

STOP FIGHTING YOUR CAMERA!

20 CAMERA SKILLS & SETTINGS YOU MUST MASTER
TO BE FLUID AND CONFIDENT IN THE FIELD

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THE IMPORTANCE OF

understanding your equipment

I've been teaching photography for 15 years and in that time I've noticed there is a huge difference between photographers who are getting shots, and photographers who aren't. And it all comes down to their GEAR. But don't misunderstand me, I don't mean that they have better gear, or more expensive gear, not at all. It's that the photographers who are getting shots know how to USE their gear, and use it well.

I've lost count of the number of times I've seen photographers miss incredible photos as the light is peaking because they are fiddling with their tripod, or trying to remember how to get out of 10 second timer mode. Because of that, I've created this list of the most common camera settings and skills I see people struggle with.



How to use this eBook

This eBook contains a list of the most important camera skills and settings you should practice using if you want to be fluid and confident shooting in the field. There are 20 skills, along with a brief description of what each skill or setting is, and why it's important. Think of it as a list of the prerequisites you should strive to master to be able to use your camera really well.

This eBook is NOT an instructional manual for your camera, nor is it a deep technical dive into each topic. For example, the eBook mentions that it's critical to know which dials control your aperture, shutter speed, and ISO, but it doesn't go into technical depth on stops, depth of field, or the exposure triangle.

Because there are so many cameras on the market, for each skill or setting mentioned, you should check your camera manual or YouTube for how to access it, turn it on or off, or adjust the settings.

Spend time before your next outing practicing these 20 skills and you will find that your ability to get shots will skyrocket. So without further ado, let's dive in.





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1

ADJUSTING APERTURE, SHUTTER SPEED, AND ISO



Aperture, shutter speed, and ISO are the three most important functions on your camera, so knowing which dials on your camera adjust each one is of the utmost importance. Even if you aren't 100% sure what these settings are used for, simply being able to adjust them quickly and easily will give you more confidence as your knowledge grows.

One thing I see consistently overlooked is the fact that these settings have proportional relationships. Meaning that if you decrease the exposure of your photo a certain amount by using your aperture, you can increase it the same amount using your shutter speed. This allows you to maintain your exposure as your creative approach to any given scene changes.

So I recommend you spend lots of time practicing changing these settings so you get comfortable with them and understand what effect each has on your exposure.

2

DISPLAYING THE HISTOGRAM IN LIVE VIEW AND PLAYBACK

The histogram is arguably the most useful tool we have in digital photography, because it shows you clearly whether you have a good exposure, if you are under- or over-exposed, or if you are clipping your highlights or shadows. Nowadays, almost every camera has the ability to display a histogram in live view and playback, so be sure you know how to turn on this feature.



3

TURN ON THE HIGHLIGHT WARNING (AKA THE “BLINKIES”)

Sometimes when looking at the histogram alone it can be tricky to tell if you have blown out highlights. This is where the Highlight Warning (AKA the blinkies) comes in. It will show you which parts of your photos are too bright and don't contain any image data. Be sure to turn this on for your camera.



4

TURN EXPOSURE BRACKETING ON & OFF

After looking at your histogram and your highlight warning, you may determine that you can't get the entire dynamic range of your scene captured in a single frame--this is where exposure bracketing comes into play.

Understand where that setting is on your camera, how to turn it on (and off), and how to adjust the number of shots and the exposure increment within your bracket.





5

MAGNIFY/ZOOM TO 100% IN LIVE VIEW AND PLAYBACK

Know how to quickly magnify / zoom into your photo at 100%, both in Live View and Playback. This is one of the most useful features on any camera, so I'm shocked how few photographers know how to do it easily.

Zooming to 100% is a great way to check if your photo is sharp and in focus. It's also useful for checking the edges of your composition to determine if you want to exclude anything in the frame.

Note that this is different than zooming in physically using your lens. Zooming in or Magnifying on live view and playback is a digital feature used for determining critical sharpness and for refining composition. Your camera has a little Zoom / Magnify button, and you should know how to use it well.

On many cameras you can set up 100% zoom as a custom button for efficiency.

6

DEPTH OF FIELD PREVIEW



If your camera has a depth of field (DOF) preview button, know where it is, or how to set up a custom function to activate it.

This is important because with many cameras, the camera keeps the aperture of the lens wide open while you're using live view (this helps things like autofocus work better). But this means you're not accurately seeing the depth of field of your photo if you are shooting at any aperture other than the widest one on your lens.

Using the DOF preview button shows you what the DOF is for your photo at the aperture you've specified.

Note that some modern cameras operate in full time DOF preview, meaning you always see the actual depth of field of your image. Be sure to check if your camera does this.

7

ENABLE BACK-BUTTON FOCUS



Back button focus separates the focus functionality of your camera from the actual picture-taking functionality when you press the shutter button. This is really important if you have focused on a subject and then you recompose slightly and your focus point has moved off of your subject. You don't want the camera to refocus when you press the shutter button, so you can use back button focus to grab your focus, then recompose, then press the shutter button and it will just take the picture without changing the focus.

8

CHANGE FROM AUTOFOCUS TO MANUAL FOCUS AND BACK AGAIN

There are many situations, like photographing stars or crashing waves, where autofocus can get fooled, or it can hunt for focus just when you want to take a picture.

For this reason, I highly recommend you get adept at using autofocus to get a good initial focus, then being able to quickly turn your camera to manual focus so that the focus doesn't change as you're taking the picture.

If you can practice this using gloves as well, all the better!



9

MOVE YOUR FOCUS POINT AND TURN ON FOCUS-PEAKING

Speaking of autofocus, it's no use if you don't know how to change your focus type (wide, narrow, single point, 3D tracking, etc.) or move your focus point around. Learn how to make those changes for your camera.

And speaking of manual focus, there's a tool called Focus Peaking which can help you determine which parts of your photo are in sharp focus. This can be especially useful if you are manually focus stacking.



10

KNOW WHICH RING ON YOUR LENS FOCUSES AND WHICH ONE ZOOMS

If you are using a zoom lens, it will have at least two rings: a focus ring and a zoom ring. (Some now have even more rings which control custom functions). It's important you know which ring is which so that you don't accidentally zoom when you meant to focus or vice-versa. And you get extra credit if you practice telling them apart in the dark while wearing gloves. The night photographer in you will thank you!



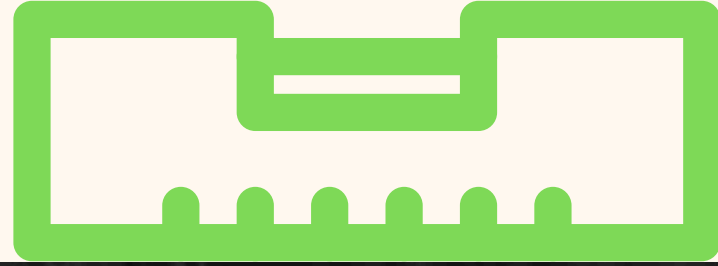
11

CHANGE YOUR SHOOTING MODE & TURN ON YOUR TIMER

When it comes to different shutter release types, we have single shot, continuous, timer, mirror up, etc., and you should understand how to quickly change between them.

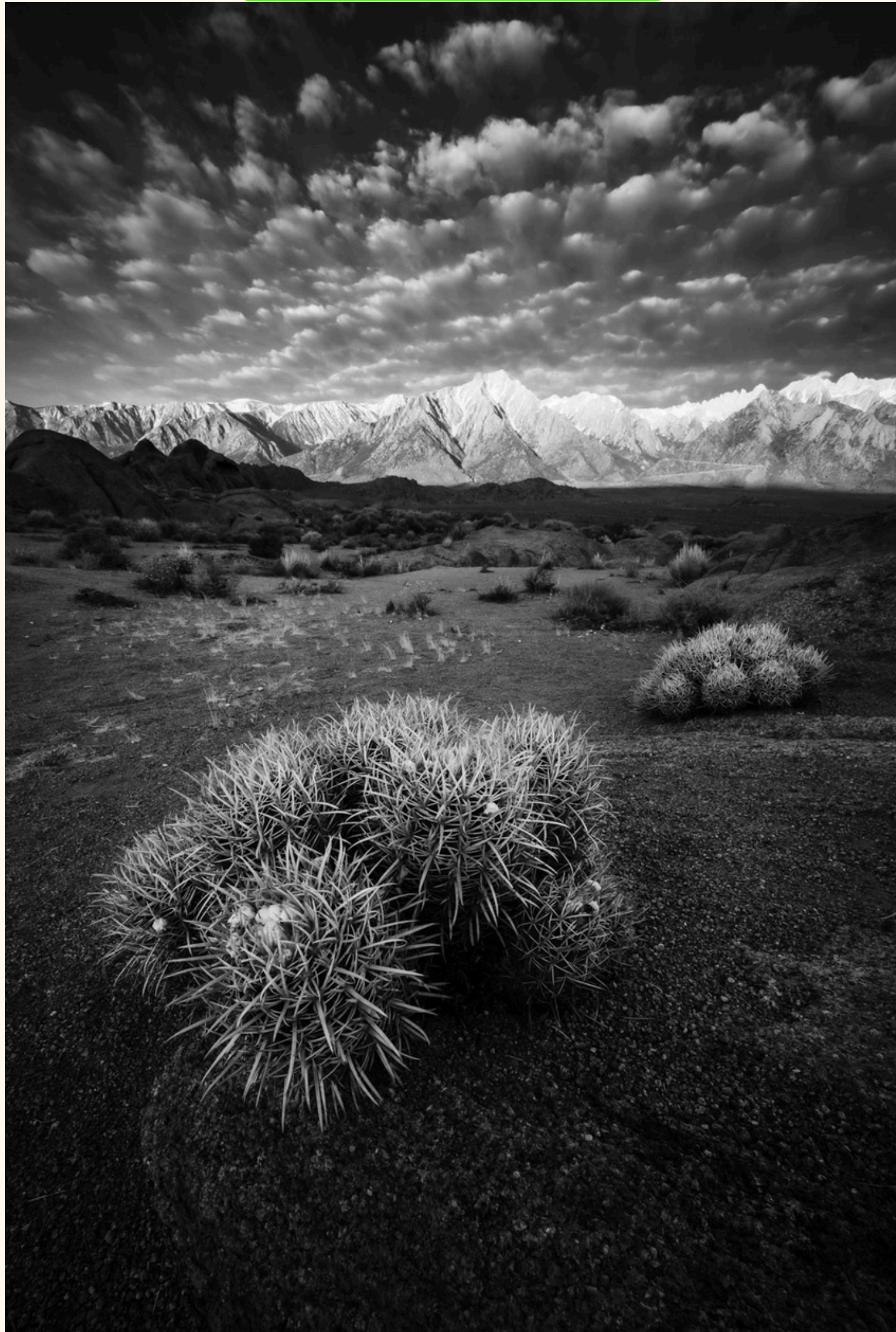
There are times when you want to turn your timer on so that you're not actually touching the camera when the shutter goes off. But then you might want to switch back to instantaneous single shot release. For example, when you are shooting a wave and you need the shutter to go off at a specific time, you don't want to press the button and then realize, oh crap, it's on a ten second timer and you have to sit there and wait for it.





12

ACTIVATE THE LEVEL IN LIVE VIEW



Activating this feature in live view is helpful in determining whether or not your horizon is level.

Sometimes we have great clues, such as at the ocean, where it's obvious if the horizon is level. Other times, however, it can be difficult to tell, especially if you're on uneven terrain or in sand and your tripod is sinking. You might not realize that you have a wonky horizon until you get home.

So by turning on the level in the field you can rest easy knowing that you're getting a perfectly level shot.



13

CHANGE THE ASPECT RATIOS OF YOUR PHOTOS IN CAMERA

If your camera has this feature, it's great to know how to quickly change your image format from FX to DX to 5:4 to 1:1. This can be incredibly useful if you want to visualize different aspects ratios for your photos.

14

ADJUST YOUR PICTURE CONTROLS AND STYLES



Another helpful tool for visualization are the picture styles or picture controls like vivid, neutral, monochrome, etc. Changing these can help you see what a scene might look like as, say, a black and white image or as a film simulation.

If you're not shooting in monochrome or one of the stylistic modes, I recommend that you shoot in either Neutral or Flat, because these are the most accurate representation of your raw data and give you the most latitude with your highlights and shadows. (Technically the picture controls don't affect the raw data, they just change how the camera displays it).

15

CHANGE THE BRIGHTNESS OF YOUR SCREEN AND VIEWFINDER

This really comes into play with night photography.

Most of the time during the day you're going to want your brightness up so that you can see more easily. As it gets darker, you want to change the brightness of your screen to reflect the light levels of the scene more accurately. This way your night vision isn't destroyed and the scene doesn't look brighter than it actually is. So be sure you know where to find the screen and EVF brightness controls.





16

UNDERSTAND YOUR MENU OPTIONS

In the field there's nothing more frustrating than thinking you have a menu option set and then realizing you didn't set it correctly, but then you can't find it again. Or you want to turn something on but you're not sure how to do it.

It's also helpful to set up custom button options on your camera so you can get to certain features or settings even faster.

The better you know your menu, how to access it and operate it, and where all the different functions and features are, the smoother you will be in the field. So practice moving through your menus and understanding all the different options.

17

**GET YOUR CAMERA OUT OF
YOUR BACKPACK AND SET
UP QUICKLY**

Another skill that just takes practice is setting up. The more you do it the smoother it'll be and the quicker you'll be able to set up a shot. Many times a few seconds makes all the difference between getting a great shot and missing the light, so the quicker you are getting set up, the better off you'll be. Practice taking your camera out of your bag and putting on your tripod a handful of times and the next time you're in the field it will be smooth as silk.





18

CHANGE LENSES QUICKLY WITH MINIMAL FIDDLING

Practice changing your lenses so that in the field you can do it in a safe, controlled, and effective manner. That way as the scene changes, or as your compositional ideas change, you can switch things up quickly without having to struggle or place your gear in a less than ideal setting.

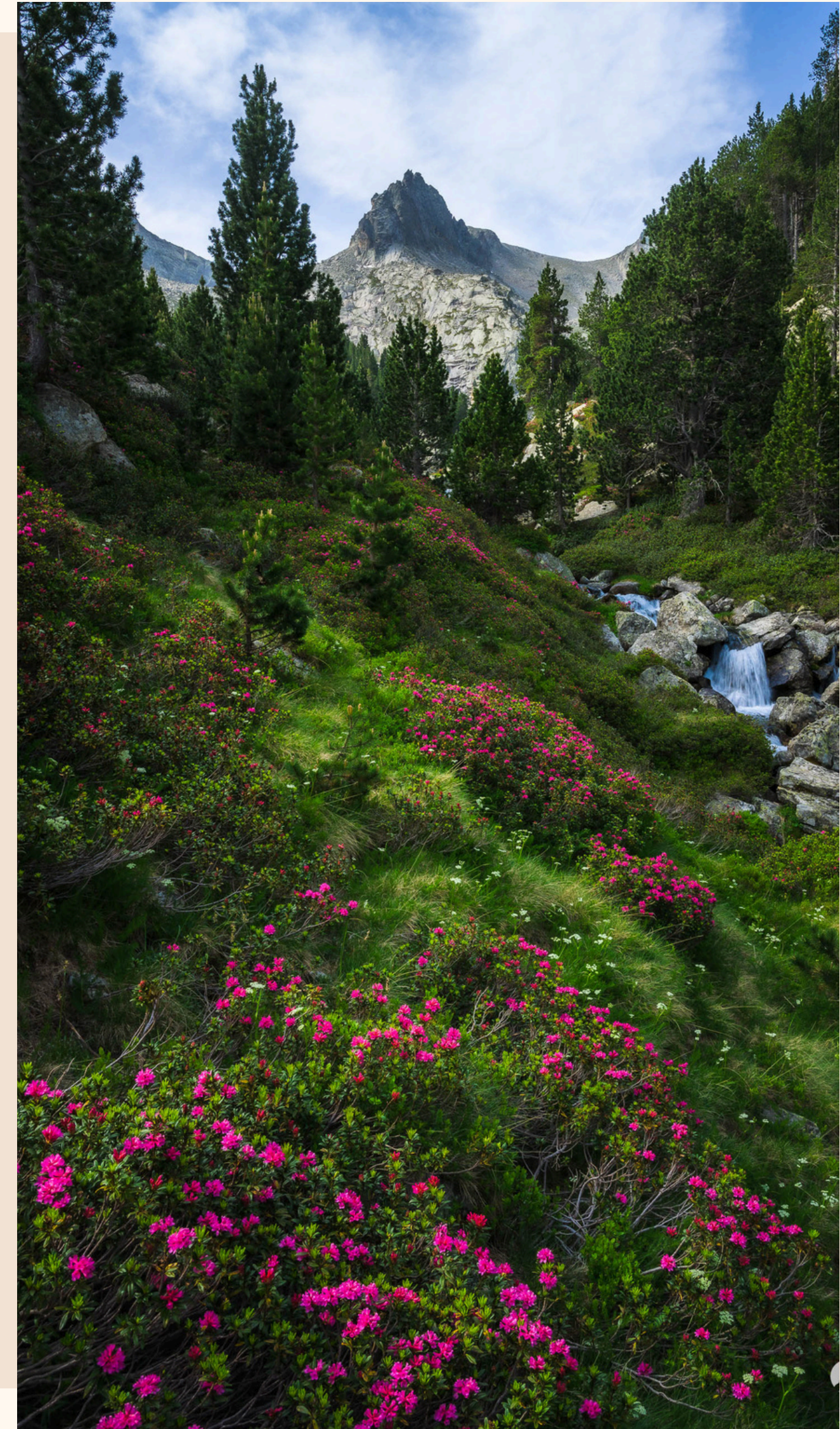
19

SET UP YOUR TRIPOD ON UNEVEN SURFACES

Knowing how to set up your tripod on uneven surfaces so that it's always level and the legs are firmly locked is imperative. The more time you waste fumbling around with your gear the greater the chances that you miss a shot.

It may sound silly, but practice setting up your tripod on a staircase (or a hill) with the goal of having the top of the tripod level.

The faster you're able to do this, the more prepared you'll be in the field when, say, one leg is on a rock, the other in sand, the other in water. Because no matter what terrain you're on, having your tripod level with the legs are locked (even if they are all at different lengths) is one of the cornerstones of good field technique.



20

PUT ON FILTERS AND TAKE THEM OFF EASILY

Filters are yet another piece of gear that can be fiddly. Practice putting them on and taking them off before going into the field. That way you're less likely to fumble and drop something, or bump your focus ring or change your composition on accident as you take your filters on and off.





The idea behind all of these skills, whether it's working with your gear or understanding the menus on your camera, turning on and off the various modes, the highlight blinkies, or knowing how to adjust your aperture, shutter speed, and ISO, it's not about being a professional photographer. It's simply about practicing using your equipment so that when you get into the moment, when you're ready to shoot, you're not fighting against your gear.

Instead, you can put all of your energy and thought into your creativity and making sure that you are ready to take pictures when the critical moment happens.

Take some time before your next outing to practice these skills as much as you possibly can. That way when you see the magic in the field, you're going to be ready to rock and roll, and you're going to have a fantastic time.

ABOUT

the Author

Joshua Cripps is a renowned landscape photographer who has garnered worldwide acclaim for his breathtaking images of our planet's wild places. His photos have been published by the likes of National Geographic, NASA, CNN, The Sun, and Nikon Global.

Josh grew up in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada and has been exploring the "Range of Light" for most of his life. Since 2015, Josh has made his home in the Eastern Sierra, one of the most spectacular and photogenic mountain landscapes in the world, where he owns a fine art gallery that displays large-format prints of his photographs.

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