

Capture Stunning Landscape Images During the **BLACK** of Night



This image was exposed for 640-seconds at f-3.5 under nearly pitch black lighting.

Capture Stunning Landscape Images in the Black of Night

Many photographers assume that once the sun goes down, so do the opportunities to take spectacular landscape images. Some of my favorite photographs were taken under extremely low light or nearly pitch-black conditions. In fact, I have found that the darker it is the better results I usually get in my images. You are more likely to pick up unusual colors not typically visible to the naked eye while capturing wonderful streaks in the sky when shooting at night. Here are a few suggestions that will help you capture great nighttime landscapes.

Scout out locations during daylight hours.

This is extremely important because it will be difficult at best to find good places suitable for nighttime photography during hours of darkness. I normally try to find several potential spots where I can go to shoot during a single trip out. Look for areas where it is safe to park your car and where you might be able to setup your tripod. I have found myself standing right next to lonely country roads, in deep ditches, and over irrigation sloughs to get just the right composition. Having a specific place to setup in mind before it gets dark can save you a lot of time and frustration.

Find a strong subject to anchor your image

A good landscape image typically has something of interest in the foreground to

grab the viewer's attention. Whether it is an old barn, hollowed out tree, or windy creek, try looking for something to make your image visually interesting. Also keep in mind the rule of thirds when composing your shots.

Avoid artificial light

The farther away you can get from city lights, the better your images will turn out. I have found that shooting in nearly pitch-dark conditions using long shutter speeds pulls out colors and tones not generally visible to the naked eye. I typically drive an hour or more to get to locations that have few or no artificial lights. Nearby artificial lighting will not kill a decent landscape image; however it can overwhelm the subtle ambient light that is naturally present. Remember that you can adjust the color temperature of your images later in processing so do not let a nearby light spoil your evening.



129-seconds at 3.5

Do not trespass

Nothing ruins a night of landscape photography faster than being contacted by the police for trespassing on

someone's property –especially at night (I know this from experience). My general rule of thumb is if the area in question has a fence around it, a sign posted advising that trespassing is not allowed, or if it appears that someone is caring for the property, I usually stay out. I have been pretty successful at obtaining permission to go onto private property to take photographs; however remember to do this during the day. Being respectful and courteous can help you get into places that might be ordinarily off limits.



423-second exposure at 4.5 taken while standing in a ditch

Take the right gear.

Obviously you will need a sturdy tripod and remote bulb switch for the long exposures. I almost always shoot landscapes with a wide-angle lens. If you are shooting in cooler weather, ensure you have a fully charged camera battery and even consider bringing a second one with you. Between shooting in cold or cooler weather and long exposure times, battery life can dwindle quickly.

Be sure to bring a couple of flashlights along too. I typically bring a small LED light to adjust the exposure and shutter speed on my camera so as not to ruin my night vision. I also bring a small, high intensity Surefire flashlight to quickly shine on my foreground subject to get my image initially focused. There is nothing more frustrating than staying out all night shooting landscapes just to return home to find the main subject out of focus because it was too dark. I consider a bright flashlight so important that I will return home if I forget to bring it.

Bring warm cloths and snacks

Most of my images required between 5 and fifteen minutes to properly expose. I also typically take several shots of same composition at varying exposures (manual bracketing). This means that there is a lot of lag time between photographs. Standing outside in the middle of the night-even during the summertime-can get chilly. I usually wear pants; bring a light fleece jacket, cap, gloves, and light walking boots. I also recommend wearing something reflective so that passing drivers can easily see you. Bringing along snacks helps the time go by while waiting between exposures.

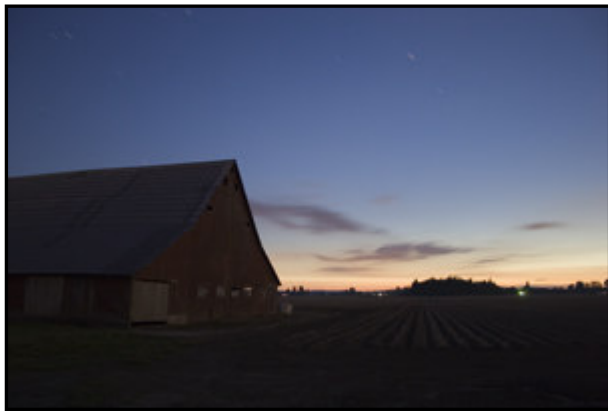
Consider shooting in RAW format

If you have not started doing this already, this might be a good time to begin shooting in RAW format. Nighttime landscape images are typically shot with long duration shutter speeds and the results are unpredictable. Shooting in RAW format offers you the ability to push

shots a stop in either direction depending on your needs.



30-second exposure at 3.5



192-second exposure at 3.5



640-second exposure at 3.5

Carefully consider your composition

Most of the time you are not going to see much of anything but black through the viewfinder. I usually start out by taking a short exposure of what I think is a properly composed shot. For example, I found myself standing in nearly pitch-black conditions for the shot below. The light visible in the horizon in the image was only faintly visible to me while taking the photographs. I started out by exposing the image at f-3.5 for about 30-seconds. This yielded a very dark image; however I was able to at least see the overall composition. I ended up needing to straighten out the skyline and move the composition upward to include more of the sky. After taking several short duration exposures, I was ready to start zeroing in on a proper shutter speed.



Since I am usually shooting in very dark conditions, I rarely raise my f-stop up past f-3.5 or f-4.5. Remember that each time you close your aperture down by one stop, you are doubling the exposure time. This can really add up if you are starting out with a ten-minute exposure.

Keep it in focus

Take the time to get your image in sharp focus. As I mentioned above, having a bright flashlight will make it easier to use your camera's automatic focus. This is a method I prefer because I never know if the image is truly focused if I set the focus manually (since it is typically so dark). I usually focus on a main foreground subject using a high intensity flashlight. When that isn't possible, I sometimes try to focus on the horizon or a bright object in the distance such as a streetlight. I have even been successful finding a focus point by using distant stars. If all else fails and your camera refuses to settle in on a focus point, switch to manual focus mode and start experimenting.

Consider including the sky as much as possible

The beauty of nighttime landscape photography is the wonderful tones, textures, and colors you get in the sky. Each time I go out, I come back with something new. I have found clear or partially cloudy nights work best. I especially love shooting nighttime landscapes when a few high altitude, thin cirrus clouds are moving through the area. These clouds, against a clear night sky, turn into feathery streaks during long exposures. Pay attention to where the bright stars are and do the best you can to include them in your shot. I have found setting the shutter speed to 5-minutes or longer creates beautiful streaks of light from the individual stars.

Use the bulb setting on your camera

After arriving and setting up my camera on a tripod, I take several test shots to confirm my composition. At this point I also lock in on the focus. The test shots I take usually range from 30-60 second exposures at f-3.5. This gives me just enough of an image preview in my camera's LCD to allow me to adjust and finalize the overall composition. Next I work to find the ideal shutter speed. I typically have a rough idea of how much time I am going to need to expose the shot after looking at the 30-second test shots I took. This can range from two or three minutes to 15-minutes depending on the lighting conditions. I usually try to adjust my in-camera exposure settings so that my shutter speed is at least five minutes or longer. I do this in hopes of capturing the unique and interesting colors and tones present in the non-visible ambient light. I also want to get as much streaking out of the stars and clouds in the sky as possible.

Keep in mind that each f-stop increment upward doubles your shutter speed. For example, if the settings for a properly exposed image are f-4 at 120-seconds, then the shutter speed would jump to around 240-seconds if you bumped your f-stop up to f-5.6. This can add up real quick!

Long exposures can result in more digital noise

Always shoot at the lowest ISO possible for your camera. For example with my

Canon I shoot at 100 ISO. Even after shooting at a low ISO, you may find that there is a bit more digital noise in your nighttime images as a result of the longer shutter speeds. My experience has varied in that I sometimes find more noise than usual and other times the noise is not noticeable at all. The most likely place for you to spot increased noise will be in the sky. To resolve this problem I typically run the noise reduction filter later in Photoshop and then paint out areas of the image that I do not want it to affect. Noise Ninja is another effective noise reduction tool.

Have fun

Remember to have fun and experiment. None of these suggestions should be considered hard and fast rules. I am always trying out new ideas. I think the key to getting exceptional landscape images is to shoot often and to be willing to go out and come back empty handed. As strange as that sounds, it has really proven true for me. Every time I head out to shoot I always hope to come back with stunning images. The sad truth is that I occasionally come back with just mediocre shots that never see the light of day. At some point I realized that this was just a natural part of learning and growing as a photographer. You just never know when you are going to be in the right place at the right time with your camera. It is all about capturing those unique and beautiful moments.

Good luck!

About the author

Currently Steve Paxton lives with his wife and two children in the Seattle area. Steve has been a photographer for over ten years and has spent most of that time shooting with a variety of Canon 35mm cameras. His experience ranges from wedding and portrait work to crime scene photography; although he particularly enjoys the solitude of shooting landscapes.

Steve always welcomes comments and feedback on his work. You can leave a comment on his website at www.paxtonprints.com or send him an email at coffeelover@gmail.com.

