
TELEPHOTO

LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY

Your telephoto lenses may become your favorites for landscape compositions

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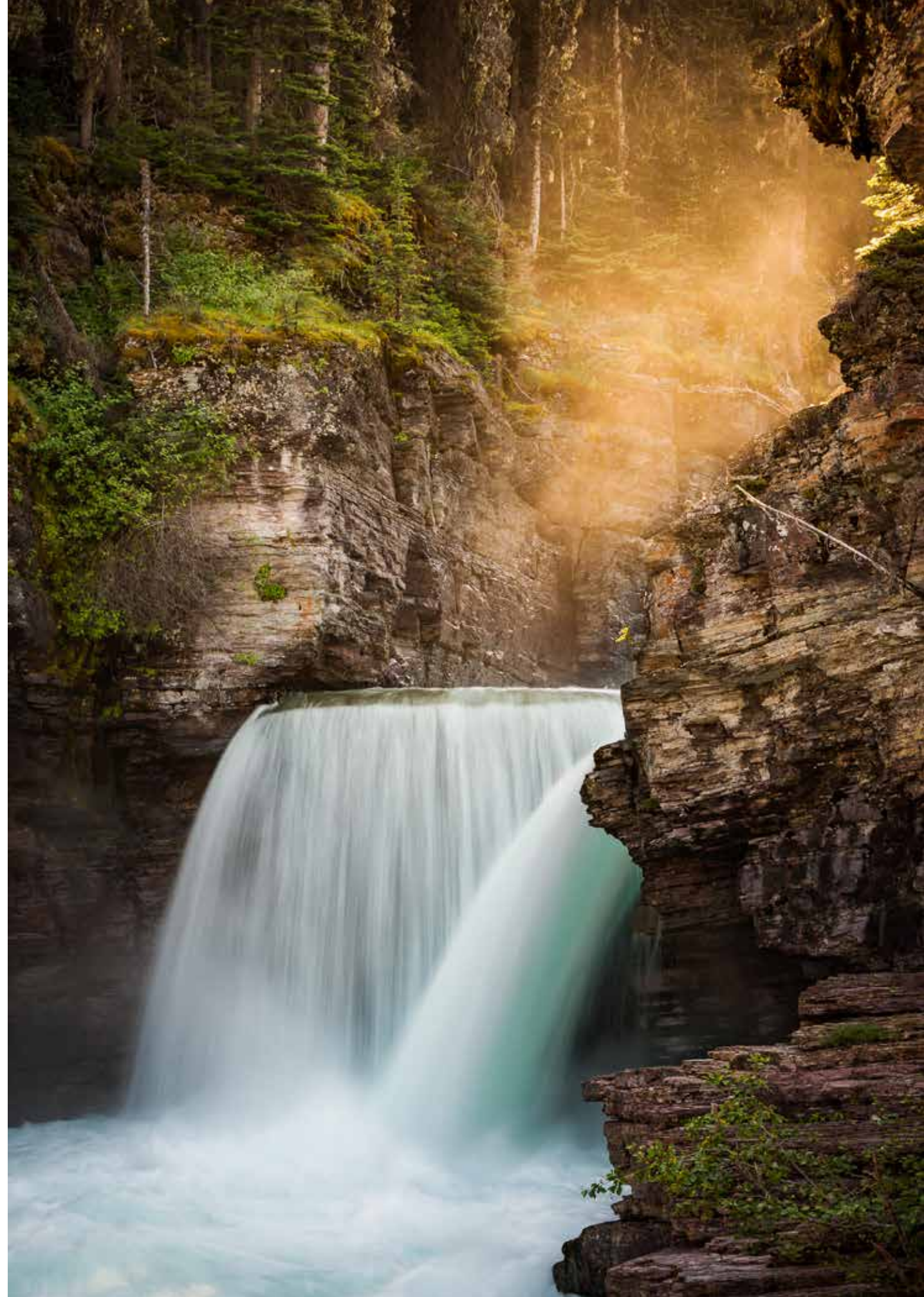
Do you suffer from “wideangleitis”? When you see an amazing landscape, do you always reach for the widest lens in your bag? If so, perhaps the time has come to give a little love to those other lenses in your bag for landscape shooting—especially your telephoto lenses.

It’s fairly common when we start out as landscape photographers to strive to include everything in the scene within our compositions because everything

is “so grand,” and we just can’t bear to leave something out. But the reality is that as we go wider, often our focal point gets smaller and thus weaker.

Don’t get me wrong. There’s no way I’m going on a landscape shoot without my wide-angle lenses, but over the years, I’ve been using them less and less, opting instead to pull in tighter on smaller portions of the scene that make for stronger compositions using my telephoto.

Typically when shooting waterfalls, I tend to start with a wide angle, but when I saw the light building in the mist above this waterfall in Glacier National Park, I knew I needed to back up and shoot with a bit of a longer lens to compress the image and capture the light.





This shot looking over the trees and fog near Mendocino, California, happened at the last moment as we were driving toward the coast at sunset. For a while, I had seen a good potential sunset brewing, but everywhere I stopped, I couldn't find a way to isolate the view. Roads, trees, houses and powerlines all kept getting in the way of the amazing tree-covered hills in the foreground. Then I realized that by switching to my 70-200mm lens, I could isolate out just a small portion of the scene and thus exclude all the distractions. The viewer would be none the wiser, thinking the entire hill must have been this beautiful.

Given the choice, with enough time and when the light allows, I'll always work a scene with several different lenses, shooting as many different compositions as possible. Often it's the tighter shots that end up being the strongest. It wasn't always that way for me. It took me time to reduce my "wideangleitis" to the point that I could reach for my telephoto first. In an effort to help you avoid my painfully

slow learning curve, here are a few tips to help you get the most out of your telephoto lenses when shooting landscapes.

Isolation

Using a longer focal length gives us the ability to isolate a smaller portion of the scene, making for tighter, simpler compositions. This can be a great creative choice in "busy" scenes with no clear single subject.

I find during my photo workshops that one of the main questions I ask people about their work is, "How can you make your subject stronger?" While that amazing sunset or sunrise does have nice colors, can you isolate a subject against it by getting tighter? How about isolating a silhouette of a tree or interesting rock against that killer sky? By spending a little extra time exploring a scene with my telephoto lens, I discover compositions that I hadn't even noticed when I first arrived on location with my wide-angle mindset.

Shallow Depth Of Field

Don't we always want more depth of field as landscape photographers? Sometimes

yes—and sometimes no. In addition to isolating your subject compositionally, telephotos can also spotlight your subject with their shallower depth of field and their ability to blur distracting backgrounds.

The longer the focal length, and the greater the distance between your subject and the background, the more the background will blur. (Using faster apertures adds to this effect.) Think of those super creamy, out-of-focus backgrounds often popular with portrait photographers, and apply that same concept to your landscape subjects. Sure, most of the time we want everything in the scene to be in focus, but there are times that isolating an element in the scene with a shallow depth of field is exactly how to make your image pop.

Telephoto Lens Compression

The longer the focal length, the more it has the effect of "flattening" a scene and appearing to draw the background closer. While harder to describe than to see in practice, choosing to photograph a wide scene from farther away but with a longer



focal length sometimes will make the same scene stronger. I often find myself looking for distant vantage points that will allow me to use longer focal lengths to "flatten" a scene. Just remember that the farther back you go, the more atmosphere you're shooting through, and if there's moisture or dust in the air, the softer your image will appear. Overall, these types of shots tend to work best in high-contrast light.

The Framing Guide

While this may seem old school, I still see a few photographers carrying around framing guides, often cut from old pieces of mat board, to help them visualize their compositions. I've heard from multiple photographers that Ansel Adams used to pass these out as standard issue to all of his students during his famed Yosemite workshops.

Today, it seems that these guides have fallen out of favor with the digital crowd, and it's mainly photographers who first learned on view cameras carrying them. But there are still lessons to be learned

from this tool. While I don't personally carry a premade framing guide, I always have one with me in the form of my thumb and first finger on each hand, held together to form a rectangle. Sometimes a scene is obvious, and my "manual" framing guide isn't needed, but other times—especially for telephoto images—I find I can use my fingers to frame the scene and help me pre-visualize my composition and the required focal length to get the shot.

Good Technique

While often we talk about good shooting technique in passing with more forgiving wide-angles lenses. When you start shooting at slower shutter speeds and longer focal lengths, technique becomes a way bigger issue.

As focal lengths increase, so does camera vibration. Every combination of camera, lens and photographer will have varying amounts of this vibration, but as shutter speeds fall below handheld numbers, these vibrations have a greater effect on image sharpness. A general rule with telephoto lenses is to

I have photographed this lighthouse several times while on the Juneau to Haines ferry with my wider lens, but on this trip, the ferry decided to pass by a little farther away, which meant I needed to zoom in using my 80-400mm lens. While it was more out of necessity rather than planning, it ended up being my favorite shot of the lighthouse, both due to the clouds and light but also due to the lens compression that came with shooting a longer focal length, making the mountains seem as though they are right behind the lighthouse.

use the reciprocal of the focal length as your minimum shutter speed. So, with a 400mm lens, 1/400 sec. would be the slowest speed recommended. Even with this in mind, and the impressive abilities of modern image stabilization technology, I still think it's worth considering using a solid tripod with a remote release or self-timer to help reduce unwanted vibrations when shooting with telephoto lenses. For those using DSLRs, mirror lockup is also a good precaution.



Invest In A Quality Telephoto Lens

While this may seem obvious, for many landscape photographers, a good telephoto is the last lens they buy. Perhaps this is because quality telephoto zooms tend to be the most expensive lenses in our bags (except for exotic super telephoto primes), and partially because as landscape photographers we often think wide angles make for the best shots. We envision dramatic, wall-filling prints of our photographs of grand, wide-angle vistas. We reach for the wide angle first—but to explore telephoto landscape compositions, eventually you're going to want a quality telephoto lens with excellent sharpness and clarity.

Two Bodies With Two Lenses

This one may not apply to everyone, but if you've got them, use them! When possible, I find having my wide angle mounted to one camera and telephoto zoom mounted to another allows me to work faster and produce more from a single scene. I don't spend time changing lenses, and I also expose the sensor to less dust.

This may fly in the face of conventional wisdom, but I've never been a huge camera bag user. Often, when I go on trips, my one or even two bodies will be sitting on the floor next to me in the car. This past summer, I spent nearly six weeks driving around Yellowstone, the Tetons and Colorado in

Left: Glacier National Park likely has more photographic opportunities than any other national park with its mix of both dramatic landscapes as well as wildlife. As a result, the challenge often ends up being finding new compositions in areas that have been shot to death. In this case, I only strayed a few minutes' walk from the throng of photographers shooting the sunrise and used a longer lens to isolate a small portion of this dramatic scene and create something a bit different. Sure, I shot the wide-angle view as well, but this telephoto view has a stronger feeling of subject, with the island playing such a large role in the composition.

Opposite: This image of Lake Tahoe was made during one of my winter workshops. It had stormed all day, and we were wet and cold by the time sunset rolled around. Because I wanted to accentuate the blowing snowflakes against the setting sun and shoot through more of them, I chose to stand farther back and use a longer focal length. I could have easily walked closer to the trees and shot wider, but I would have lost many of the blowing flakes in the process.

our campervan with the family, and my camera rode on the floor for nearly 6,000 miles. I only put it in the bag on dirt roads to protect it from vibration. Yes, this probably does lead to a few more cosmetic scratches, but cameras are meant to be used, and they can take more abuse than we think. It also means my gear is instantly ready, and thus I create more images.

I also have double sets of my commonly used filters like circular polarizers, so I can have one on each lens and don't have to keep switching them.

The next time you set out to do some landscape photography, bring along a telephoto and reach for it first. It may become your new favorite landscape lens. **OP**

To see more of Josh Miller's work and learn about his landscape and wildlife workshops in Alaska, Costa Rica and the West, visit his website at joshmillerphotography.com.

