

## Shooting in the Land of Ice and Snow Rick Sheremeta takes protective precautions (for himself and his equipment) and keeps his eye out for unique aesthetic elements to create engaging winter landscapes and wildlife shots.

By Jennifer Gidman

Images by Rick Sheremeta

Montana is known for its early and intense winters: Snowstorms can make an appearance as early as September, and many of the state's cities expect an annual accumulation of nearly 50 inches of snow—in the mountains, that figure can reach as high as 300 inches. The icy open expanses of northwestern Montana have proven to be an ideal stomping ground for photographer Rick Sheremeta, who captures stunning winter landscapes and indigenous wildlife even when the mercury is heading south. When he heads out into Big Sky Country, Sheremeta usually packs his Tamron [18-270mm VC](#) lens, as well as his 17-35mm lens.

Preparation is key when you're embracing the elements: Before you head into the great white unknown, ensure that you're adequately protected from what can be tumultuous weather. "You need to regulate your body warmth for comfort and safety and to prevent hypothermia," says Sheremeta. This includes layering your clothing, which should be made up of wicking material (leave the cotton at home) and a windproof, waterproof, breathable outer layer; always wearing a hat and scarf (80 percent of your body heat escapes through your head and neck); and staying hydrated and nourished with water, hot chocolate, or soup (save that winter lager for a post-shoot cocktail).

Sheremeta also advises to wear sunglasses or a similar form of eye protection to prevent "snow blindness," and to slather on the sunscreen and lip balm. Snowshoes and an insulated pad help keep your feet dry and warm when you're standing on frozen ground or in snow, and gloves with polyester or silk lining offer you better finger flexibility than mittens.

Once you're sufficiently fortified against Mother Nature, it's time to prep your equipment for what could be a harsh outing. "You want to keep your camera as warm as possible," Sheremeta says. "A fanny pack or photo

pack can help in that regard. Also cover your camera lens when it's snowing with a commercial cover or plastic bag."

Keep snow off of your gloves (it will stick onto your camera and lens), shoot in autofocus so you don't have to keep bringing your wet gloves up to the lens, and use a rubber eyecup to keep your face off of the camera itself. "When you bring your eyebrows and eyelashes right up to the viewfinder, it tends to fog up," he says. "Take off your ski mask, face dickey, or other protective headgear and breathe easy—your breath fogs up the viewfinder, as will moisture from your face protector."

Because the cold weather drains your batteries even more quickly than usual, especially if you're using autofocus or image preview, make sure you carry at least one spare battery, if not more—and keep them safe and warm inside your jacket. "Alkaline batteries are no good," says Sheremeta. "You want to bring along lithium AA's or rechargeable lithium-ion batteries, and rejuvenate them when you get back inside."

If you're shooting in deep snow, make sure your tripod doesn't sink by attaching little tripod snowshoes. "There are little disks that you can get that attach right to the bottom of the tripod," says Sheremeta. Another multipurpose tip is to insulate the tripod legs. "You can buy commercial protectors with a fancy wrap like kids put on the handlebars of their bikes, but I just go buy pipe insulation at Home Depot," he says. "It doesn't last forever, but when it wears out, I just go buy another piece to put on. It not only protects your hands so you're not putting them on an icy-cold surface, it also provides some cushioning so you don't have the hard tripod legs resting on your shoulder when you're carrying it."

For those who still want to capture the beauty of winter on film ("Provia's a good choice—it accentuates the blue tones"), Sheremeta advises to take special care with the leader when threading onto the takeup spool, as it might be more brittle, "Wind and rewind at the slowest speed to prevent static electricity, and don't load film with snow on your gloves," he says. "Also be careful of the lint from your gloves: Wool and polyester gloves have fibers that can scratch film."

When you're finally ready to head back indoors? Don't send your camera into "condensation shock": "Keep the camera in your pack or in a plastic bag until it gradually warms up," says Sheremeta. "And don't blow snow off of the lens or viewfinder—use a lens brush or fan."

## **Exposing for the Ice and Snow**

A photographer shooting winter landscapes should adhere to the usual "golden hour" rule to get the best light, shooting in the early morning and the late afternoon or early evening. "That really is the best light," Sheremeta explains. "However, in the winter, those hours tend to expand, because the sun is lower toward the southern horizon, so the light has a better quality, even in midday. It's not quite as contrasty as it would be over the summer."

When you're surrounded by snow, bracket your exposures and spot-meter. "To compensate for the snow, shoot for +1 on an overcast day, and +2 (and maybe even as much as +3) for a bright sunny day," says Sheremeta. "Typically I'll find that if you spot-meter for the northern sky, about 45 degrees from the horizon, that's going to result in a neutral tonality, or '0,' on your meter. The problem most people have if they're shooting in shutter or aperture priority mode is that the meter wants to make everything neutral density, or 18 percent gray, so your snow comes out gray. I suggest shooting in manual mode instead. I'll meter different portions of the scene: I'll meter the sky and the foreground, or I'll meter an object I know is a neutral tonality, like a gray rock or a tree trunk. The fur of wildlife is also generally a neutral tonality. Once I know the relative exposure values of different subjects in the frame, I can then make a conscious decision of how I want the overall scene to be rendered, taking into account any compromises for over- or underexposure."



Don't forget to check your histogram, but realize that your histogram in the winter is going to be different than your histogram in the summer. "It's going to push itself over to the overexposed side," says Sheremeta. "It depends on how bright and sunny it is, and on how much white snow you've got, compared to any treed areas—especially coniferous trees, which tend to be dark. But if it's a pure white snow scene, that histogram could literally peg to the right, and it's still an O.K. exposure, because that snow is going to be bright. If it's really bright and sunny, there won't be any detail in the snow."



Sheremeta generally always uses a polarizer when shooting outdoors to accentuate the sky and cut down on natural glare, but with a certain caveat. “In the winter here in northwestern Montana, we get a very low sun angle,” says Sheremeta. “You can really overpolarize the light if you’re not careful and turn it almost an indigo or black. It tends to look a little unnatural. However, you can see it right away, so you can back off on the amount of polarization, and fortunately, with post-processing, it’s not as much of a problem as when people were shooting film and slides where you couldn’t correct it once the shot was taken.”



Sheremeta also uses a regular neutral-density filter if he can’t fiddle with his ISO to get it low enough. “For example, if you’re shooting flowing water and want to get that nice creamy look where you need a very slow shutter speed, and you just can’t get it by changing your aperture, shutter speed, or the ISO, then the next thing would be to use a neutral-density filter,” he says. “You can also get this same effect with a 2-stop exposure difference with a polarizer. Sometimes I use both in combination if I’m trying to really slow the shutter down under very bright conditions.”

### **Working in a Winter Wonderland**

A wide expanse of snow-swathed prairie can certainly be dramatic, but too much white and gray can sometimes get stagnant. Searching for color and detail is one way to keep your winter landscape photos compelling. “I like to try to find unique elements and isolate these elements—a red barn for example, a fence post with barbed wire, or trees with frost,” Sheremeta explains. “We get a lot of hoar frost up here in Montana, and some days the trees look like a fairyland when they’re covered in ice crystals. I’ll place whatever element I’m isolating in different positions in the composition—high in the scene, low in the scene, to the left or to the right. Then when I look at them on my computer monitor, I can decide which one has the most interest. The important thing is to keep a fresh and open mind when out photographing—shoot your subject from different angles and perspectives, and at different focal lengths.”



Seeking out patterns, textures, and shadow detail is another way to generate drama in what might otherwise be an unremarkable winter scene. “For a while, I was shooting shadows, which can be really interesting, especially if you have some crusted snow that’s been sculpted by the wind,” says Sheremeta. “And if I really don’t have a lot of color in an image, I’ll often convert it to black-and-white in post-processing, because the image is really kind of monotone anyway. Doing this can really bring out a lot of contrast in the image.”

While it can be thrilling to spot some of the region’s indigenous residents juxtaposed against an icy winter scene, it’s important to remain respectful of these often camera-shy creatures. “Don’t stress the animals—conserving energy is critical to their survival as the winter months approach,” says Sheremeta. “Anything to put the animal at ease is the appropriate thing to do: You don’t go trekking after an elk or deer or bison and cause it to panic and run.”

To stay within the animal’s comfort zone, Sheremeta recommends using a longer lens (“this way, you can shoot from further away and still get in pretty close”) or create a “blind” of sorts. “You can use a natural blind, or purchase a commercial blind, which many hunters and photographers use. However, I’m not really one for sitting in what’s basically a tent all day, waiting for an animal to walk by. A vehicle also serves as a fairly good ‘blind.’ You can get up close to fairly any animal—but as soon as you open that door, that animal will be gone!”



For more of Rick Sheremeta's work, go to [www.alpenglowproductions.com](http://www.alpenglowproductions.com).