

**Yellowstone In Winter
Presentation to Photo Forum
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Trip Logistics: Our trip to Yellowstone the first week of February, 2010, was as much about the adventure as the photography. We spent five full days snowmobiling in the park with photographers John and Barbara Gerlach. The group of 12 (including the Gerlachs) traveled about 400 miles over the five days. We were ready to go at 8 a.m. each morning and were out until 6 or 7 p.m. in the evening, well after dark.

We were based in West Yellowstone at the Holiday Inn, which also provided the snowmobiles. Although temperatures dipped into the ‘teens (and rose as high as 40 degrees), we were protected against the cold by dressing properly. The hotel outfitted us with a heavy, weather-proof snowmobile suit, gloves, boots, helmet, and face mask. We brought silk underwear, loose-fitting, warm pants, sweat shirt, neck gaiter and working gloves.

Gear: For camera gear, Nancy and I both had two camera bodies, three batteries apiece, and several memory cards, the largest of which was eight gigabytes. Between us, we had four lenses – 17-35 mm, 18-250 mm, 70-300 mm, and 100-400 mm. We used them all. Accessories included polarizing filter, cable releases, bubble level, sturdy tripods, and inexpensive rainsleeves (optechusa.com) to cover camera and lens in rain or snow. Although we photographed in heavy snow, we did not use the sleeves. The snow was so dry that it could be brushed off the camera without leaving much dampness. Even so, we probably should have used them.

I also carried a flash unit with a Better Beamer attachment which could throw the flash a considerable distance. I did not, however, use it. I had in mind photographing the dark head of bison against the white snow, but when that opportunity arose, the bison was between me and my flash equipment. (Since bison are often stock still for some time, John Gerlach suggests using an HDR technique, making two exposures – one for the snow and one for the bison’s head.)

All camera gear needed to be well packed, including the tripod. As John explained, the jarring of the snowmobile ride can loosen tripod parts, and it’s

better to have the parts come off while in a bag rather than scattered along the trail. Indeed, a screw came off Nancy's tripod, but we found it in her bag so that she was soon back in business. Two other essential pieces of equipment are bungee cords and large plastic bags. The bungee cords are used to secure camera gear to the back of the snowmobile (mostly 3' cords; 2' will work but are difficult). We each needed three cords. To avoid condensation, each evening before going inside we removed the batteries and memory cards from our cameras and put the gear (bags and all) into plastic bags (we used XXL Ziplocs, but trash bags with draw string ties will work) where they remained until the next morning.

We did not have any camera or equipment failures. I did lose a foot off my tripod in deep snow. We used duct tape around the bottom to prevent that section of the leg from sliding up into the next section and to prevent snow and dirt clogging the leg. It might be a good idea to tape the feet to the tripod to begin with. One participant tapped tennis balls to the feet of his tripod, thinking that would work well in snow. We didn't see the tennis balls after the first day.

Although we had no camera failures, we had human failings. I made the same trip in 1999 with photographer Jack Acrey. I thought then that snowmobiling was a blast. I still think it's a blast, but 11 years later, my body wasn't up to it. A painful back from slipping, sliding and bouncing on the snowmobile forced me to sit out the last two days of the workshop. Others in the party also aggravated some of their physical weaknesses, although no one else dropped out. Nancy persevered through the week.

Yellowstone vs. Snowmobiles: Snowmobiles have been controversial in Yellowstone more than 30 years ago. Cleaner, quieter four-stroke snowmobiles have replaced the two-stroke machines I rode in 1999. Even so, the National Park Service has begun a two-year project to develop a plan for managing winter use of the park. That plan is to take effect the winter of 2011-12. At the end of next winter, all motorized snow-vehicle access into Yellowstone will end unless the new plan is in place. In the meantime, Yellowstone allows 318 snowmobiles and 78 commercially guided snow coaches a day. There are also, however, over a 1000 miles of groomed snowmobile trails outside the park which have no restrictions (one participant's husband spent the week snowmobiling outside the park with a friend and saw more wildlife than we did).

Enclosed snow coaches are an alternative way to photograph Yellowstone in winter. The advantages of a snow coach are that it is a warmer way to travel, and you are always camera ready (no need to unpack and repack gear on the snow mobile). Disadvantages are that it isn't the adventure and blast that snowmobiling is, it lacks some of the flexibility, and it can't leave the park for a day going up Two Top Mountain, for example.

Daily Routine: Each morning we set out a bit after 8 a.m. The first stage was a 14-mile ride to the warming station at Madison Junction. We would stop along the way for wildlife (elk, bison, trumpeter swans, coyotes). From Madison Junction we headed north toward Norris Basin, another 14 miles, or south toward Old Faithful, 16 miles. In each direction there were frequent stops for waterfalls, geysers, basins, paint pots, and wildlife. The weather varied continuously throughout each day from sun to overcast to heavy snowfall. At each stop we had to unpack our gear for shooting and repack to get underway again.

On one day the group travels to the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone which is another 12 miles east of Norris. The Gerlachs also check the weather each morning to determine whether the group can attempt a run up Two Top Mountain, east of the Park. Usually, at least one day a week is clear enough to make a run. This year, on a Thursday, the group had to turn back after the weather closed in part way up. In 1999, we ran into a white-out and had to stop for awhile, but the weather cleared beautifully so that we made it up and all the way into Idaho for lunch.

Photography: John and Barbara stressed several techniques:

Back button focus to lock in the focus while composing the picture within the frame.

Sharpness on landscapes by shooting at 100 ISO, f16, with tripod, mirror lockup, 2-second delay, and cable release.

Live View for composing, viewing depth of field, and (magnified to 10x), when leaves or plants are moving in a breeze, determining the moment of stillness to release the shutter.

Calculating HDR exposures using the histogram (see their book "Digital Landscape Photography").

Manual Exposure to lock in exposure and to prevent underexposure when light can enter through the viewfinder.

Manual Focusing in snow fall (autofocus is confused by the snow) and focusing on, for example, the hair under a bison's dark head in order to achieve sharpness.

We consider landscape photography to be especially difficult (and often not very interesting to do) because it is so difficult to achieve a truly distinctive shot that is not merely pictorial. Good landscapes generally need a foreground, middleground and background, just like a story needs a beginning, middle and end. Iconic subjects like Old Faithful are especially difficult. A truly distinctive shot of Old Faithful will nearly always be captured by someone who is in the park when tourists aren't (sunrise, sunset) and at a location tourists do not have access to. Perhaps, though, a routine, pictorial shot can be strengthened some by, for example, converting it to black and white (see photos 097/099, 115/117, and 123/125).

Nancy and I are most interested in photographing wildlife. The snow had not been heavy enough to bring the wildlife down from the mountains in great numbers. Bison were especially rare, but the one we did find fulfilled our expectations. The wolves and bears were photographed at the Grizzly & Wolf Discovery Center in West Yellowstone. The challenge there was to keep the fencing and buildings out of the photographs. In the photograph of two upright bears (no. 193) the fencing is blurred by converting the image to a smart object, employing Gaussian blur, and painting the bears back in. Whether the background appears realistic is up to the viewer. The photograph of the coyote leaping for a vole was taken about 5 p.m. in deep dusk. The settings were ISO 800, f5.6 at 1/200. I was using Barbara Gerlach's shoulder to steady the camera since there was no time to unpack and set up a tripod. The photo has been cropped from a horizontal to a vertical. Its sharpness and exposure is a testament, I suppose, to the "L" series canon 100-400 lens and to the full-frame sensor of the 5D camera.

