

Tom Murphy: In His Own Words

There aren't many places I haven't photographed in this world, but the one place I always return to, with passion is, Yellowstone National Park. Winter travel into the backcountry of that park always involves carrying emergency equipment in addition to the 30 pounds, minimum, of camera equipment. I bring things that allow me to be able to survive a night in any weather. I know I won't be comfortable but I'll live. I also carry a space blanket, matches, warm coat, cap, and mittens.

My photography and emergency equipment is always carried in a large internal frame backpack that I sit on to insulate me from the snow. I'll wrap myself in the space blanket to keep the wind at bay and only start a fire if it gets too cold. A fire is impossible to keep going on top of the snow so it will usually turn into a smoky, steamy cloud that you can't get much warmth from anyway. In 30 years of backcountry photography I have been caught out in winter without a sleeping bag, shelter, etc., three times and have only once built a fire.

I do nothing special to winterize my equipment. I carry extra batteries, although I get about 40 rolls or more out of a set of Alkaline AAs in my F4s in the winter. I put all cameras and lenses in plastic bags before carrying them from the cold onto a warm environment. They do not have to be in bags while they are out in the cold. If it is snowing it is better if the equipment is cold so the snow doesn't stick to it.

For equipment I always carry an 80-200 f2.8, 20-35 f2.8, and a longer lens only if I have a specific use for it. I use Nikon F4s with an old Nikon F2 as a manual backup on ski trips because it does not require batteries to fire the shutter. I only own six lenses, the two mentioned above and 300 f2.8, 500 f4, with a 1.4 teleconverter, a 105 macro, and a 35-70 short telephoto. I like Bogen tripods and Linhoff ball head and quick releases.

The two main problems I encounter in winter photography are the cold temperatures and the extreme contrasts between bright snow and dark objects like bison. Exposing for snow involves two basic decisions: The first is to meter the important element properly, and the second is to compensate for white snow. Set the aperture and shutter speed by metering on the most important feature in which you want to maintain color or texture. Film cannot see the contrast that our eyes can, so expose for the important highlight and let the lighter and darker areas go wherever the film puts them. Fill flash, neutral density filters, etc., are excellent tools, but I don't want to carry most of this stuff when I am buried in a few feet of snow. To make snow appear white and still show the texture, override what your meter says and overexpose it. Exposing snow exactly as your meter says will produce snow that looks like blue-gray sand. If there are shadows in or around the subject, overexpose by 2/3 or 1 f-stop. If there are no shadows, overexpose by 1 to 1.5 f-stops. Bracketing exposures is a smart thing to do until you know



exactly how your meter reads.

I have not been able to work with any kind of a plan, no matter where I am shooting because wildlife photography is serendipitous, finding the unexpected, that moment of surprise. I pay attention to light and pursue landscapes, macro, abstracts, and wildlife with the quality of the light as my guide. However, sometimes I make my own luck by knowing my subjects: where to find them, what they might do, and how I should act around them in the case of when I am pursuing wildlife. I watch how the light illuminates the land and how it gives a sense of volume, depth, and space to a photograph.

With the completion of my first book, *Silence & Solitude*, I am now at work on the next in the series, which will be a book about spring in Yellowstone.

