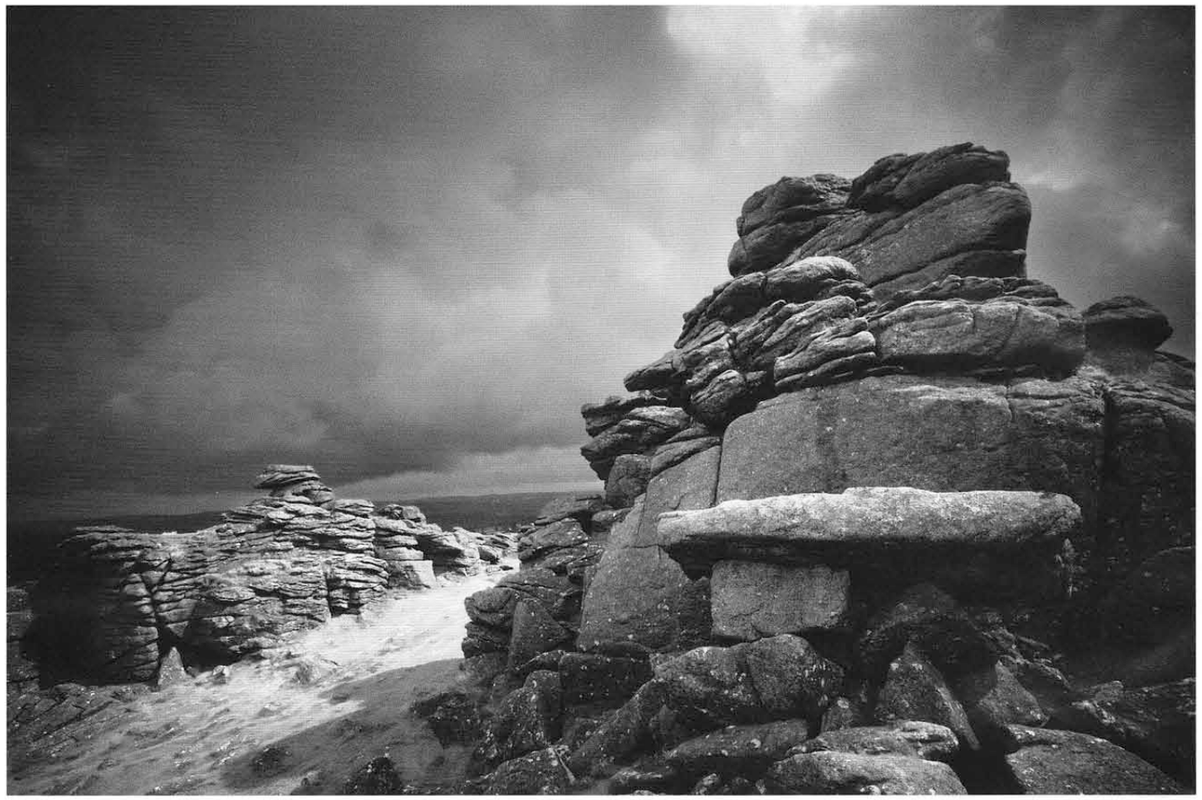
Uig Sands, Isle of Lewis, The Hebrides
Sidelit grasses cause definite shadows, creating an extra texture in the luminous sand. A feathered vignette was added to darken the sky and the bottom corners to draw the eye inwards.



BLACK & WHITE IN HARSH LIGHT

Every landscape photographer knows you shouldn't venture out shooting during the midday hours of harsh sunlight. Or should you? **FRAN HALSALL** explains that harsh sunlight can be full of creative possibilities for black-and-white photographers

Strong sunshine is generally thought to harm landscape photography and this is arguably the case when working in colour. However, it is a different matter when shooting in black and white, as crisp highlights and bold shadows create high-key contrast, which can be made into a positive feature.

FRAN HALSALL

↑Hound Tor, Dartmoor, Devon
A brief splash of mid-afternoon sunshine escapes from between dark clouds, an effect that is magnified by lightening the green grass and adding emphasis to the shadows.

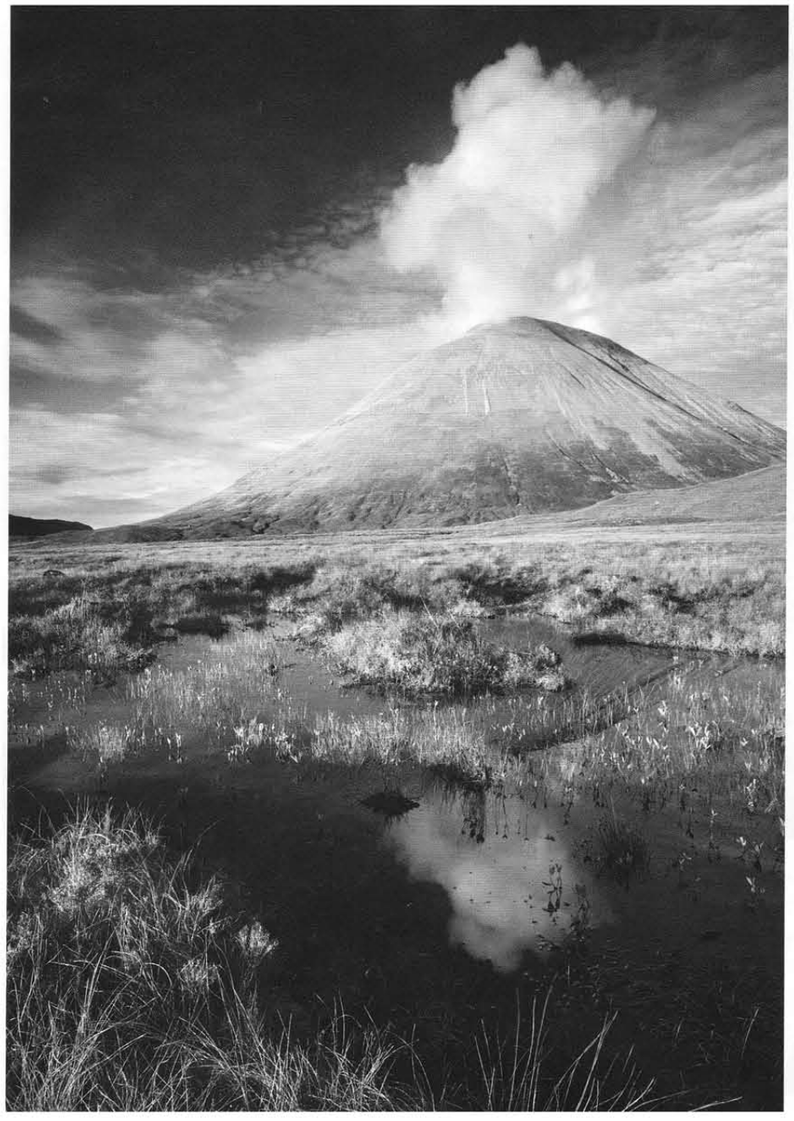
THE ADVANTAGE OF BLACK AND WHITE

The intensity of sunlight throughout much of the day has a negative impact on colours, because bright light creates strong reflections, making things appear less vibrant. This is much less of an issue in black-and-white photographs as those are concerned primarily with tone.

An image that appears washed out in colour can be transformed into something altogether more interesting in monochrome, which extends the useful number of hours in the day for making landscape photographs.

However, the flood of sunshine in the hours either side of noon is best avoided because shadows, while very dark, are reduced to a bare minimum. As substantial shadows are such a key part of revealing the shape of things, the light around midday is just too harsh, even for high-key images.

Black-and-white images, by definition, should include areas of both tones. It does not require large proportions of either shade, but a photograph lacking both black and white will appear comparatively soft and somewhat flat. This is due to the phenomenon known as edge contrast, ▶



"TO HEIGHTEN CONTRAST IT HELPS TO INCLUDE COMPLEMENTARY COLOURS: RED-CYAN, BLUE-YELLOW AND GREEN-MAGENTA"

where a light grey next to a dark grey appears less sharp than white next to black. The higher the contrast value the crisper the distinction is between objects, which explains why high-key photographs make such a strong visual statement.

CAMERAS AND CONTRAST

It is important to consider how cameras deal with contrast, as they are less sophisticated than the human eye, which means that any darker tones are pushed towards black and lighter ones towards white. In bright light it is critical to keep an eye on potential exposure problems. It may well be impossible to achieve detail in both shadows and highlights within one exposure.

Presume that ND graduated filters or exposure composites will be necessary to make balanced exposures. A certain amount of leeway can be given to the shadows, as some concentrated areas of pure black work well, but blown-out highlights where no detail exists are far less pleasing.

Just as with colour photography, polarising filters are useful, particularly in sunny conditions. Take the example of a fluffy white cloud against a blue sky; the filter can be used to reduce some of the reflected light in the sky, thus making it a deeper shade. When this scene is converted to black and white the effect can be amplified and the sky made to appear charcoal grey or even black, which will make the clouds more pronounced.

If a subject such as a glinting rock or glossy foliage is sparkling in the sunlight and causing highlights to blow out when the rest of the exposure is otherwise reasonable, the filter can be used to slightly soften the intensity of these reflections. However, it will have no real effect on specular reflections from water, because those are as bright as the sun itself.

↖ ***Glamaig, Isle of Skye, The Hebrides***
The red-gold moorland vegetation was processed to be as bright as possible so that it appeared silvery against the boggy pool. The blue sky was made deeper by using a polariser and then adjusting the blue channel

↑ ***Vale of Edale, Derbyshire***
Brightening the yellow and green channels generates contrast with the red bracken patches that have been made to appear a much deeper shade of grey. The black-and-white version has a much broader tonal range than the original colour image

MULTICOLOURED MONOCHROME

As odd as it may seem at first, monochrome photography still requires an awareness of colour. Alongside tone, colour is a significant factor in establishing the image's contrast range. Whether using coloured filters (which lighten their own colour and darken their opposite one) with black-and-white film or shooting digitally and mixing colour channels, you must consider the potential effects from the outset.

The tonal information recorded within the individual colour channels of the digital file can be manipulated during processing to increase contrast variation, making some 'colours' more luminous and toning down others to a deeper shade of grey.

Obvious areas of colour are more easily distinguished from one another and some of the best monochrome shots begin life as multicoloured scenes.

To heighten contrast it helps to include pairings of complementary colours: red-cyan, blue-yellow and green-magenta, because these exhibit the greatest difference and when processed can be pushed towards opposite ends of the tonal scale. This is why it is preferable to shoot a colour file in-camera, ignoring any black-and-white picture settings, and to use the full-spectrum data.

PROCESSING

Digital processing has opened up new creative possibilities for black-and-white imaging. It is ultimately more flexible than film and filters because it allows the manipulation of individual channels from each area of the spectrum, which gives greater control over tonal values.

Ideally any file should be shot in RAW, as it offers more room for manipulation without causing pixel damage.

Contrast settings tend to be pushed much further in black-and-white images, far more than would be expected in a colour equivalent, and digital artefacts can arise, such as grainy noise, most often in the blue channel, and the banding typically seen as discontinuous shading in blue skies.

The lower the ISO rating of the original file, the less of a problem it will be when it comes to the often extensive adjustments. PM

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