



FOCUS PEAKING

& DEPTH OF FIELD

How to use focus peaking to get maximum sharpness with every shot

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This shot of the Grand Tetons was a perfect situation to use focus peaking. Fine detail foregrounds (like grass) are a great way to learn how focus peaking works. With the blades of grass being highlighted (red in my case), I was able to adjust my focal point as well as aperture to figure out exactly where I should focus to keep the mountains and grass sharp—while also trying to use a mid-range aperture for critical lens sharpness. In this case, that balancing act led me to $f/11$ and a focal point a couple of feet into the frame toward the mountains.



A lot has changed in the last 20 years for us photographers—think about how much has changed just in the last five! First, we transitioned away from film (some of us faster than others), and now we’re transitioning away from DSLRs toward mirrorless cameras (again, some of us faster than others). While it’s been quite a ride for those of us who remember shooting film, everyone can agree it has made photography easier, and the photos we make are stronger as a result.

Part of this transition, and one of the features that initially drew me toward mirrorless cameras, is focus peaking. It started as a feature of early mirrorless cameras, but it was quickly added to the “live view” options on many DSLRs as well. While often overlooked and misunderstood, focus peaking is one of the most powerful new technological advances in photography over the past several years. Though it may seem useless or even gimmicky for wildlife or action photography, it really comes into its own in landscape photography, where composition is done slowly and methodically—and usually on a tripod.

In its simplest form, focus peaking is a display overlay in your digital viewfinder or LCD that highlights the edges around everything in your frame that’s in focus, making it far easier to focus manually (especially with aging eyes). But it doesn’t just highlight what *is* in focus in the viewfinder. It also highlights what *will* be in focus based on the depth of field of your selected aperture when the photo is actually captured. As a result, it allows photographers to more accurately choose the absolute best aperture based on their depth of field needs while retaining sharpness.

Precise Focus Versus Lens Sharpness

Many photographers don’t realize there is a difference between being “in focus” and sharpness. While they’re related, they’re not the same thing. Lenses are typically at their sharpest in the middle of their aperture range. Stopping down a stop or two from wide open will usually give you sharper results. For many lenses, this means their sharpest aperture



Above: I created this fall image last year during my first totally mirrorless photography trip. At the time, I was still experimenting with focus peaking, and I was blown away by my newfound ability to select the best focal point as well as depth of field for each situation I photographed. Having been to these locations many times during my fall workshops, I found this year my work was technically much stronger as a result of my use of focus peaking.

Opposite: I took this photo of Mt. Rainier before focus peaking existed and thus had to guess as to the correct depth of field based on my previous experience with similar scenes. Knowing that the flowers in the foreground were the most important part of the composition, I chose to focus on them and let the background fall slightly out of focus at *f/11*.



