

Better Things Come To Those Who Wait

Waiting a little bit longer or even revisiting a location can make a huge difference in landscape photography. Everything depends on light and, some times, quality light is worth waiting for; **Fran Halsall** explains

It is repeated so often that, to talk about ‘timing being everything’ in photography, now seems like a cliché. However, this proverbial phrase never has been more relevant. Being a keen observer of other photographers at work, I wonder what exactly it is that these individuals are up to as the shutter goes every couple of minutes. This is a sure sign of doing and not thinking and is a tendency exacerbated by the perceived disposability of digital photographs. As the years have gone on I shoot less and give more time to thinking about the ‘perfect’ image. Whole days can be spent out in the field making observations and not photographing anything, usually because the light is not quite right, or taking one or two reference shots that serve as sketches for future images. While this approach may be anathema to the reportage or social photographer, I believe it is essential to those wishing to document the landscape. Why? Because you can be so busy reacting mechanically to the environment that there are no spare minutes left for considering what it is that you are trying to say about that place, let alone allowing time to critique those responses. It is important to accept that the best circumstances for making landscape

images do not occur every day, not even every week, and that revisiting a scene, often on multiple occasions, is part of what it takes to produce an image that goes beyond the ordinary.

The following depicts locations represented by two images, the first of which is a work in progress, while the second of the pair is the culmination of a better approach in the right light. In some cases it was a case simply of waiting a few hours between each photograph, in others a month or more and, in one case, more than a year had elapsed since the initial attempt. And what is the difference that marks them apart? Time well spent on reflecting upon the parts that work and those that do not.

Glen Affric, Pine Trees

On arriving in Glen Affric, my senses were somewhat overwhelmed by the many striking trees that had so much photographic potential. The first image was rushed, frankly, and the idea was to show a group, using the near tree to frame the three behind it. However at this time of the evening, that meant looking into the sun and it was still bright, creating a difficult exposure. To record detail in the sky, a minus compensation of one and two-thirds stops was blended in Photoshop with an exposure that was

correct for the land. However, even after this process, the sky is still burnt out around the sun and sufficient minus compensation to rectify this would have made the majority of the scene pure black and impossible to composite. The backlighting threw the trees into silhouette, a pleasing graphic effect in some ways, although harder to distinguish where one tree ends and another begins, making the composition too incoherent for my taste.

The second image focuses on a single stately pine and the composition is all the better for its simplicity. Taken only half an hour later, this time the subject is side lit, which makes the exposure more balanced as the difference between the sky and the land is less pronounced. It also means that the tree has a more three-dimensional appearance as the tones across it transition from light to dark; the long shadows revealing the bark’s texture. By this point a cumulus cloud had drifted in and this provides an extra surface for the light of the setting sun to reflect from and serves to make the sky area more interesting, which is important as this area is given greater weight than the land. This composition makes good use of perspective depth as it was shot at a fairly wide angle of 24mm, which means that the mountains and the trees in the middle distance appear smaller and further away than they would to the naked eye, exaggerating the scale relationship between them and the near tree, making it look taller still and even more imposing. »

Glen Affric, Pine Trees

Right 1st picture

Canon 5D

Canon 17-40mm f/4L @ 20mm

f/22, 0.3sec, ISO 100

Below 2nd picture

Canon 5D

Canon 17-40mm f/4L @ 24mm

f/16, 0.5sec, ISO 100



All pictures © Fran Halsall



“As the years have gone on I shoot less and give more time to thinking about the ‘perfect’ image. Whole days can be spent out in the field making observations and not photographing anything”

» Weir on the River Wye

As this location is in a deep valley, direct lighting at the ideal times around sunrise and sunset was always going to be impossible. This is why I thought that the first image, taken a short while after sunrise in diffused light, was the best result that was likely to be achieved, although not exactly satisfying. While the blue of the reflected sky on the water's surface is pleasant enough, the soft light does little for the woodland beyond. Due to the blue cast, the vegetation lacks the vitality of yellowish spring green, which after all was the reason this was shot in May rather than at any other

time. Although the dale at this point runs north west-south east, there was potential for the weir to be side lit during mid-afternoon. However, this would bring its own problems, as the sun would still be high and cast deep shadows that would create maximum contrast with the highlights on the flowing water; nonetheless I resolved to go back later.

As the day wore on, high cloud started to gather and normally this is bad news in terms of quality of light, but for once it worked actually in my favour. Approaching the weir at the appointed hour, the sun's strength was filtered through the wispy cloud

so that even though it has a direct presence, the shadows were not pure black and the highlights on the moving water were gently sparkling rather than completely dazzling. The important thing was that the woodland now looked properly vibrant and attractive dappled patterns on the stonework brought the scene to life. The tripod was set up in what I thought was the same position, although clearly it is closer to the protruding part of the river bed and this means there is less water in the bottom right, which produces a more balanced arrangement. Using a polarising filter helped to reduce

not only some of the light reflecting off the water, making the exposure range a little easier to handle, but also afforded a glimpse of the river bed. Even so, the cascading water was still beyond the range of an exposure that was correct for the rest of the scene (accepting that the shadows would lose some detail) and a second frame was shot at minus one and one-third and blended in post-production. Looking back, the image captured in the morning is borderline acceptable but when compared with the afternoon one, it seems lacklustre at best. »



“Using a polarising filter helped to reduce not only some of the light reflecting off the water, making the exposure range a little easier to handle, but also afforded a glimpse of the river bed”

Weir on the River Wye
Above 1st picture
Canon 5D
Canon 17-40mm f/4L @ 17mm
f/22, 6sec, ISO 100
Left 2nd picture
Canon 5D
Canon 17-40mm f/4L @ 19mm
f/22, 0.3sec, ISO 100

» Ynys Llanddwyn, Old Lighthouse

These two images are nearly identical compositionally, except for the fact that in the earlier image my desire to include the cloud directly above the tower has resulted in a half and half ratio between land and sky. Perhaps there was a way to achieve the classical proportions of two-thirds land to one-third sky but it was not obvious at the time. Aside from this issue, the weather on this particular summer evening was especially fine and the light was still quite bright, even though sunset was fast approaching. While some may like the sunny feel and think me curmudgeonly for dismissing it, to my mind the lighting

has little emotional resonance and does nothing for me. With scant cloud for the sun to reflect from, the warm-coloured wavelengths go to waste as they dissipate in the clear sky.

The second image, taken 14 months later, was shot on an early autumn evening and this time all the ingredients came together. Having been critical about the compositional weaknesses of the previous attempt, this time the viewpoint is fractionally lower and the lens is angled downwards a touch more to tip the ratio towards more land and less sky. In addition the focal length has shifted from 28mm in the first instance to 32mm and the magnification this provides alters the scale and spatial relationships, which means that the

near elements are fractionally larger and the mountains appear both slightly bigger and also closer in the latter photograph. These are small but critical adjustments that help provide that elusive quality called balance. Obliging, better weather could not have been asked for, as towards sunset the light went a soft gold and the shadows are far less stark than in the summertime version. The clouds themselves had feathered edges that set up textural contrast with the rocky terrain and they appear to converge on the tower, which is a happy coincidence created by air currents but enhanced by the fairly wide-angle lens’ effect on perspective. »



“The second image, taken 14 months later, was shot on an early autumn evening and this time all the ingredients came together”



Ynys Llanddwyn, Old Lighthouse
Above 1st picture
Canon 5D mkII
Canon 17-40mm f/4L @ 28mm
f/16, 0.3sec, ISO 100
Left 2nd picture
Canon 5D mkII
Canon 17-40mm f/4L @ 32mm
f/16, 1/8sec, ISO 200



» Stanage Edge, Looking North West

Anyone who has tackled Stanage Edge knows that it is hard to appreciate its full extent from any one viewpoint, and yet this is the challenge I faced when photographing it for my current book project. The plan was to show the escarpment snaking off into the distance and in the first attempt I thought a good vantage point had been found. Even though much time was spent ‘perfecting’ the composition it was still not quite right on two counts; most fundamentally the foreground rocks lacked any definable shape and although, the puddle was included to mitigate

this lack of structure by inserting a focal point, it did not work as well as anticipated. In addition, the bump on the horizon that is a continuation of the escarpment ended up in a central position and upset the flow. These two factors cancel out the otherwise agreeable weather conditions, as for an image to ‘work’ it has to have a balance of both light and form.

Going forward eight months, and after at least one failed mission in between times due to bad weather, I found a more shapely arrangement of boulders that suggest a clear lead into the vista beyond. Pointed forms are an obvious but effective choice and these rocks appeared especially geometric due to edge contrast created by

strong side lighting. Composed so that a line originating in the bottom left corner traces along the edge before terminating at the bump on the horizon, which this time is aligned with the top left-hand third. More weight is imparted to the rocks on the right, which is appropriate as this is the feature that needed to be illustrated, given that this area had a diminished role in the previous photograph. The icing on the cake is the rich colouration throughout: the autumnal moorland offset by the green trees and finished off with the deep blue of a stormy sky. »

“Going forward eight months, and after at least one failed mission in between times due to bad weather, I found a more shapely arrangement of boulders that suggest a clear lead into the vista beyond”

Stanage Edge, Looking North West
Left 1st picture
Canon 5D mkII
Canon 17-40mm f/4L @ 23mm
f/16, 0.6sec, ISO 100
Below 2nd picture
Canon 5D mkII
Canon 17-40mm f/4L @ 25mm
f/16, 1/10sec, ISO 250



» Back Tor, Derwent Moor
Part of Back Tor's charm is the setting, as it is a long walk from anywhere. However, this means that it is awkward to photograph around the ideal times of sunrise and sunset. The first image demonstrates the problem all too well as it was taken mid-afternoon and many hours before sunset. Because the sun was arriving from such a high angle, the shadows that could reveal the Tor's eroded nooks and crannies are too short and stark to be of any use. The shadows are nearly pure black and contrast aggressively with the bright rock. While not a total failure, as the Tor framed against the cloudscape

is a nice idea, the image is far from a triumph. The same image taken a couple of hours later might well have been altogether more successful but by then I had moved on to other locations on the moor.

Returning about a month later, the weather conditions were much more conducive, being an afternoon of squally showers and intermittent sun. Only five minutes prior to this image being taken I had been huddled in the lee of the Tor sheltering from the tumultuous, yet brief, onslaughts. Daring to look out as the sun reappeared I saw a wall of rain attached to menacing clouds coming

right towards me. With no time to lose, the outcrop was placed on the frame's right leaving space for the rain cloud to sweep in from the left. Care was taken so that at least some of the moor beyond the rocks was visible, creating spatial depth that was lacking in the earlier attempt; besides which, the hint of purple from the heather moorland was certainly worth including. Even though this image was taken earlier in the afternoon actually than the one a month previously, the dramatic weather has changed the lighting dynamics to such an extent that the result is much more atmospheric. ✦



Fran Halsall

Fran Halsall has worked as a professional photographer and writer for nearly 7 years, taking as her inspiration the wild landscapes, diverse geology and different habitats of the British Isles. To view her work visit

www.fran-halsall.co.uk

Back Tor, Derwent Moor

Above 1st picture

Canon 5D

Canon 17-40mm f/4L @ 19mm
f/22, 1/20sec, ISO 100

Left 2nd picture

Canon 5D

Canon 17-40mm f/4L @ 17mm
f/22, 1/10sec, ISO 100



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