



How to Get the Most Photographically from the Palouse

Kevin McNeal
Olympia, WA

Kevin McNeal is a
mentor on PSA's New
Member web site:
<http://psa-newmember.org/>

*Photo above: One of the
classic barns that still stand
in the Palouse*

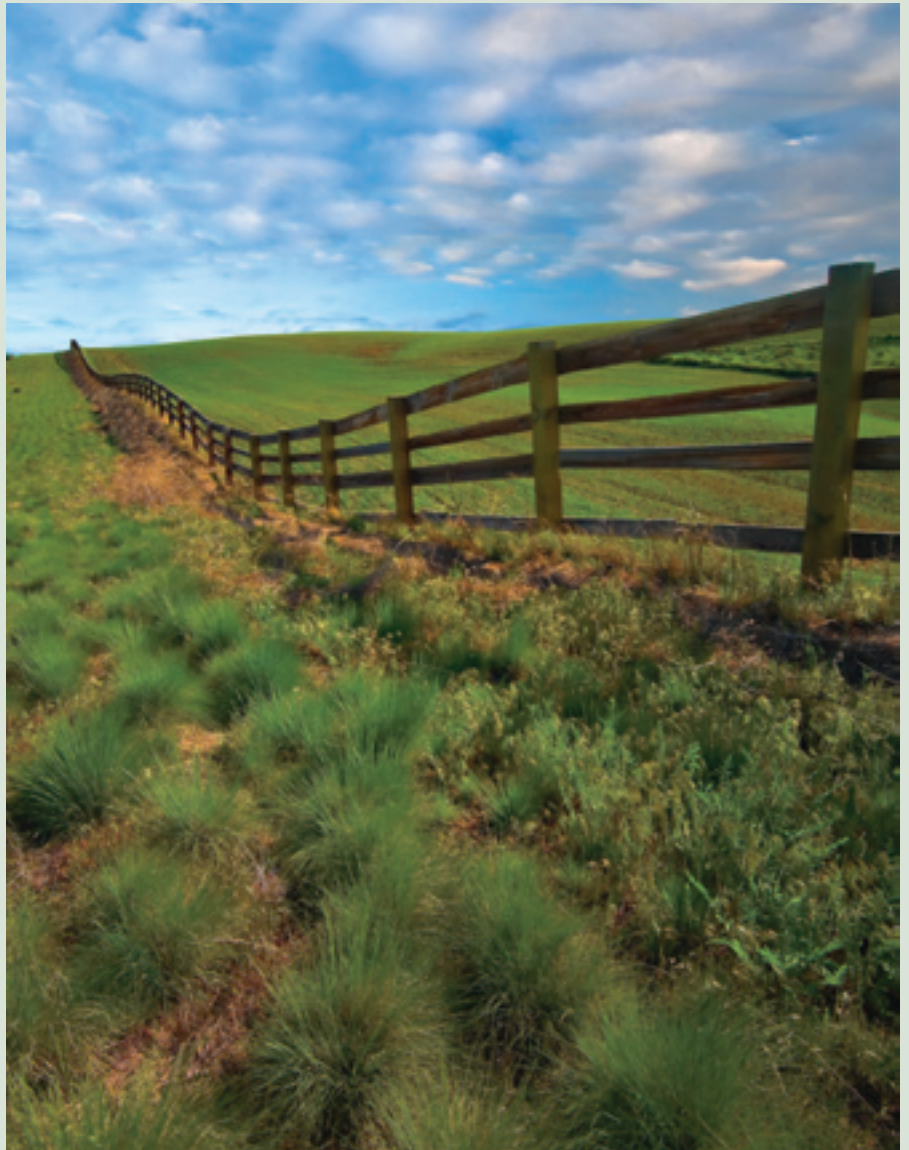
Spring is a time for photographers from all over the world to visit the Palouse for its fresh palette of colors. The Palouse region is an area found in southeastern Washington and north-central Idaho. It is the richest wheat growing area in the United States, and outdoor photographers visit the region to witness the process of nature changing its colors. Known for its vast rolling hills of velvia green, rustic rural barns, spring wildflowers, and pastoral vistas that delight visitors every spring, what makes this place so unforgettable is the way the land dances with the light and creates its own artistic palette. The challenge for every outdoor photographer is to capture the magical scenery the way the eye sees the image. This article discusses ways that outdoor photographers can anticipate some of the challenges and take home rewarding images.

Preparation for any trip begins beforehand, and this is no exception. Organization is one of the

most important things a photographer can do to benefit from photographing the Palouse. First thing to do is research previous images from different resources, including the web, magazines, and books. There is a lot of information, especially on the Internet that can give you a head start as to what is important beforehand. Also, another good source is other photographers that do a lot of shooting in the area. This is not the time to be shy; politely contact them to see if they can give you any advice. It is good to know when you are photographing the Palouse, what crops are growing at that particular time, where they are located, and if they are ahead or behind schedule for the season. First hand knowledge of individuals living in the Palouse is always an asset; a good contact is the Chamber of Commerce who can answer many of your questions. If the Chamber can't answer your questions they will refer you to someone who can. An invaluable source of information is

to contact the mills that are responsible for the planting of seeds. Certain individuals at the mill will be able to reveal information that can lead to specific areas of certain crops. The Palouse region is a very large area that spans roughly 20,000 square miles and getting familiar with the area can be very difficult. Knowing where the best places to be at certain times of the day gives you the advantage of being at the right place at the right time. An obvious source of getting familiar with a location if you have never been to the Palouse is photo tour workshops. There are many different photo groups available in the spring and the instructors often offer intimate knowledge of the area from living there for many years. Doing your homework beforehand keeps you organized and when it comes to time to shoot you will be able to concentrate on your photography and not on maps.

In terms of equipment, having the proper tools is critical to having sharp detailed images. When photographing the Palouse it is a good idea to bring two to three lenses from wide-angle to telephoto. The opportunities available here are numerous and range from wide-angle compositions of endless pastoral vistas to telephoto framed compositions of repeating patterns. Having a camera ready to switch lenses is ideal and you will come across numerous circumstances where a scene will offer both angles of view. One of the best subjects to photograph in the Palouse is the rustic barn. Telephoto lenses are needed for most of the barns as they reside on private property; which can be several hundred meters from the road. It is vital not to step on the farmers' crops to get closer to the barns. The use of telephoto



Cumulus clouds set the scene for a perfect afternoon in the Palouse



Crops create naturally patterns to this isolated barn



An old classic Ford settles on this farm for awhile

Summer sunset
over the Palouse
Falls in Eastern
Washington



Kevin McNeal

One of the many crop
fields in the Palouse with
its intricate patterns



lenses are challenging in the Palouse due to the high winds. Sharp images are very important and the same principles apply here as well. Make sure you have a good tripod that can support the weight of your camera, use mirror lockup, and always have something to keep your tripod steady and supported. A technique that helps photographers keep their tripods down is to have something heavy like a backpack hang from the tripod hook below the ballhead. In the Palouse, the winds can be so

strong that shielding your lenses with something can be your only option.

Another piece of equipment helpful in the Palouse is an extender, which can be added on to your telephoto. The telephoto lens particularly aids the photographer when tightly framing shapes and designs found intricately within the crops. Such that this framing allows the viewer to think in terms of abstracts and gives no visible clues to the viewer of its identity.

The last piece of equipment to mention is filters. Filters are needed because of the challenges to exposure that you come across frequently in the Palouse. There are many situations where a filter can balance the exposure and bring harmony to the image. A strong element to any image from the Palouse is the rich tones of a saturated blue sky to complement the vibrant greens. A circular polarizer when used at ninety degrees to the sun is most effective at accentuating the blues and giving the image the added vibrancy. Even better is the combination of a polarizer with a color intensifier to emphasize the contrast in colors. The Palouse is abundant in color and it is necessary to use every tool possible to replicate how you saw the scene originally. Another scene that is common in the Palouse is wildflowers such as lupine and arrowroot balsam. After a rainfall is the best time to shoot the wildflowers as the wet adds a sense of saturation to the subjects. This saturation can best be achieved with a polarizer to reduce the glare on the flowers and a color intensifier to retain the detail in the petals without blowing out the highlights from saturation.

The filters most used in the Palouse are



One of many classic cars abandoned in the Palouse fields

Graduated Neutral Density Filters, which are filters that are darker on the top half to balance out a brighter sky. This is common at sunrise and sunset when the sun near the horizon causes the top half to be much brighter than the bottom half. Without a graduated neutral density filter, the photographer must choose to expose for the sky and therefore block the shadows in the foreground. Or expose for the foreground and blow the highlights in the sky. With the addition of these filters you can balance the exposure in one image. Balancing is achieved by spot metering the sky, and then spot metering the foreground and calculating the difference between the two; the difference in the number of stops is the type of filter you choose such as a two or three stop graduated neutral density filter. A proper exposure retains the detail in the colorful sky and allows the camera to expose for the detail in the foreground. A common example of when the graduated neutral density filter is practical, is shooting wildflowers in the early or late hours of the day when the sky is illuminated with stunning colors. Practice using filters in all types of situations and learn to identify what filters are most advantageous for your style of photography.

An important concept to improving your images from the Palouse is composition. Too often photographers are overwhelmed by the ethereal qualities of the Palouse and they forget to compose with intent. Composing your images with intent is to compose the scene in terms of shapes, patterns, and color. There are important designs that our eyes naturally find more appealing. It is the job of a photographer to know these appealing qualities and inject them into the scene. Too often as photographers we are guilty of photographing the first thing that looks good to us as the scene is presented. An integral part of composition is implementing leading lines within the scene to your subject. For example, crop lines that curve their way to the subject make for compelling images. Composition with intent is a way to tell your viewers a story about the image. Careful composition draws the viewer in and keeps them engaged in the image as the senses are heightened.

The single most important factor to be aware of when photographing the Palouse is the “light.” Successful photographers in the Palouse learn to *chase the light*. Specifically, photographers will learn where the sun will rise and set and will envision how the light and shadows will affect potential subjects. Monitoring weather systems and cloud cover is a critical part of how light will affect your scene. Light mixed with clouds can result in all kinds of conditions and pleasing images are rewarded with perseverance. What makes the light in the Palouse so different is the fact that the weather changes frequently. This means the photographer must be ready at any moment for anything. Part of the learning curve to the Palouse is predicting the light and being ready before the light happens. Too often photographers react to the light by trying to find something to photograph after the light has occurred. Capturing the magic of light is being able to predict when and where the light will occur and being ready for that moment. An example of this would be to frame a potential scene with a S-curve to the subject such as a single tree. The power of the scene lies in the careful selection of how the light and shadow affect the subject. Ideally, the goal would be to have the low angle of the sun illuminate only the single tree in warm light, and leave the rest of the scene in shadow. Although, considerable time and patience is needed to predict where the light will occur, in the end your photography will greatly benefit from learning.

The preceding concepts are all important considerations when it comes to photographing the Palouse. It is important to have a workflow that you feel confident with before you commence. Nothing can replace the importance of researching the Palouse beforehand, and being prepared for when that magical light occurs. ■

Any mention of products or services in this article or anywhere else in the *PSA Journal* does not constitute an endorsement or approval of those items.

Photos © Kevin McNeal

Unique weather conditions create a very surreal morning over the rolling hills of the Palouse

