

# The Mouth of The Kenai

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## Plugged In: For good photos, use a light touch/touch of light

**By Joe Kashi, for the Redoubt Reporter,**

The term “photography” literally translates from the original Greek as “light-writing” — a most apt name. Photography captures light — nothing more, nor less.

The most effective photographs use light to best advantage, preferably in a uniquely personal way. That means being constantly open to how natural light makes a scene come alive or, if you prefer a more formal style, how you can artificially light a subject to make the best possible image. Although it’s simply a personal preference, I like the look and feel of natural light and images as found, rather than artificially constructed images lit by artificial light.

During the film era, photographers were generally urged to take photographs in bright sunshine with the sun behind the camera, causing subjects to be evenly front-lit. That was due to the significant limitations of early color films, not aesthetics or interesting lighting. Digital photography is more flexible, at least when images are saved in RAW format using a camera with a wide dynamic range, and post-processed with a good program, such as PhotoShop ACR, Lightroom or DXO Elite.

If you use a good digital camera’s dynamic range to best advantage, you’ll be able to take good photographs under a much wider variety of lighting conditions, while still retaining the ability to make exhibit-quality enlargements.

Beginning photographers are often urged to take photos during the first hour after dawn and the last hour before sunset. When the sun is near the horizon, the angle of sunlight is nearly horizontal, emphasizing textures and shadows that bring out maximum detail. Low-angle sunlight has a warm overall color balance that’s often very flattering. Compared to Lower-48 photographers, Alaskans and other high-latitude residents have an advantage — our winter sun is low on the horizon for months, even during midday, extending the optimum time for making outdoor photographs.

Automatic white-balance settings tend to cancel out the warmth of low-angle sunshine. In those circumstances, I’ll set my camera’s white balance to “daylight” in order to retain that warmth.

I find backlighting to be the trickiest but most interesting lighting angle. When backlit, the light source is behind your subject and pointing toward your camera. Backlighting can be quite dramatic if done properly. With fireweed foliage or other highly colored, translucent subjects, backlighting greatly emphasizes deep, highly saturated color. With reflective subjects like a wet beach, backlighting can result in intense reflections that, when underexposed by a camera's auto-exposure feature, result in dramatically different renderings of a common subject.

Be careful to avoid "flare," those unwanted internal lens reflections caused by bright light sources directly striking the front glass lens element. Flare can be interesting when controlled, but uncontrolled flare easily ruins images. Some lenses better avoid flare because of more effective coatings. After you've shot a number of backlit images, you'll know which lenses work best.

Harsh and intense lighting is not always necessary to produce interesting images. Very soft lighting with muted colors can be at least as attractive as intensely color-saturated bright light. This sort of lighting is particularly effective for soft portraits of people, particularly in direct sunlight through a single window or a door.

There's no single best type of lighting. Rather, what works best depends on the subject and your concept of it. Remember, though, to use auto white-balance cautiously so you don't inadvertently cancel out what attracted your interest in the first place.

While it's usually evident at a glance when it fails, what constitutes good photo composition is fraught with controversy and strong opinions. I rather like Edward Weston's simple statement that good photo composition is simply the strongest way of seeing a particular subject. That certainly implies that there are no hard-and-fast "rules" that will mechanically produce a strong image every time.

Rather, if you see a possible image that attracts you, spend some time without forcing the process. Get an intuitive feel for what the image means to you, personally, and plan your shots and overall technique to best bring that to fruition. Perhaps an angle other than eye level might work best. Perhaps you might move away to provide more surrounding context for the subject, or closer, to eliminate surrounding context and provide a sense of abstracting the subject from its surrounding reality. Move around the subject until the various elements seem to best fit and reinforce each other.

A few general thoughts about composition are appropriate, though. Gestalt provides an interesting approach in which you can work with how the brain naturally perceives input. In our June 30, 2010, issue, which remains available online, we discussed how photographers can use gestalt to make more interesting photographs. It's worth re-reading as you hone your compositional skills.

Another "rule" that is followed, perhaps too frequently, by photographers is the so-called "rule of thirds." You'll find many discussions of it throughout online photo sites. Less common but more important, I believe, are discussions about when to NOT use that approach. The best that I've found is at <http://www.petapixel.com>. It's the best short discussion I've seen about photo composition and I highly recommend not only reading it, but saving and rereading it often. The author explores more complex compositional techniques known to trained painters for centuries, but to which photographers are seemingly oblivious.

Finally, consider how you might apply symmetry, or the lack of symmetry, as well as more generalized concepts, such as lines, shapes, masses, tone and color. Make open areas and other negative space work to reinforce your subject. Try to avoid static compositions in which your eye either

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doesn't move constantly around the image or seems pushed off the edge. Control potentially distracting backgrounds, or provide necessary additional sharpness by controlling depth of field with wider or smaller lens apertures.

Although the concepts we've discussed in summary this week sound relatively straightforward, mastering them in the field requires a lifetime of thought and practice. Doesn't that sound fun?

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