

# COMPOSITION



This is a lesson to help improve one's ability to compose landscape photographs. Eventually, we understand how to work our cameras well enough, but we all strive for better compositions and post processing abilities.



Let's take a moment to discuss my philosophy on fine art photography.





I think Ralph Eugene Meatyard (1925-1972) summed it up best in his quote:

“I feel that ‘more real than real’ is the special province of the serious photographer.”





# “More Real Than Real”

Interesting sentiment for someone who died in 1972.





I think the general public with the frequent question...

“Was the image Photoshoped?”

would be surprised to know how much pre-digital, post processing was possible, especially with print film.





Well, I attempt to make my image believable, but with that something extra kick that Fuji, Velvia provided during the film days.

Something Extra = Modified Colors and Contrast.

What that film captured was not exactly what I perceived with my eyes; it had a richer feel.





Now, let's review some approaches to fieldwork.





In the old days:

My film approach to fieldwork was to only trip the shutter if I was certain it was a wall hanger.

Sadly, often it was not.

But, this approach is still valid and forces one to think very carefully about composition and to really study what's in the viewfinder.





This approach is still espoused today. In a recent magazine article Guy Tal wrote:

“One of the most important milestones in the development of photographic artists is the moment at which they make their peace with the idea that making more meaningful work implies making less of it.”



Well, these days I don't exactly make fewer images. Since transitioning to digital the number of images I make in the field seems to have grown exponentially.

I do not shoot with reckless abandon... ok, not always.

But, with the post processing techniques available today, it is rare when beautiful images cannot be made.





For photographers, one of the most important habits to learn, is to slow down and really look and think about what is in the viewfinder.





Nowadays, with digital cameras, my approach to fieldwork has evolved.

I make as many photos as possible when in the field.

Do pro basket ball players still practice? YES.

The more one does something and gets feedback the better one gets.





Photography is an erodible skill.

It is not like riding a bike.

One must constantly practice to keep improving and prevent skills from deteriorating.





I believe you are attending one of our workshops because you want your photographs to look more interesting than hand held snapshots.





Well, improving composition will have the greatest impact on achieving this goal.





# COMPOSITION

What does a great photograph have that a snapshot does not have?





Superb composition!

It is an image that catches the eye of the viewer and evokes an emotional response.





In photography, composition is the arrangement of elements in the viewfinder that create an image.

These elements may be mountains, streams, lakes, flowers, etc.





There is a huge difference between taking snapshots and making photographs.





When taking snapshots, we tend not to scrutinize subject placement.





Or, evaluate complementing and distracting elements.





However, when making photographs, we pay careful attention to every aspect of the composition.





The photographer's goal is to make the composition as captivating and pleasing to the eye as possible.





The composition should hold the viewer's interest and not invite the viewer's eye to leave the image.





Composition is subjective.

Each photographer chooses the subject matter, lighting, exposure, location and perspective that appeals to them.

However, there are guidelines that can improve one's ability to compose a photograph.







The following guidelines will help one achieve greater success composing photographs.

Please note, there are exceptions to all compositional guidelines.

It is not uncommon to violate them.



# Time of Day — Guideline

Time of day plays a significant role in the outcome of an image.





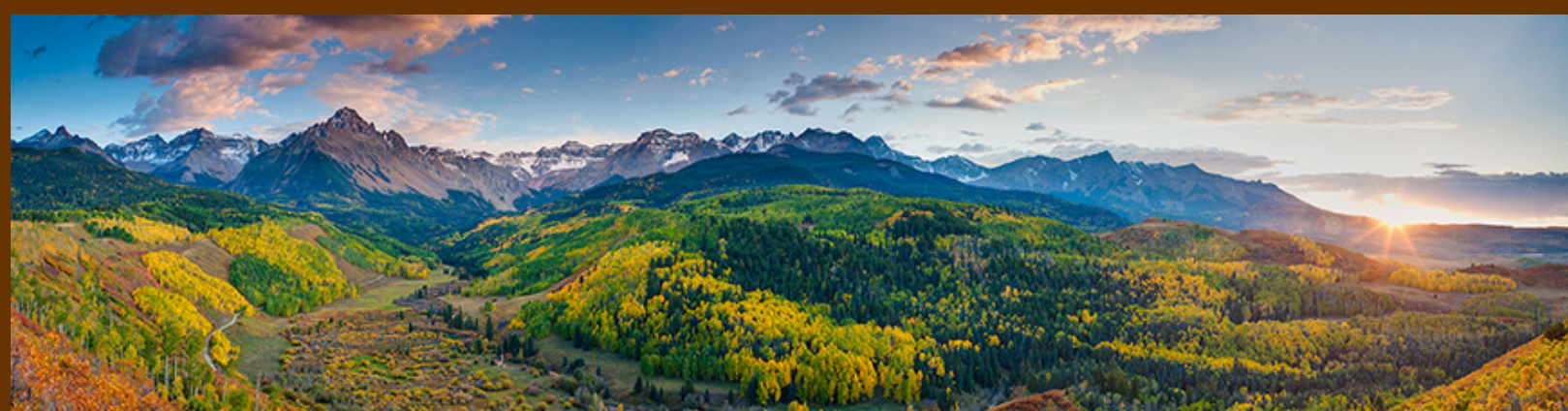
The quality of light available can be as important as the subject in landscape photography.



Eagle Lake, Acadia N.P. Maine.



Often the best time to photograph any given scene is around sunrise and/or sunset.



Any exceptions to this rule?



Yes, there are many exceptions.

Black and white images may photograph very well during midday hours, especially when dramatic clouds are present.





Overcast days can be particularly fruitful because the soft diffused light allows one to photograph intimate scenes without excessive contrast.





And, some larger scenes can be exciting to photograph on an overcast day. Look for stormy weather.

**CAUTION:** Don't let the sky burn out.

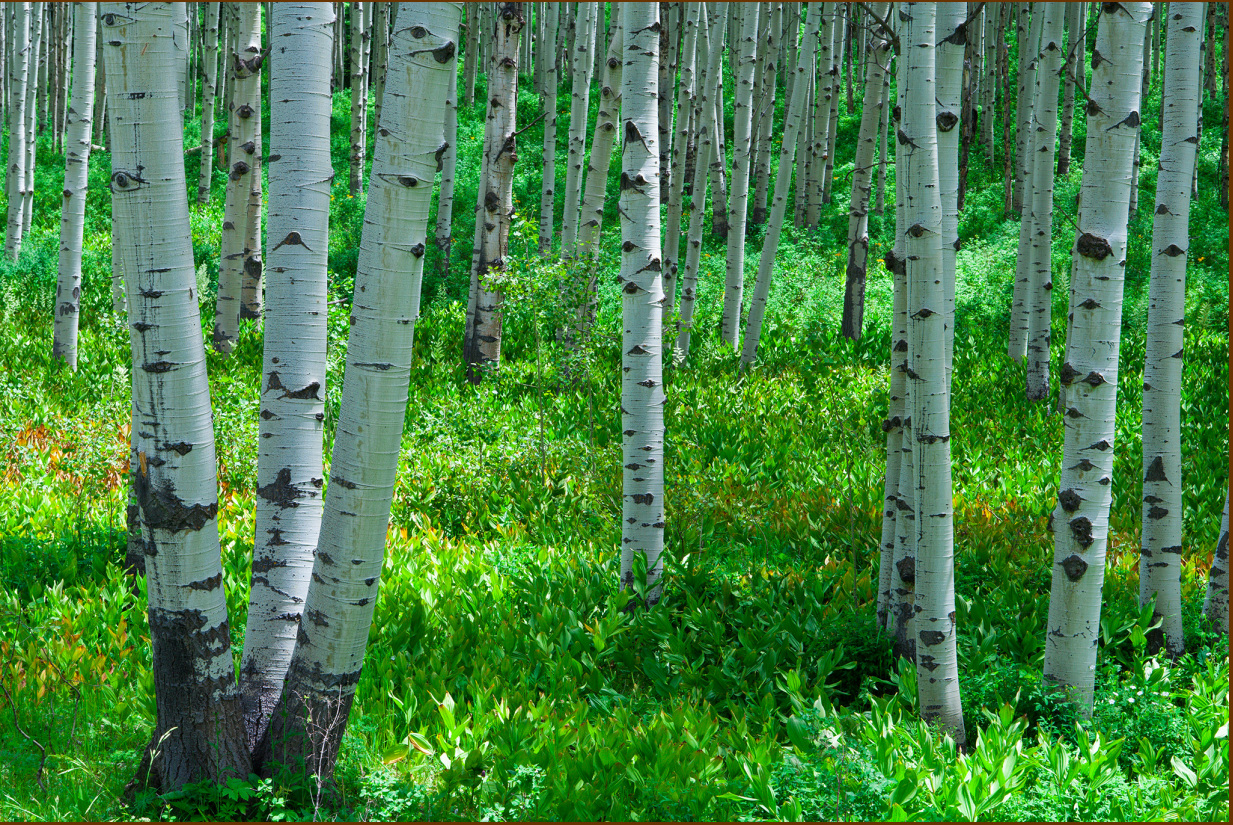




When photographing midday take advantage of passing clouds to provide softer light for a scene.







Sunny (Our eyes like this lighting.)



Cloudy (The camera likes this lighting.)



The diffused lighting offered by clouds reduces contrast in a scene; tonal range of scene fits within the dynamic range of the camera.

This provides better detail in both highlights and shadows.



Sunny

Eyes Enjoy This

Cloudy

Camera Loves This



Actually, with today's cameras and advanced post processing techniques, one can even photograph scenes that were once considered too contrasty.

For example: A stream with dappled lighting.





When the sun goes down we can continue photographing by moonlight and flashlight with surprising results.





Perhaps the question should be.

When can't we successfully capture images?



Always look for special lighting, especially when the sun is at lower angles.



# Rule of Thirds — Guideline

Use the rule of thirds as a starting point for the composition.



The foreground element (boat) resides in the left 1/3 of the image.



Imagine there's a tic-tac-toe grid in the viewfinder.

Position the main subject in the viewfinder, along the lines of the grid or near the intersecting points of the tic-tac-toe grid.



Which image seems properly composed?





Avoid placing the subject in the center of the frame.

A landscape image with the main subject centered in the frame is rarely appealing and may feel awkwardly balanced.







Is there an exception to this rule?



Yes, when the subject is being framed by other elements.





# Lines & Curves — Guideline

Use leading lines and curves to draw the viewer's eye into the image and to the main subject.

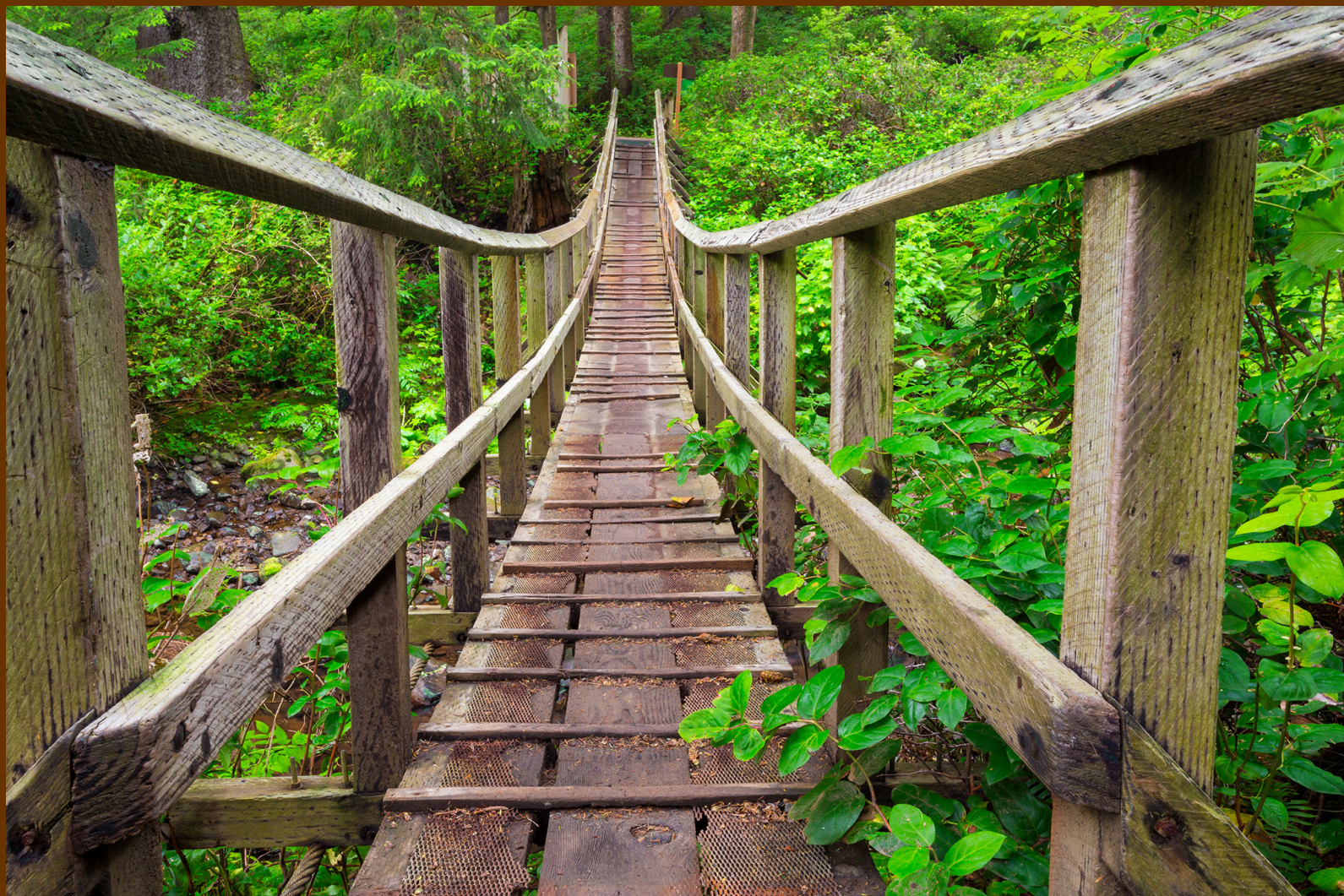




Lines are powerful compositional elements.

They readily attract the eye's attention.

They should be used carefully.





If there is a line in the image, the viewer's eye will be attracted to it.

Almost everyone probably noticed the log in this image a few slides ago.





Even the relatively small lines created by the tree trunks will attract the viewer's eye.





Every time there is a line or curve in the viewfinder, evaluate it, and only include it, if it enhances the image.





Lines and curves may be created by a stream, fence, shoreline, path, road or even an attractive log.







Lines and curves all by themselves, sometimes make a captivating image.



To create a more powerful feel, have lines and curves originate near the corners of the frame.





**Avoid straight, uninterrupted lines that divide the image.** I dislike this kind of image so much that I don't have a good example to show. I just can't bring myself to make this kind of photo.



Here, except for the two fence posts, the interface of sand and water would be a straight, uninterrupted line. Of course, the line created when the sky meets a large body of water is often an exception to this rule.



**Do not obscure the subject with other elements. — Guideline**





# Be careful with Negative Space

## Guideline

In an image, negative space is an area where nothing is happening.





Too much negative space creates imbalance in an image and a region where the eye drifts off the main subject to the void of nothingness.

A common mistake is to include too much empty sky.





A far less common problem is having too little negative space; it squeezes the composition, reducing its impact and balance.





When is extra negative space useful?

When a photo buyer requires room for text.



Does this image have too much negative space?

Violate any other guidelines?

Does it still work?



# Consider Portraits — Guideline

Consider the camera's orientation; **vertical** or **horizontal**.

One may be better than the other, so be sure to consider both.



Do you like one of these better than the other?  
Why?



# Look for Framing Elements

## Guideline

Try framing the subject.

Use a simple arrangement of interesting elements around or beside the main subject.





Framing elements can be tree trunks, rocks, branches, flowers, fences, etc.





Use simple framing elements so they don't distract or interfere with the main subject.





Phrased another way for emphasis:

Avoid busy framing elements.

They're distracting.





# Include Foreground— Guideline

Add something to the foreground.





Landscape photographs are greatly enhanced by placing an object such as a flower, rock, stump... in the foreground.





Foreground elements provide the viewer an entry point into the image and add a sense of depth.





# Make Images Sharp— Guideline

Be certain that both the foreground and background are in focus.





How can one be certain that both the foreground and background will be sharp?





By selecting the proper aperture and focal distance that will give the required depth-of-field.





How does one determine the proper aperture and focal distance, that will yield the required depth-of-field?





# By using a hyperfocal chart.

Focus At	near - $\infty$	f/8		f/11		f/16		f/22	
12mm	3ft	1.5ft - $\infty$	2.1ft	1.1ft - $\infty$	1.5ft	0.75ft - $\infty$	1.1ft	0.6ft - $\infty$	
18mm	6.6ft	3.3ft - $\infty$	4.8ft	2.4ft - $\infty$	3.3ft	1.7ft - $\infty$	2.4ft	1.2ft - $\infty$	
24mm	11.8ft	5.9ft - $\infty$	8.6ft	4.3ft - $\infty$	5.9ft	3ft - $\infty$	4.3ft	2.2ft - $\infty$	
28mm	16.1ft	8.1ft - $\infty$	11.7ft	5.9ft - $\infty$	8ft	4ft - $\infty$	5.8ft	2.9ft - $\infty$	
35mm	25.1ft	12.6ft - $\infty$	18.3ft	9.2ft - $\infty$	12.6ft	6.3ft - $\infty$	9.1ft	4.6ft - $\infty$	
50mm	53.2ft	25.7ft - $\infty$	37.3ft	18.7ft - $\infty$	25.6ft	12.8ft - $\infty$	18.6ft	9.3ft - $\infty$	
70mm	101ft	50.3ft - $\infty$	73.1ft	36.6ft - $\infty$	50.2ft	25.1ft - $\infty$	36.5ft	18.3ft - $\infty$	
100mm	205ft	103ft - $\infty$	149ft	75.6ft - $\infty$	103ft	51.3ft - $\infty$	74.6ft	37.3ft - $\infty$	
150mm	461ft	231ft - $\infty$	336ft	168 - $\infty$	231ft	115ft - $\infty$	168ft	84ft - $\infty$	
200mm	820ft	410ft - $\infty$	597ft	298ft - $\infty$	410ft	205ft - $\infty$	298ft	149ft - $\infty$	



Or by using an app on a “smart phone”.

I like using an app called TRUE DoF-Intro. it’s free and it takes diffraction as a result of small apertures into account.





Of course there are exceptions.

Sometimes one may use selective focus to keep the viewer's attention on the subject.





# Patterns in Nature — Guideline

Look for patterns in nature, such as ripples in sand, wood grain, leaf litter, a stand of trees, etc.





Patterns can make a great foreground.





Patterns often create an appealing image all by themselves.





# Look for a Picture Within a Picture Guideline

After deciding what to shoot, take a look at the subject again.

Is there a picture within a picture?



Is it ok to cut the top of  
the mast off?

How about tree tops?



Try changing the focal length to see if another pleasing composition unfolds.

Consider shooting a panorama.





# Avoid White Skies — Guideline

Avoid including white skies in the composition as they're generally uninteresting and distracting.

Our eyes are drawn to areas of bright and dark within a scene.

If the viewer's eyes are drawn to a bright, white sky and away from the subject, then the image fails.





# Conduct Border Patrol — Guideline

Before tripping the shutter, scan the perimeter of the image looking for elements that do not belong in the composition. Often these elements are branches, but not always.





The upper left of the image below breaks the overall pattern; the image fails.





# KISS

## Keep It Simple Silly!

### Guideline

The viewer should not have to guess what the subject is.

it should be identifiable as soon as one looks at the photograph, even a small photograph.

FIELD IDEA: Being able to readily distinguish the subject during image review on the back of the camera is a good sign that it's easily identifiable.





The waterfall, the subject, is too small. The image fails.



One can quickly identify that the subject is the waterfall. This image is much better.





Fill the frame with the subject!



Yes, this was cropped, but you get the idea.



Try not to include everything in a scene.

Compositions are improved by eliminating as many unnecessary elements as possible.



In the image above does the forest in the upper left really need to be included? No.

Is the boulder in the bottom middle a problem? Maybe.





Consider that composition is not so much what is included, but what is excluded.



The image below shows what was behind me while photographing the image above.





Often compositions that have the fewest elements are the most compelling.





Simplify!



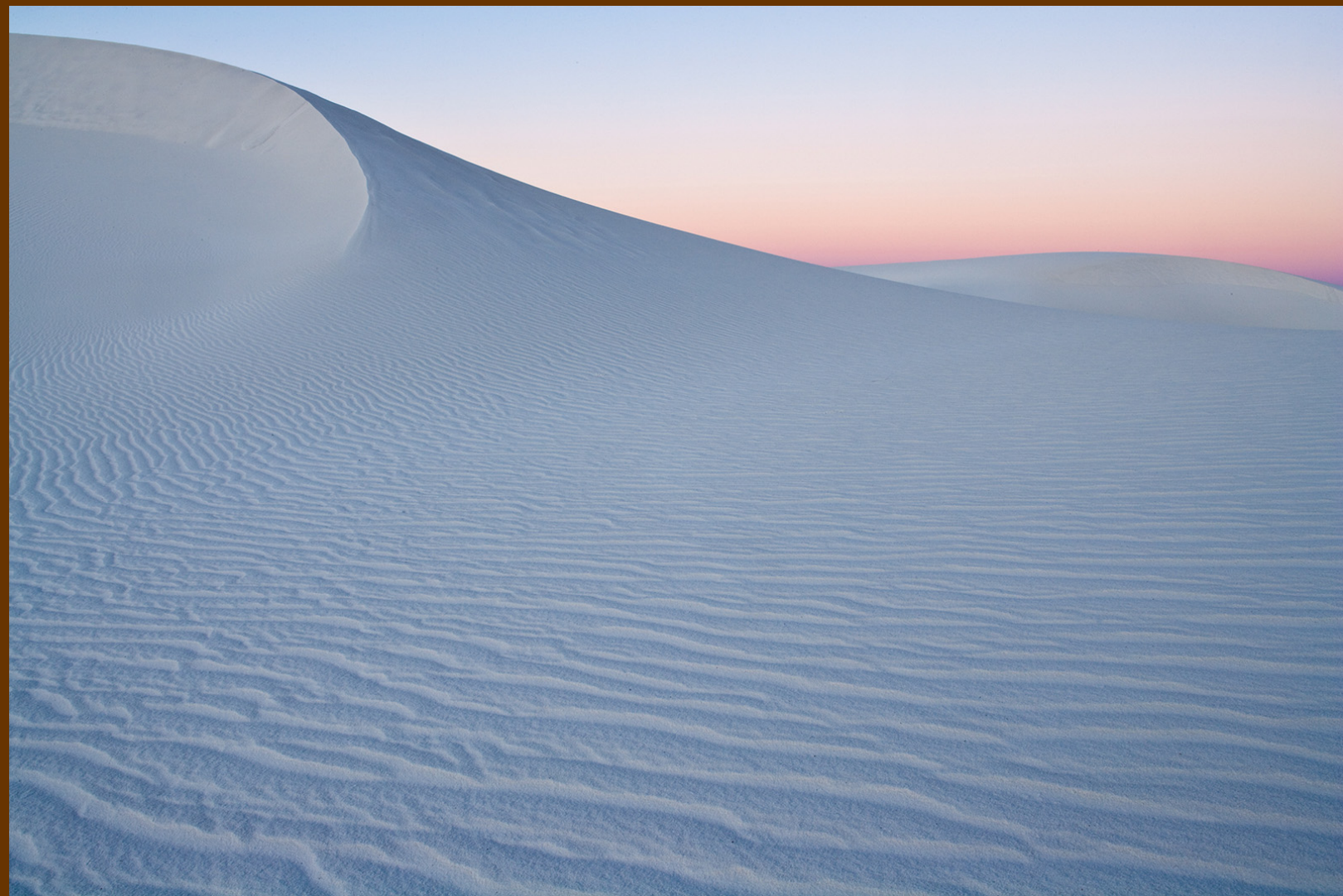


Simplify!





Simplify!





Being able to describe everything in the image with a few short sentences, instead of a long winded paragraph, is a good indicator that the image is simple enough.





# Consider Various Perspectives Guideline

Before placing the camera on a tripod, it is very important to evaluate the subject from a **variety of possible angles or perspectives.**





To help decide the best angle for an interesting photo, walk around while looking through the viewfinder. Ok, do this carefully.





The composition may be more interesting from a lower or higher vantage point.



Climb the road cut, take a look.



After taking photos that come immediately to mind, have a short break. Then look around and ask yourself:

“What is the next correct answer?”



“What is the next correct answer?”

This question means, is there another way to photograph the subject?

It is meant to provoke one into seeing the scene in a different way.



“What is the next correct answer?”

Keep asking this question and photographing until there are no more next correct answers.



“What is the next correct answer?”

This is the most important field procedure to follow as it sparks as much creative thought as possible when on location.



Driving through Montana I saw the scene below.

It's the scene that inspired me to stop.

This is the first image I took at the location.







This image was taken after searching for additional “correct answers”.





About 1&1/2 hours after stopping.

This panorama was the final “correct answer”.  
It’s also my favorite.



Another example:

Initially, I took the easy shot from a bridge crossing the river.





**Then I relaxed,** looked around and noticed a way to get under the bridge.



The next “correct answer”, the one from under the bridge, is my favorite.





# Small Subject Perspective Guideline

Consider perspective when photographing flowers or animals.

Try shooting them from their level to create more intimate images.





Photographs of flowers or animals from a standing position are rarely appealing.





Carrying knee pads in the camera bag will encourage one to crawl on the ground.





# Consider a Panorama Guideline

Sometimes a location is truly stunning to behold.

Yet, when the camera is held up to the scene, it cannot do it justice.

This is often the case for me at Grand Canyon National Park.

When this happens consider shooting a **panorama**.







Panorama taken with the camera horizontal.



Panorama taken with the camera on it's side;  
in a vertical position.

This image can be enlarge to a greater extent  
and still maintain detail upon close  
inspection.



REMEMBER: Panoramas can be photographed vertically, by tipping the camera up or down.







It is important when shooting landscapes to photograph something that stirs an emotion.

It can be a field of wildflowers, a small cascade or a sunset.

Unfortunately, beautiful scenery does not necessarily translate into photogenic scenery.



# Critique — Guideline

Only by shooting and honestly critiquing will one be able to produce images with better compositions.





Friends and family may not offer the best critique... they're usually too kind.

Try joining a camera club or take workshops to access constructive critiques.





Besides a camera, lenses and adequate tripod, what two additional pieces of field equipment can have a huge impact on one's composition?





# Polarizing Filter



Without



With



# Neutral Density Filter



Without



With



**How does one become inspired to improve?**





# Be Inspired by Others

Seek and find inspiration in the work of others.





Look at beautiful images from other photographers to get in the right frame of mind before going on location.

## Good Resources Outdoor Photographer & Photo.net

A SITE FOR PHOTOGRAPHERS BY PHOTOGRAPHERS

SEARCH All of Photo.net GO


**photo.net**

FORUMS EQUIPMENT GALLERY SHARING COMMUNITY LEARNING REVIEWS STORE BLOG

SIGN IN Connect REGISTER

Home > Top-Rated Photographs: Best Photos from Past 3 Days Ranked by Rate Recent Avg

**TAMRON TAILGATE TOUR**  
A fun **photo educational** experience at every stop  
FIND OUT WHERE WE'RE HEADED AT [www.tamron-usa.com/tailgate](http://www.tamron-usa.com/tailgate)











### Browse Our Top-Rated Photos & Photographers

Photos  Photographers  Galleries [+ Show Details](#)

Photo Category: Landscape Timeframe: Past 3 days Sort By: Recent Ratings (average) **FIND PHOTOS**

[< Prev Page](#) 47 matching photos (displaying 1-12) [Next Page >](#)

 <p>Luigi Parisi</p>	 <p>Brian Goodman</p>	 <p>Bruce Lee</p>	 <p>James (Jim) Johnson</p>
 <p>Sean Kurdziolek</p>		 <p>Minh Le</p>	 <p>Oleg Kozheltsev</p>



In the film days this would be the end of our discussion.

Why?

Because:

For those of us using positive (slide) film, after we tripped the shutter, we were done.





But... These days we still have work to do.

What else should one know to increase one's success in capturing great compositions?





# Know How to Post Process Images Guideline

Earlier we talked about being able to photograph in just about any kind of lighting.

sunrise, midday, overcast, nighttime...

For these raw captures to result in acceptable final images, we need to know how to post process them.





The level of the photographer's digital darkroom skill will impact what compositional possibilities are noticed when in the field.





More knowledge and experience with post processing results in seeing more compositional possibilities while in the field.





Said another way for emphasis:

Often the limiting factor when in the field is lack of post processing skill.

Without adequate post processing skill, one will miss opportunities and never even know it.





What we capture in the field is just the starting point to producing a photograph.





Composition of an image does not end in the field. It is fine tuned in the digital darkroom where we tweak colors, contrast, dodge and burn... To emphasize what we feel is appropriate to hold the viewer's interest and guide their eye through the image.







Unadjusted raw file; not what I saw.



Adjusted raw file; about what I saw.



It's reasonable to assert that post processing is at least 50% of the effort to create a fine photograph.





Many of us have difficulty knowing how to approach processing images.

Where to start?





**Well, once again, be inspired by others.**

**Really study the images of others.**





Ask yourself.

What did the photographer do with colors and contrast?





Attempt to duplicate in your work the feel (colors and contrast) captured by another photographer.





If it has been a while since I've processed images, the first thing I do is go online to PHOTO.NET.





I spend time browsing the beautiful work of others.





Then, when processing, I attempt to infuse my images with a similar feel.





We all have our own unique style when it comes to processing and presenting final images.

How one photographer processes her images, will be different than the way another photographer does theirs.





I feel if one likes the way their images look, then they have succeeded; there is no right or wrong processing.





The question is, as the photographer/  
processor:

Do you like the results?

Do they match what was pre-visualized  
when tripping the shutter?

If the answer is yes, then I think it is a  
successful image.





Note: There are some flaws that can be introduced during post processing that can impact composition.

## Halos (dark or light)

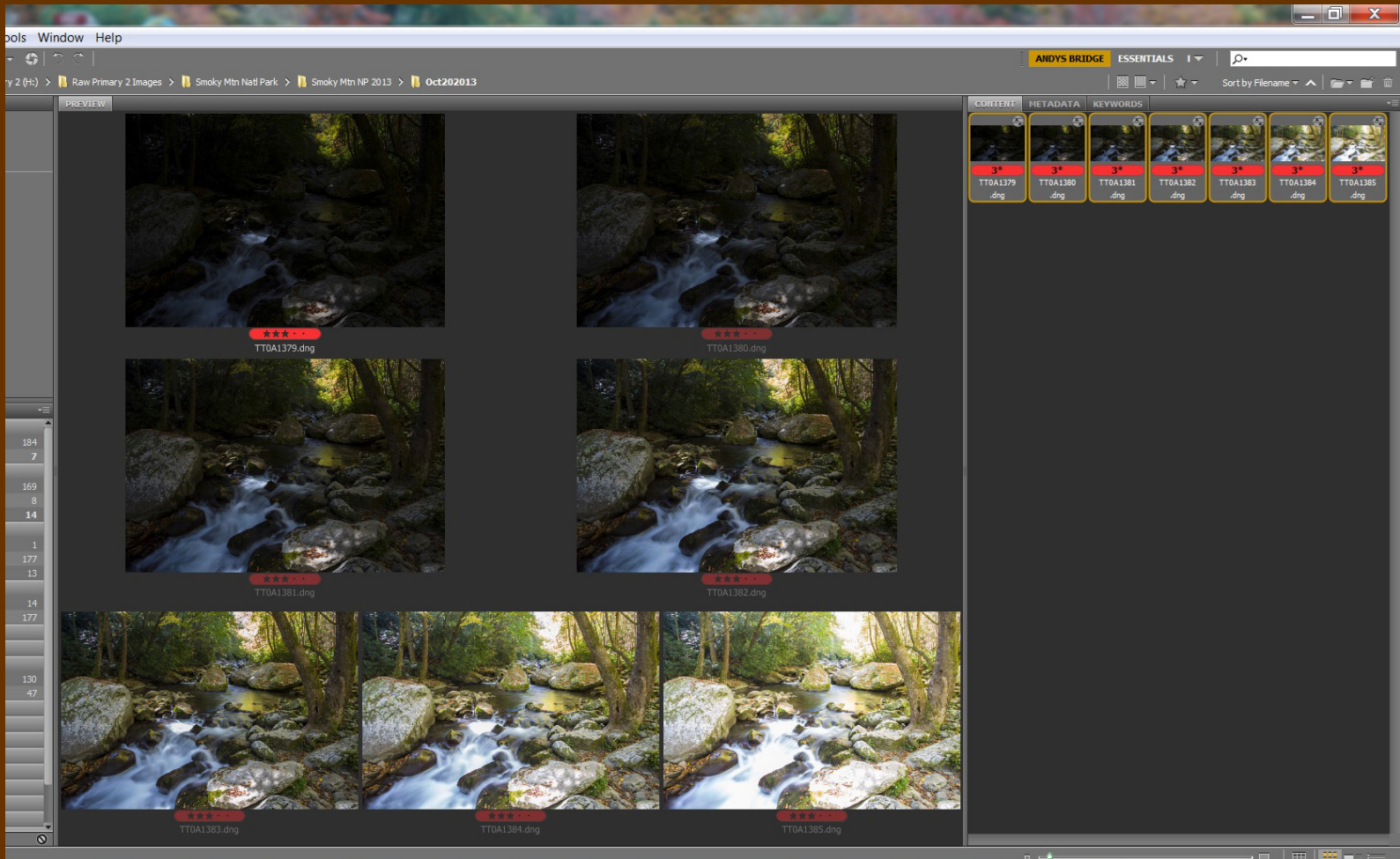
Something I try to avoid is halos, especially in the sky; they look too unnatural to my eyes. For those using an automated HDR program, this can be a result of not enough images in a bracketed series.





While most HDR programs indicate they will work with a series of 3 bracketed images, I find that using a minimum of 5 yields better results. Actually, I often use a series of 7 bracketed images.

It is much better to have too many images in a bracketed series than not enough.

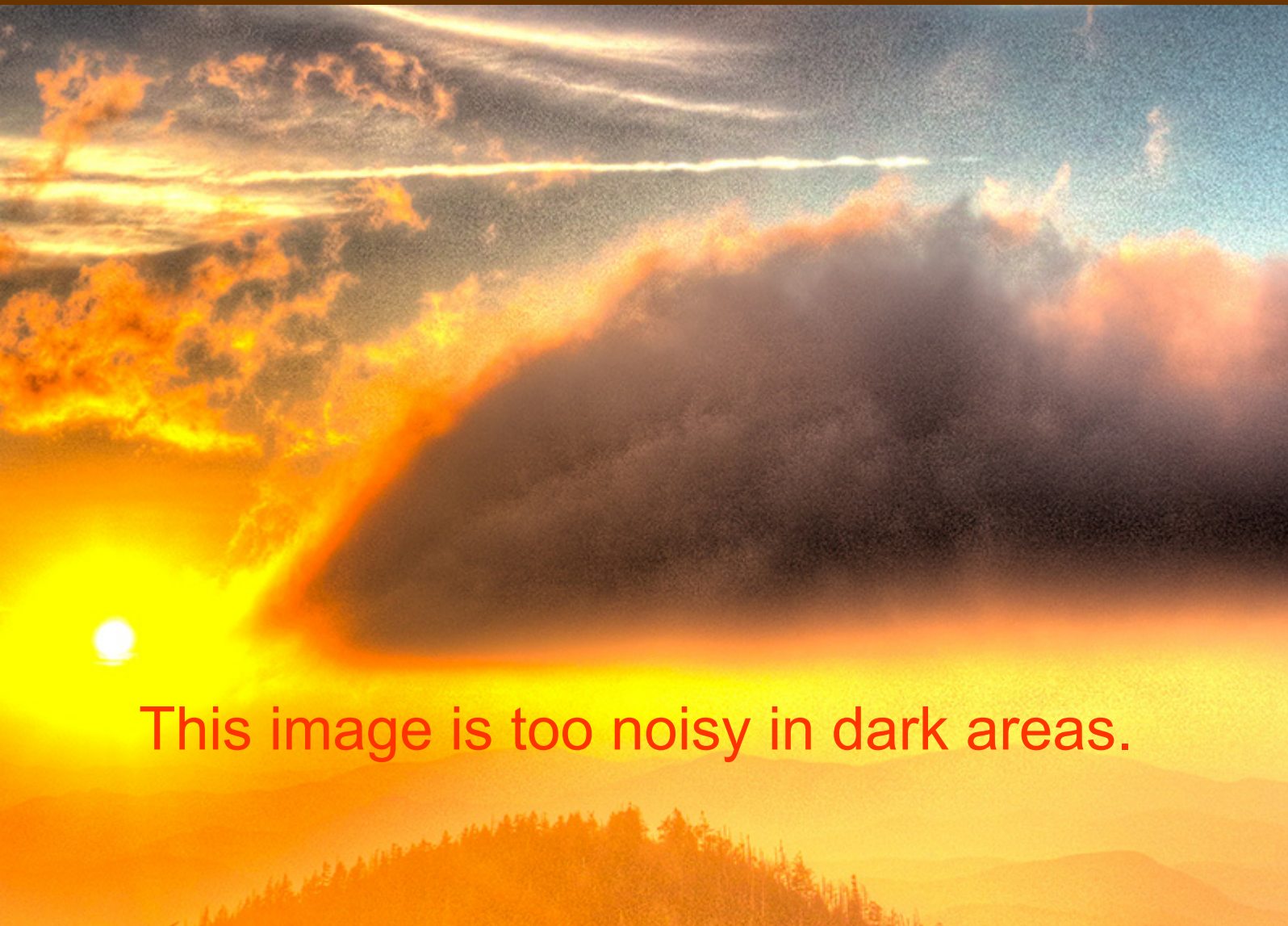




Another positive attribute obtained by using a larger bracketed series is less noise in the final image.

Also, lower ISO settings will have a noticeable impact on how much noise is present in the final image.

When possible I set the ISO to 50.

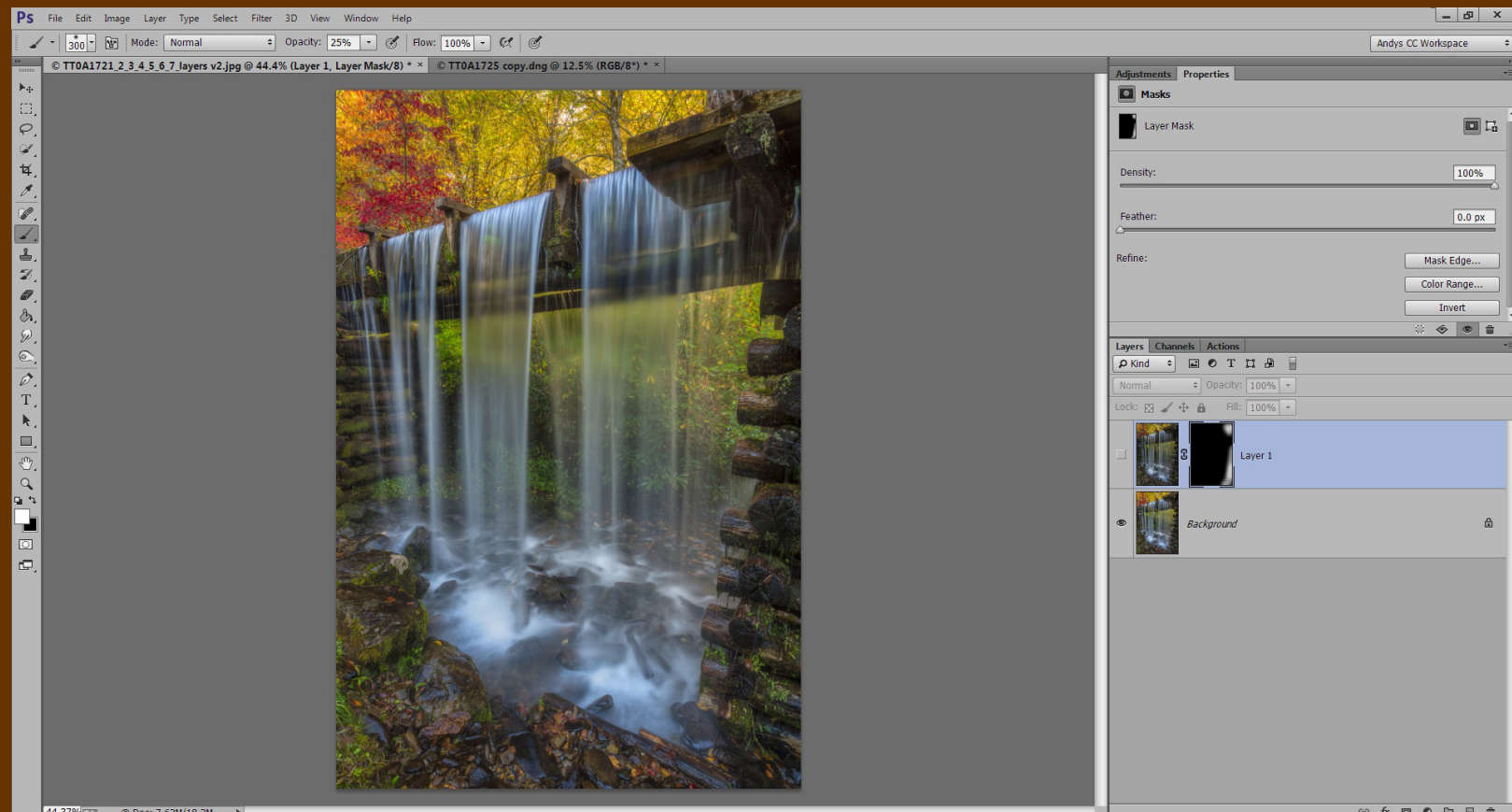


This image is too noisy in dark areas.



If noise introduced in an automated HDR program is a problem, consider blending the image in Photoshop with one of its source images that has been made to look as good as possible through more traditional processing.

Blending in Photoshop = Layers & Masking





Often images that have been pushed hard look fine on the screen but fall apart when enlarged.

When making an image in the field and during processing one of my concerns is:

How will the image look enlarged to 24 x 36, 30 x 45 or bigger?

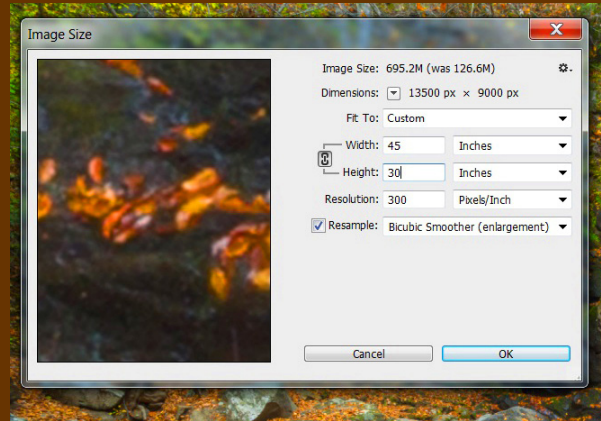
Factors Involved:

1. Did I nail the depth-of-field?

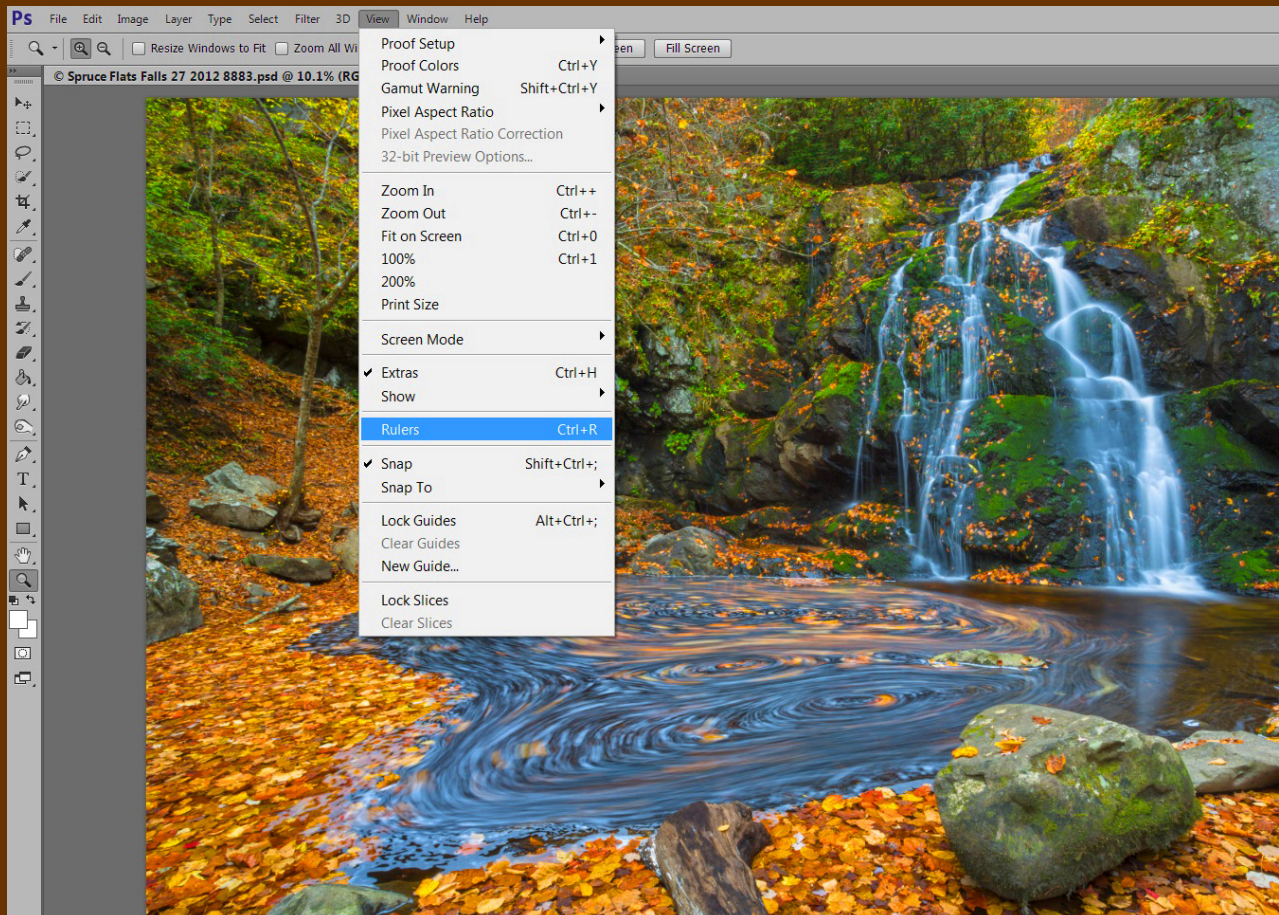
2. Will the hard push on processing result in too much noise; too much grain and loss of detail in large prints?



A way to preview how an image will look printed at a large size, is by resizing it in Photoshop to something like 30" x 45" at 300ppi.



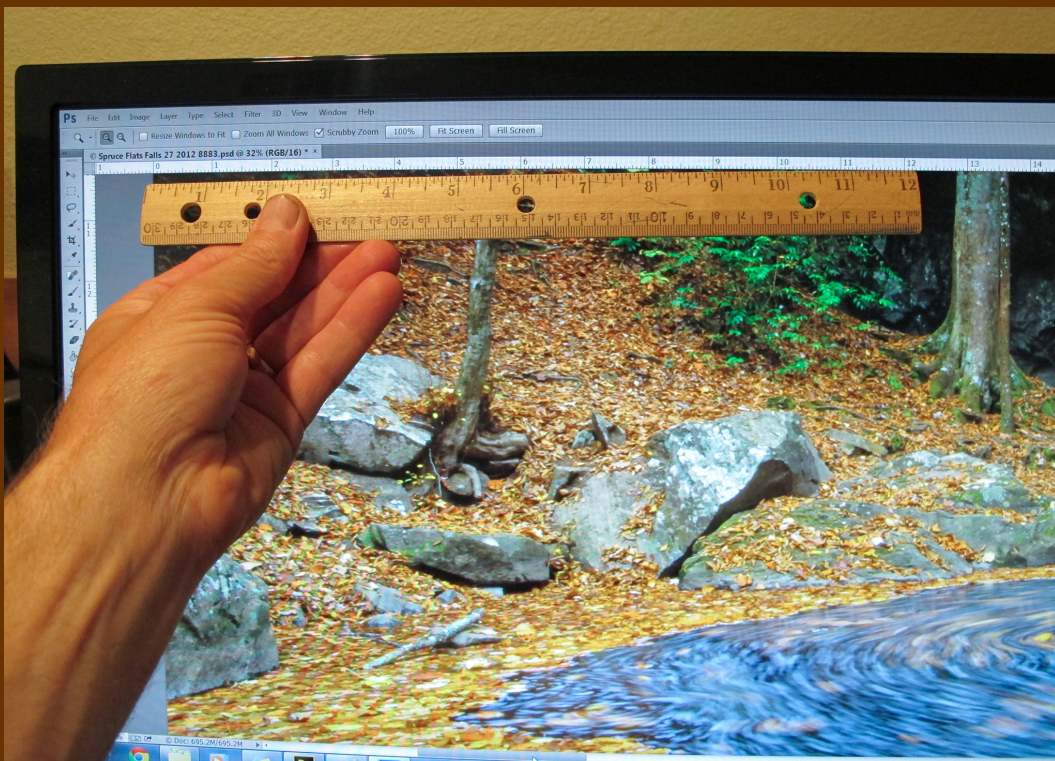
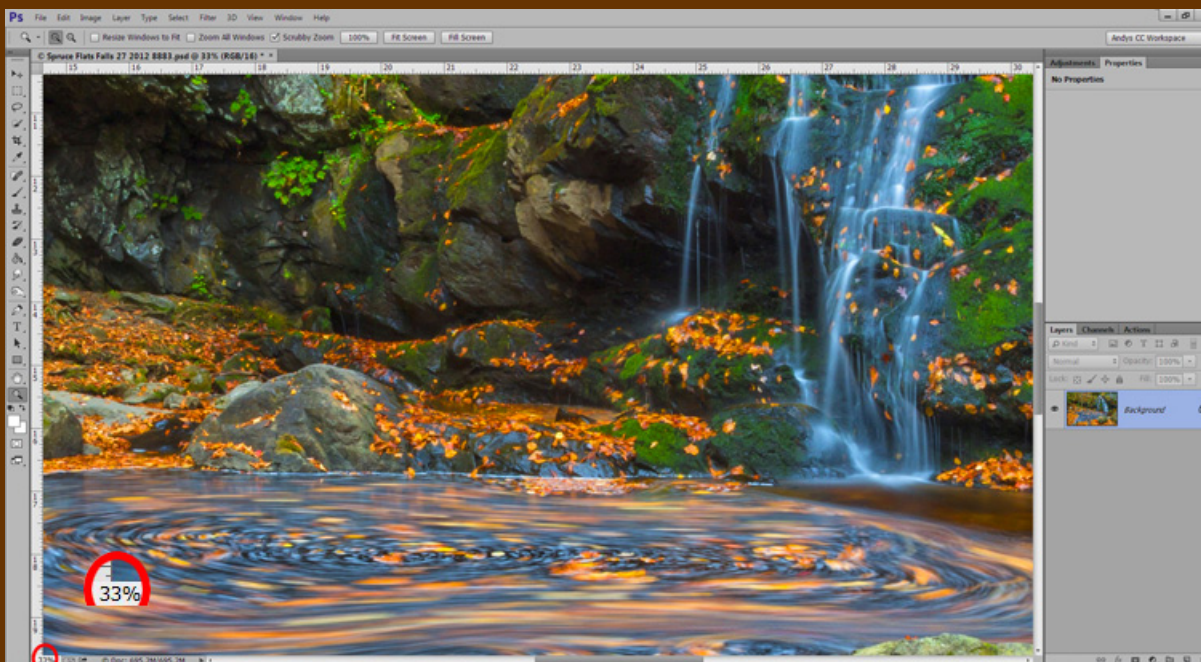
After resizing choose "View-Rulers" to display a ruler along the top and side of the image.





Now in the bottom left change the percentage while holding a ruler adjacent to the ruler on the screen.

32% to 60% should be the range, it is dependent upon screen resolution.



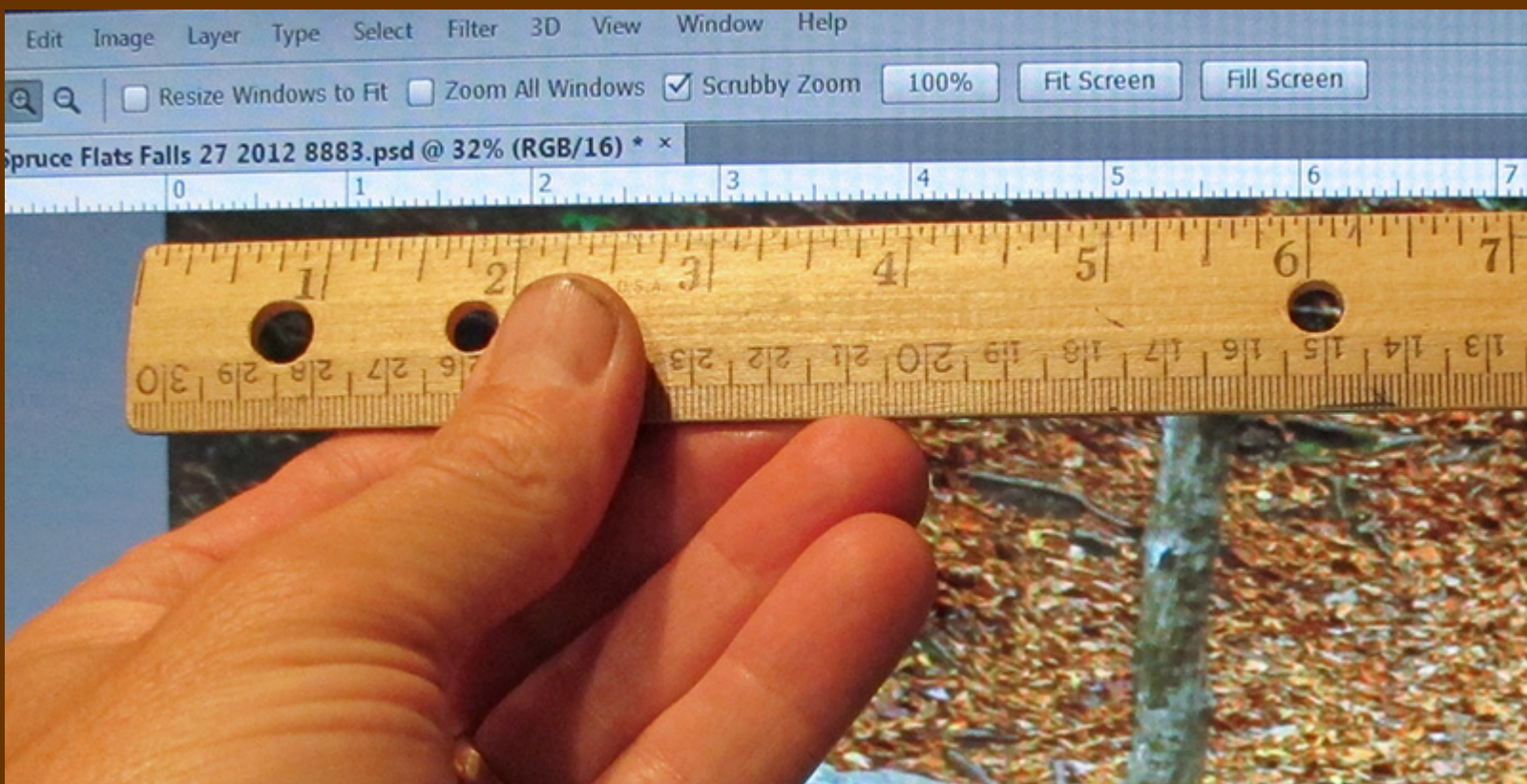


When an inch on the screen is the same length as an inch on the ruler, one is viewing the image approximately as it will print.

Of course it still needs to be sharpened for output.

Does it still look acceptable?

Don't save this large version over the master file, always save as a new file.







Enjoy the journey!