



The Solitude of Winter

by Andy Long

Find excitement in capturing the photographic beauty and serenity of winter landscapes.

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A pair of trees are isolated from the background on a foggy, snowy morning.

Colorado. Every season has its own calling, especially in Colorado. Summertime offers fields of flowers with dramatic mountain backdrops; fall has the golden shimmer of the aspens; and spring is the season of new birth and new growth. In Colorado, there is some type of wildlife available to chase during any time of year.

Winter in Colorado, though, is a world unto itself--a time when you can go to once bustling areas and find yourself alone with the beauty that's in front of you and with your thoughts. There's a quietness and stillness that permeate the air. While the temperature might be cold, a warm feeling can overtake you as you search out the subtleties of snow, trees, fences, barns, and shadows—a variety of subjects that ask to be photographed.

For me, winter holds a special feeling--maybe because I grew up in Florida and never saw snow and didn't have to deal with the potential problems that come with it. A trip to capture the simple yet complex images that winter

In Florida where I grew up, winter held a completely different meaning than it did in most other parts of the country. It meant running the air conditioner on Christmas morning rather than sitting around a fireplace. The only white we could find on the ground was sand on the beach. However, everything changed when I moved, first, to Jackson, Wyoming, and then to

offers is exciting for me. It's a chance to become part of the scene. When doing landscape photography—and, for me, that primarily means intimate landscapes rather than the large vistas, I like to take time to soak-in the surroundings, to become part of the whole. In winter, blending-in seems easier to do.

The essence of the beauty more than makes up for whatever is lost as far as color in this monochromatic season. A drive across a stretch of road that in summer seemed tedious becomes an adventure into a whole new world as snow covers the ground and highlights the trees whose dark trunks contrast nicely against the white.

There's something about an old barn that has seen better days when it's surrounded by snow. A feeling of solitude and isolation is easy to create in a photo when there's just one strong element situated in a field of white. Many emotions besides solitude and isolation can be evoked by the setting—such as serenity and calmness. It's easy to become one with the surroundings.



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A fresh snow puts a layer of white on the fence adding a new depth to the scene.

Although a trip to shoot landscapes during the summer might be ruined when rain makes an appearance, falling snow can contribute to the overall mood of a setting. Capturing it can add another nice element, especially if you're able to catch it falling in front of a barn or a group of trees. While the contours of the field are lost, the sense of atmosphere is enhanced. In fact, a fresh accumulation of several inches of snow built up on trees, fences, and the ground makes heading out all the more enjoyable.

When you revisit an area in the winter that you knew best in other seasons, you may discover images you didn't think twice about at other times of the year. For example, a clump of vegetation that you'd never look at in summer or fall may become a very pretty picture when it's sneaking up through the snow, isolated from its surroundings.



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This clump of vegetation would be overlooked in other seasons but has a certain appeal surrounded by snow.

Sometimes you're taken aback by what you see. In fall, I've stood on the back of my vehicle to gain a different perspective of a fence as it works its way toward a group of aspen trees. In winter, a walk up a snow bank puts me above the same fence that now has snow piled up to the top rail of the four I've seen at other times. In fact, it's very easy to get lost in a setting on a sunny day when mounds of snow cast shadows over an area. The contrast and details can be extremely beautiful. It's easy to be surprised when you realize you've just spent nearly forty-five minutes shooting in one spot, especially when you know you could spend another hour there working on more images—this time of the trees and their shadows.



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A walk up a snow mound in winter makes it easy to get above the fence to show its shape.



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A low sun casts shadows both from the small pine as well as the ridges in the snow.

Macro photography is a subject that doesn't

receive as much attention in winter as it should. A very cold night can create wonderfully detailed ice crystals or frost. Just as when you're shooting flowers during the summer months, you have to be part contortionist to get in a good position for the shots. Unfortunately, now you're crawling around through the snow. But the end result is worth all of the effort—even beyond the reward of getting lost in the peacefulness of the setting. If you have the affinity for macro work, you know that you could spend a couple of hours shooting in order to get a wide variety of compositions.

The detail that can be found in a single ice crystal or group of crystals is stunning to see through a macro lens. And, with the proper equipment, creating extremely tight shots using a 1.4 teleconverter, 25mm extension tube, and a macro lens allows for very tight shots that emphasize the detail. Backlighting brings out even more of the intricacies.



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Macro work can add a whole new set of shots available during winter.



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Leafless aspens show off the shape of the hillside while a crisp blue sky contrasts nicely with the white snow.

Arctic Alaska is unlike any other place I've experienced. The winter beauty is beyond description. People who've seen it in both seasons say there's no comparison; it's much nicer in winter with everything shrouded in snow than in the summer with browns and greens filling the landscape. Even a gravel pit can be pretty when snow is piled up on the large rocks that are waiting to be crushed into road gravel.

Nothing says winter like fresh powder snow and a crisp blue sky. They contrast nicely, as well as being very complimentary in color. The richness of the sky can be brought out even more with a polarizer filter, but you have to be careful at higher elevations because cranking up the intensity to its fullest can darken the sky too much, and your scene will look unnatural.

Some winter settings can be otherworldly in appearance.

During a recent workshop, while on our furthest journey north, to about 150

miles north of the Arctic Circle, I asked the workshop members for a one-word description of the setting. Their choices included “incredible,” “awesome,” “wow,” “stunning,” “amazing,” “stark,” and “beautiful.” It’s very easy to just stand, look 360 degrees around you, and feel absolutely insignificant within the vastness of your surroundings while feeling awed to be a part of the whole.

The details, patterns, and textures that can be brought out in photos of snow can’t be matched at other times of the year. An area with rolling mounds can provide an almost endless array of compositions. Using lines and shadows helps show off the softness of this sometimes-harsh season. The magic could be the purity or it could be the freshness. Whatever it is, there’s something about a winter scene that can inspire a creative eye to find all the hidden grandeur. I find a restfulness that permits me to relax and get away from all that comes with a busy life. Disappearing into a sea of white is an escape that also offers plenty of pushes of the shutter button.



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Shadows help define the shape of the mounds and rolls creating a subtle study in shape and form.

Sitting here looking out the window of the cabin I use for my Northern Lights workshop, I’m watching shadows creating interesting patterns on the snow that has piled up and is overhanging the roof. There are no cars or people bustling by. Everyone in the area seems to be part of the relaxed atmosphere--a relaxation that comes with the solitude that only a quaint cabin in the winter wilderness can offer.

First Light offers workshops to prime photographic locations in the country. Each year new locations are added as 20-year professional Andy Long travels the country finding great spots. All trips are educational with hands-on help in the field and instructional slide programs. Visit www.firstlighttours.com for more information.

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