor Photographer*, [www.outdoorphotographer.com](http://www.outdoorphotographer.com).]

So we're all set to take images and have some likely subject matter in mind.



How do we actually proceed? The simplest approach is to set your camera to take the photo in black-and-white; however, that's usually the least desirable method. Yes, it will take a black-and-white image, but be aware that usually the image will be an 8-bit JPEG rendered to whatever preset the camera manufacturer has formulated for your particular camera make and model. This may not yield the most desirable finished product. Additionally, the extent to which any further postprocessing modifications or improvements can be made will be limited. A much better approach is to take the photo in color and RAW format. Suffice it to say that there's a world of difference between JPEG and RAW; however, that's a subject all to itself and is well beyond the scope of this article. The bottom line is that shooting in RAW will result in a much greater tonal range to work with and more flexibility in postprocessing, and any changes performed will be entirely nondestructive, as the raw data will always be there.

### Postprocessing

Now that I've convinced you not to shoot directly in black-and-white, what's next? Regardless of the RAW processing software you use, there are some initial steps to be taken to help improve the overall end result. I happen to prefer doing all of my initial editing in Adobe Photoshop Lightroom 5, and then I move on to Photoshop or other software, if need be, to achieve a certain effect. However, if you happen to be more comfortable working in Photoshop, note that a camera's RAW processing engine that drives Photoshop is exactly the same as the one in Lightroom; albeit, there are some differences in presentation on how controls are accessed, so use whichever you prefer.

Now, let's proceed, keeping in mind that this isn't intended to be a Lightroom tutorial, per se, but merely how I approach things and what my workflow is like. You may find that a totally different approach works best for you, and that's fine.

First, before doing anything else, it's always a good practice to remove chromatic aberration and any lens distortion. This is done through the Lens Correction Panel inside the Develop Module. It may not be readily apparent in the color version, but chromatic aber-



ration, if present and not removed, may show up as a white halo around any areas of high contrast (such as a mountain ridge line), so it's best to deal with that first. In general, I've found that it's best to remove chromatic aberration before converting to black-and-white; however, there are certain images where the opposite is true, so convert first, then remove chromatic aberration. Some experimentation may be necessary to see which way works best for each particular image. Figure 5a shows the Lens Corrections Panel in the Lightroom Develop Module.

Next, go into the Develop Module to adjust white balance and tonality just as you would for any color image. I rely closely on the histogram when adjusting images, and for black-and-white, I seek to expand the tonal range as much as possible while making sure that blacks and whites aren't clipped. When sky is present, I'll darken highlights down to as much as -100 and do this

primarily to obtain greater sky definition. This depends upon the image and may require some experimentation to see what looks best. Then, I'll generally lighten shadows until the effect looks pleasing, but again, this is totally dependent upon the particular scene.

Figure 5b illustrates typical initial adjustments made to the original color image prior to black-and-white conversion. One thing to note, however, is that any vibrance, saturation or luminance adjustments done in the Basic Panel or HSL/Color/B&W Panel will have no effect whatsoever on the final black-and-white conversion; I suggest not wasting your time playing with these, as they will only make the color image look garish. If you work in Lightroom, as I do, it doesn't really matter if you make the above adjustments before or after the image is converted to black-and-white; I just happen to prefer getting the color rendition to look its best and then convert. Prior to making the black-and-

white conversion, I also prefer to make a virtual copy of the original color image and work on that; I only do this because I like to maintain the original color image as a master or “before” version for quick and side-by-side easy comparison.

### Making The Conversion

To convert from color to black-and-white, simply click on the Black & White treatment option at the top of the Basic Panel in the Develop Module or use the keyboard shortcut “V”; you can use this one keystroke command to toggle between black-and-white and color for quick comparison or evaluation before you do any post-capture processing. After converting to black-and-white, it then may be necessary to go back to tweak the basic tonality adjustments to your liking before proceeding with any further enhancements. Also, readjust contrast and clarity to suit what you think looks best.

If you don’t think there’s enough contrast gained from using the contrast and clarity sliders in the Basic Panel, try working with the Tone Curve. Start with one of the presets, then use the sliders or point curve to adjust lights, darks, etc., or use the Targeted Adjustment tool (the little target-like icon in the upper-left corner of the panel) to perform adjustments directly from the image. To use the Targeted Adjustment tool, click on the area you wish to lighten or darken and drag up or down, respectively, with the mouse. There’s no absolute recommendation here; just play around until the image looks most pleasing. It’s all very subjective, and there’s no right or wrong.

You may also wish to use one of the presets offered by Lightroom or third-party developers for the black-and-white conversion. These can be used as a starting point from which to make further adjustments, as well. They can be viewed and accessed in the Presets Panel to the left of your main image view. As you scroll through them, a preview of the resulting effect will be visible in the Navigator Panel. To see the effect on the actual image, simply click on any one or a number of the presets, and the image adjustments will be done automatically and appear on the main screen view—all this will be done nondestructively, and each change will be kept track of in the History Panel, allowing you to go back at anytime to re-select any previous state.

Now that you have a starting point, you can simply stop there or let your creative juices flow by making further adjustments in the Basic Panel, Tone Curve or the HSL/Color/B&W Panel. Note that HSL and Color will be grayed out after converting to black-and-white, allowing only Black & White Mix adjustments. Moving the color sliders in the B&W Mix left or right will darken or lighten the underlying base colors, which govern tonality changes in the black-and-white rendition, respectively. You can either work each of the sliders individually or use the Targeted Adjustment tool option to make adjustments directly from the image in a similar fashion to Tone Curve adjustments as explained previously. Click and hold the mouse button (or tablet pen) on an area you wish to lighten or darken and drag up or down, respectively. You may notice that more than one slider moves when using the Targeted Adjustment



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tool. This means there’s a mix of the colors represented by the sliders that make up the underlying color in the original image. To dodge (lighten) and burn (darken), or make other adjustments such as exposure, contrast, clarity, etc., to specific elements within the image, use the Adjustment Brush tool. And don’t forget about using the other tools like the Graduated Filter, Radial Filter and Post Crop Vignetting to control brightness and help guide the viewer’s eye.



Adding grain or toning can also be used to create a more vintage feel, emulating classic black-and-white film. Again, note that the advantage to working in Lightroom is that all adjustments are nondestructive, meaning you can go back at anytime to add to, delete or modify any previous adjustment without any loss of original RAW data. Figure 5c illustrates the Presets Panel, along with Black & White Mix, and use of the Targeted Adjustment tool for fine-tuning local black-and-white adjustments.

### Beyond Lightroom

Black-and-white image enhancements aren’t limited solely to Lightroom. Used in conjunction with Lightroom, Photoshop’s layers, effects, filters and myriad other tools leave no bounds as far as creativity is concerned. Additionally, there are numerous other software packages that work as a standalone or as plug-ins in conjunction with Lightroom and/or Photoshop. Some of the more popular software are Nik Software’s Silver Efex Pro 2, onOne Software’s Perfect B&W 8, DxO FilmPack 4 and Topaz Labs’ B&W Effects 2. Many of these packages offer presets that emulate the more popular classic black-and-white films, plus a number of other tools and controls for creative input.

As you may guess, each one works in a slightly different manner, and all will have an initial learning curve, but those familiar with Lightroom and/or Photoshop should have little problem getting up to speed quickly. The good thing is that they all offer free 30-day trials so you can try them out at your leisure and decide if they suit your creative needs. For reference, Figure 6 provides a comparative look at some different black-and-white conversions done with software packages noted above. Each yields a different finished product as a result of empirical algorithms established by the software manufacturer.

### Final Tips

Don’t limit your shooting time to early morning or late evening, and by all means don’t delete those midday, harshly lit images from your storage media; use them as another means to a different end, a great black-and-white photograph. And don’t look at harsh midday light as a negative; learn how to work with and take advantage of lighting conditions as they change in the field. After all, light is what photography is all about, and it’s not all Golden Hour. Converting midday color images to black-and-white not only expands your shooting time, but provides another avenue to further develop your creative outlets. Experiment, and try some of the software that’s available—you’ll be amazed at the results, and they’re almost limitless.

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