

Boundary Waters Photography

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2-1-2020

Often times I am asked about my Boundary Waters photography, so here are a few thoughts...

Equipment: I carry all my gear in an F-Stop Gear Ajna backpack. It sits at my feet at all times when in the canoe. In the bag, I have a Canon 5D Mark IV DSLR with a 24-105 and a Canon 7D Mark II with 70-200mm... I also take a 16-35mm wide angle lens. Some trips I take the 100-400mm instead of the 70-200, but it is a couple pounds heavier. I use a cover over the bag in bad weather but don't use a

completely waterproof container like a Pelican Case. I accept some degree of risk because I want quick access to my gear... I do have my equipment insured so that gives me some peace of mind.

I also keep a little point and shoot camera (Canon G9X) with me at all times in case I see something interesting along a portage trail. Don't underestimate the value of a little point and shoot... I have had many photos published, including a front cover, taken with the point and shoot.

I take a Gitzo 2531 carbon fiber tripod with a Really Right Stuff BH40 ball head. I store it in a light weight protective bag ... that at least gives some protection when it is bumped around while strapped on the side of my Granite Gear pack. It was terribly expensive but has served me very well. One more thing... I try to set my camera bag on a couple of 1 inch diameter sticks to keep it off the bottom of the canoe, especially on rainy days. It will help the bag avoid soaking up water. If the rain looks like it is going to last a long time, I will put the entire bag in a dry bag.

- Know your camera: ...how to turn on/ off autofocus and red eye reduction, have a basic understanding of how the metering system works and how to compensate when necessary. Understand how to override the automatic features. When the camera is on the tripod and I'm shooting scenery, I use Av (Aperture Priority) mode so I can control depth of field. If I am doing quick shooting for fishing action or around camp, I will use P (Program) mode. I take my camera manual with me in a zip lock bag for reference.

- Understand your cameras histogram and how it can help you get the correct exposure. In general, if the histogram is hitting the right side of the scale, you are losing detail in the highlights, if the histogram hits the left side you losing detail in the shadows. Adjust your exposure compensation dial as needed ... +1 will move the histogram to right and -1 will move it to the left.

- Due to the limited dynamic range of most digital sensors, some scenes cannot be captured with a single image. In these cases I will shoot 3 or more shots using different exposure levels, then combine them later using an HDR (High Dynamic Range) program like Photomatix. This technique works best when the camera is mounted on a tripod, but can work handheld too. I use HDR sparingly since it can create unrealistic looking scenes.



- Consider shooting in RAW format if your camera is capable of it. This will allow much easier adjusting of white balance after the photo has been taken. You can also increase or decrease the exposure by 1 stop (or more) after the photo is taken.

- Crooked horizons – try to keep your horizon level for a more pleasing photo.

- Moving water and the use of different shutter speeds. You will start to get that silky look in a moving water photo when shutter speeds are greater than $\frac{1}{4}$ sec – I often use 4-5 sec exposures. Consider experimenting with a polarizing filter – it will remove glare from rocks and water and also wet foliage. If you have a large and powerful waterfall, then stopping the action may be more effective. In that case you will want to use a faster shutter speed of around $\frac{1}{500}$ sec to stop the action. Again, experiment with different shutter speeds.

- Compose for less clutter – be aware of distracting elements either in front of or behind your subject. Can you move a little up or down or right or left to clean up the composition? Applying zoom can also simplify a scene.

- Dramatic light – I prefer to shoot in early morning and evening light. The lower angle of the light creates a warmer and (I think) more pleasing photo. Be especially alert after a rain storm... they are often times followed by dramatic light and better yet, a rainbow. If there is an overcast grey sky, I try to keep it out of the frame... for the most part.

- White Balance – I leave my camera set to Automatic White Balance (AWB) and find it is fairly accurate, but still often fine-tune the setting later in my RAW converter.

- Work Hard – Well, actually I really don't consider this work, but I do work hard at it. I am typically up about 30 minutes before sunrise and evaluate the weather and potential for color in the sky. Hopefully I have scouted the area the day before and know right where to go for the best composition. When scouting, it helps to know where the sun will be rising and setting. For the Boundary Waters in Sept/ Oct., sunrise is roughly at a 90 degree compass bearing and sunset will be around 270 degrees. I am constantly looking for interesting compositions... if the weather/sky isn't cooperating, I sometimes spend time behind camp looking down at the interesting mushrooms, lichen, leaves or birch bark designs.

- Post Processing – this is really important. Since I shoot in the RAW format, I have to do some post-processing in order to be able to share my images in .jpg or .tif formats. I use Adobe Lightroom, but a lower cost alternative is Adobe Photoshop Elements, which is very powerful. This is where you can fine-tune the white balance, exposure, color and sharpness. It may seem overwhelming to learn, but there are many very good YouTube videos that will be extremely helpful.

- Finally, constantly review the work of photographers whose work you admire and determine how their photos are different from yours and get fresh ideas of which techniques are working for them. Some who inspire me are: Jim Brandenburg, Thomas Mangleson, Marc Adamus, Joe Rossbach, Bill Fortney, Art Wolfe.

So there you go, all of my 'secrets' in less than two pages ☺ Now go out and get some great shots!

