

Photographing in Antarctica

Iceberg, Antarctica

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Photography in the cool climate of Antarctica is a rewarding experience that can be thoroughly enjoyable. It takes a bit of planning, but is well worth the effort.

Practical details can make a big difference. It is important that the equipment be thoroughly

checked. Cold, gloved hands add a degree of difficulty to dealing with equipment failures. As cold air has a low moisture content, condensation is generally not a problem. A warm eye against a viewfinder or warm breath from exhaling can cause its surface to fog. It is a good idea to keep the camera and flash as warm as is possible. Placing a camera inside a warm coat can induce condensation from perspiration, so a camera bag is a better alternative. LCD's and other electronics are very sensitive to cold and batteries can lose their charge quickly. NiCad and Lithium batteries are a good alternative, as they will last longer. Extra batteries are a must. If a battery loses its charge in the cold, it can often be restored by simply placing it inside a warm pocket. Condensation does become a problem when bringing the equipment back indoors. Equipment should be placed inside a sealed plastic bag and allowed to warm slowly until its temperature is equal to that of its surroundings. This prevents fog from building in the camera mirrors and other sensitive areas. Another consideration is whether trigger fingers need to be kept warm. Gloves with fingertips cut over flexible glove liners work well. Large capacity memory chips lessen the number of times that they need to be changed in the field. In the pristine conditions of the Antarctic, wildlife is unusually unafraid of human contact. So, long, heavy lenses are not necessary. However, a medium telephoto lens is indispensable. Rocking ships make the use of tripods meaningless, as the *ground* itself is moving. An image stabilized system is, therefore, a welcome aid for sharp images taken from a boat. Once on shore, tripods can be useful, especially for scenics.

Of course, there are also technical considerations. Cameras are programmed to look



King Penguin Portrait, Gold Bay, Antarctica



*Fur Seal and Pup,
South Georgia*

at a scene and assume that the average luminosity is mid-tone gray. So, an image of mostly white snow, if shot without exposure compensation, will look an uninviting neutral gray. Therefore, the exposure compensation needs to be set to adjust for this. A setting of +2 is often a good starting point. A test image is shot, to see whether this is an acceptable setting for the current light conditions. Once the image is on the viewfinder, its histogram will tell the story. If shooting in the RAW format, the often-heard mantra *Shoot to the Right* is the best approach. The idea is that the histogram should show information in the right most column without any sign of a spike on the far right of the display. This is because, with digital cameras, the right (light) side of an image contains much more information than the left (dark) side. In fact, the right most stop contains half of all the available information! Many cameras today have blinking lights to warn the photographer of over exposure. Ideally, the histogram should be as far right of the display as possible without getting any of these 'blinkies.' The image and histogram calculations on a viewfinder are the result of a camera generated internal conversion, and, therefore not accurate. So often, images which show a small amount of overexposure in camera, can be easily recovered. To allow for software based exposure compensation, shooting in RAW and then opening the image in 16 bit format is highly recommended as it contains the largest amount of the available information, giving the most leeway during image editing.

a white background, it can work well to expose for the subject and recover the white background details by using appropriate software at the time of image development. Using the recovery tool in



Gentoo Penguin Colony, Neko Harbour, Antarctica

If the subject is not white, but is set against

*Crab Eating Seal,
Southern Ocean*



King Penguin calling for her chick, Gold Bay, Antarctica

Adobe Camera Raw (ACR) is simple. An image is opened in ACR; the two exposure warning squares at the top right and left of the histogram are checked to be sure that they are active. If not, clicking on the inactive squares will activate them. Underexposed areas will flash bright blue in the problem areas. Similarly, overexposure will be shown in bright red 'blinkies.' The exposure slider is then adjusted as far right as it is possible without seeing the red flashing lights. If this is not possible (because of overexposed areas), the next step is to slide the recovery slider to the right only as far as necessary to get the red blinkies to stop. Because of the human eye's sensitivity to light, most overexposed areas in an image will prove unacceptable. The opposite tends not to be true. It is important that shadow areas show detail, but it is also quite acceptable and usually desirable to have a small portion of pure black to help 'anchor' an image. Once these white and black points are set, the brightness slider can be adjusted.

A trip to Antarctica is a once in a lifetime experience, so taking full advantage of opportunities is a must. When coming across a scene or wildlife action that is worth shooting, it's a good idea to frame the exposure the way that is most pleasing. A photographer would then move around the perimeter of the scene as much as possible, thinking about other angles, a different crop, and any other variables that present themselves. With nature action shots, it's often best to take as many images as the camera will allow. The only downside to this

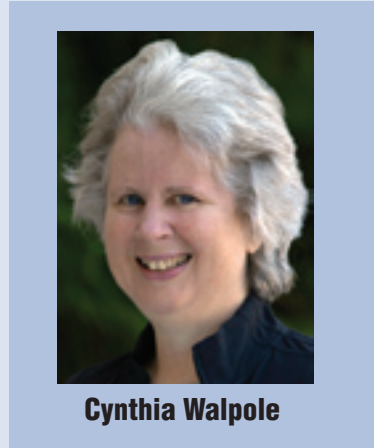


Magellanic Penguins in a sand storm, Saunders Island, Falkland Islands

approach is that more image chips will be needed in the field and, of course, there will be more time spent later looking at all those images to pick out the very best one!

All images for this article were taken in the Falkland Islands, South Georgia, and the Antarctic Peninsula and its surrounding waters during a

month long voyage. Canon Digital Rebel Xti cameras and image stabilized lenses were chosen. Most photographs were made with a 70-300 mm lens. To capture action shots, the camera was set at TV (shutter speed) priority between 1/500 and 1/1000 of a second and +1/3 to +2/3 exposure compensation. ISO 200-400. ■



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Gentoo Penguin feeding, Saunders Island, Falkland Islands

