



# Yellowstone in the Winter

*Coyote hunting in the weeds*

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Spring, summer or fall, what could be a better photographic opportunity than Yellowstone National Park and its surrounding area? The answer is Yellowstone in the winter. The crowds and traffic are non-existent, the animals are easier to see against the snowy background and the geysers are magnificent as hot water hits the cold air and turns into billows of steam. There are only two methods of transportation in winter in the park: snow coaches or snowmobiles, with the park grooming over 200 miles of trails nightly. This photographer chose to travel with a snowmobile

photo safari conducted by PSA members **John and Barbara Gerlach**.

Nowadays, the restrictive luggage practices put into place by airlines are not making it easy for photographers to travel with a full array of equipment. However, this problem was overcome by shipping almost all equipment via FedEx® Ground from New Jersey to West Yellowstone, Montana, 10 days beforehand. Included were the Nikon® D300; a tripod; a Nikon 200 – 400mm lens; an 80 - 200mm Nikkor® lens; a wide angle lens; polarizing filters; and a Panasonic® Lumix for

*Winter scene of river on the way to Big Sky*



a back-up camera; lots of large memory cards and batteries. A laptop and Wolverine® external hard drive were brought to backup all images.

Since home is New Jersey at sea level and Yellowstone is at an altitude of 8,000 feet, the plan was to arrive early and get acclimated to the elevation. Altitude sickness can be a serious illness and it is wise to permit your body to adjust slowly. When going to high altitude areas, try to fly in at least 24 hours before the fun begins.

When shooting in cold weather climates, it is very important to have extreme-weather attire. Shooting days can be very long: the snowmobile safari day lasted from 8 am until 6-7 pm. In most areas, whether it is Yellowstone or Churchill for the polar bears, it is possible to rent your outfit. The snowmobile operators provided the group with boots, a one-piece snowmobile outfit, heavy gloves and a helmet. It was necessary to bring a wool cap, neck warmer, layered undergarments, and ArcticShield® system gloves, which have a removable mitten type overlay for the fingers and can be found online or in hunting stores. Technology and new fabrics have made it possible to stay warm even in extreme weather conditions. This photographer kept hand warmers in the mittens, however luck prevailed for the snowmobile group as temperatures stayed in the 20's throughout the week. The group became so acclimated to the weather that it was possible to have a picnic lunch, while sitting on the snowmobile while the thermometer hovered around twenty-eight degrees.

The snowmobiles left West Yellowstone every day at 8 AM for a forty-mile trip to the first warming hut. But this was, more often than not, the most productive part of the day as animals were frequently sighted in the meadows and along the rivers on the way to the warming hut. Great photo-ops! The park rules dictate that visitors stay 100 yards away from bears and wolves, and 25 yards away from all other wildlife. During the winter, there are warming huts throughout Yellowstone and breaks were taken approximately every two hours. The warming huts were excellent stops for the tour leaders to get the best information about photographic prospects for the day. In fact many times, plans were not made for the day's destinations until after that first stop. This was a great advantage to the group as plans were flexible and opportunistic.

While shooting throughout Yellowstone in the winter, extra care must be taken when exposing for snow. A digital camera will *see* the snow as a mid-tone gray. Exposure compensation must be used to avoid having snow look like an unappealing neutral gray. Take a test shot of the snow and then follow the directions below for using the camera's histogram.



*Three ghostly white trees on Two Top Mountain*



*Wolf portrait taken at the Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center*

Coyote on the Snowmobile Trail



Elena McTighe, AP SA

This photographer always shoots in RAW and always checks the histogram on the rear monitor on the back of the camera. The Gerlachs' advocate that rather than using the combined RGB histogram, use the RGB histogram that shows the three individual channels: red, green and blue. On the Nikon D 300 this is found in the display mode, and scrolling up or down until the RGB histogram is viewed. (All high-end DSLR's—Digital Single Lens Reflex—have this feature. Please refer to the camera's manual.)



RGB Histogram on the Nikon D300

Take a test shot of the subject, or most importantly the snow, and then display the RGB histogram. In all histograms, the horizontal axis gives the pixel brightness and the vertical axis reveals the number of pixels. Examine the histogram and observe which channel is closest to the right side with out touching the end. In most cases, this will be either the red or green channel. If the image contains an average range of brightness, the histogram readings will be evenly distributed. If the image is dark the readings will be shifted to the left and if the image is bright the readings will be shifted

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HDR of Midway Geyser Basin



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to the right. Most of the useful information in an image is found on the right side of the histogram, so the goal is to move the channel closest to the right side as close to the right wall as possible, without being concerned about the other two channels. Increasing exposure compensation will shift the tones to the right and decreasing exposure compensation will cause a shift to the left. When satisfied that one of the channels in the RGB histogram is as close to the right side as possible, take the picture. Camera histograms are not infallible, but even when shooting in RAW it is important to get the exposure as close to perfect in-camera and then it can be further fine-tuned with RAW editing software.

Extra precautions for your equipment must be taken when shooting in cold or snowy conditions. Bring plenty of batteries and keep them in a warm pocket near your body. If a battery seems to fail while shooting, sometimes an hour or two in a warm pocket will revive it. The Nikon batteries performed amazingly well, while the much smaller Panasonic batteries lost their charge quickly. Have an ample supply of camera and lens covers, which will protect your gear from inclement weather conditions such as snow, sleet, wind, rain, sand, dust, and harmful UV rays. Covers can be bought or home made. Always use a lens hood in order to protect that expensive lens. And finally at the end of the day, when coming in out of the cold, remove the memory card and then seal the camera bag containing all of the cameras and lenses in a heavy duty plastic bag and leave it sealed in the room for a few hours. This will prevent moisture and condensation from ruining the equipment. While the equipment is slowly warming up to room temperature, back-up the memory cards and evaluate the day's shoot. As an extra precaution wipe down all the equipment everyday including the tripod legs, especially if they have been standing in snow.

No snowmobile trip to the park would be complete without a side trip to Two Top Mountain where 200-foot snow-covered trees were to be seen and photographed. Truly a magnificent sight, as the trees appeared to be ghostly white shapes. Two Top is at an elevation of 9,000 feet and the day the group visited, the area was encased in fog and light falling snow. A wide-angle lens was used for all images taken on the mountain.

This photographer's planned to use HDR (high dynamic range) as much as possible. But, with the exception of three hours of sunlight, the skies remained cloudy and so the scenery lacked the contrast needed for good HDR images.

Perhaps the most telling sign as to whether or not a trip is a great trip is to ask the question, "Would you do it again." And the answer for this photographer is, "Yes, in a heartbeat."



*Elk at the riverside*



*Coyote hunting in the meadow*



*Old Faithful and small rainbow*