

Shoot for the Moon

Monthly news and tips from Landscape Photographer
Gill Moon



June 2020 Vol 6 - Black & white Photography

Hello

and welcome to the sixth edition of 'Shoot for the Moon'

This month's edition has been inspired by a photography project that I have been working on. It is all about shooting and processing images in black and white and as usual will include some hints and tips on technique and post production and some details of black and white photographers I find inspiring.

I hope you will find this issue interesting and informative. I am always keen to receive feedback so please get in touch if you have anything you would like to share.

Remember to aim high, be inspired and shoot for the moon! Thank you and happy photographing

Gill

If you would like to get in touch please email me at gill@gillmoon.com

Shooting in black and white



This month's 'Shoot for the Moon' has been inspired by a photography project that I have been working on. As a landscape photographer I am keen to undertake personal projects that explore some of Suffolk's lesser known locations so at the beginning of the year I decided to undertake a project to photograph the small RSPB reserve of Hollesley Marshes throughout 2020. In thinking about how to put together a cohesive body of work in various seasons and weather conditions I decided to undertake the whole project in black and white.

I love colour so black and white photography is not something that I have spent much time doing and I am certainly not an expert, but I have found the whole process quite liberating. It has allowed me to experiment with different shots and lighting and to practice shooting

at various times of the day. You still need good light to take atmospheric black and white images and it is a mistake to think that you don't have to worry about it if you are shooting in this format. You can however shoot in weather that wouldn't lend itself to colour photography. So grey days, mist and drizzle are all great for creating atmospheric black and white shots.

Shooting in black and white is really good practice for improving your photography on a general level. It forces you to look at all the physical attributes of the landscape beyond the colour which can often be the first thing we notice out in the field. To create a compelling image in black and white you will need to learn to see the landscape in shades of grey. You will also need to familiarise yourself with the building blocks of an image which are the

lines, shapes, textures and areas of dark and light that make up a landscape.

Why Black and white?

You need to have a reason to shoot in black and white so ask yourself why before you hit the black and white conversion. The removal of colour won't turn a poor photograph into a better one and conversely not all colour images convert well to black and white.

The colour picture below was taken on a misty morning for a project about Hollesley Marshes. Although I really like the colour image I felt that a black and white conversion would add to the mood a little and provide me with a way to make a cohesive body of work across a wide time frame and varied weather conditions.

Because the colour image has a very subtle feel to it the conversion had to be low key utilising grey tones rather than any strong blacks.



Nikon 70-200mm lens at 100 mm, F8 at 1/500 second exposure, ISO 800 handheld

Black and white or monochrome?

A black and white image is monochrome but a monochrome image isn't necessarily black and white. A black and white image has all its colour removed and consists of black, grey and white. A monochrome image has a colour tint for example a sepia image is monochrome and has a yellow tint.

Shoot in RAW

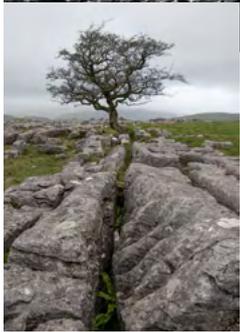
To take good black and white images it is best to go out with the intention of shooting in black and white rather than shooting generally and hoping something might work in black and white when you get home. Always shoot in RAW as this will give you the greatest dynamic range to play with in post processing. Some cameras have a monochrome setting in the menu which allows you to see the world in black and white in the live view option. This can be a good way of visualising the landscape and gives you an immediate idea of what works and what doesn't. The monochrome setting will capture the image in black and white but if you are shooting in RAW all the colour information will be retained, giving you the option to process the final image in a variety of ways.

Composition

Good composition is something that you will need regardless of whether you are shooting in colour or black and white. However you may find yourself making different decisions about your composition when shooting specifically for black and white.

Stripping away all the colour from an image will leave you with the basic building blocks of an image - shapes, lines, shadows, contrast, tones and texture and you will need to see these as the prominent features instead of seeing the colour in a landscape.

The first shot on the previous page works well in black and white because of the composition and the contrast and texture within the image. There are no sunrise colours to distract (although they were pretty) and the image relies on the arrangement of lines, elements and tones within the frame for its success.



This image was taken at Malham in Yorkshire. It is a pretty iconic location and works as a composition due to the leading lines and isolated subject. In colour this image looked a bit flat

- it was a grey day, the light was fairly flat and none of the elements really stood out. In black and white however things become different. Using processing in Lightroom I was able to bring out the texture and dark areas in the limestone pavement as well as the detail in the sky, giving the image a more moody feel.

Shadow and contrast and tone

Shadows have a much greater importance in black and white photography than they do in colour. They are no longer just a darker area of the photograph, but instead can be a major part of the composition. They can be completely black or can contain some detail.

Contrast is the key to creating a moody image that really stands out. The success of this comes down to the proximity between the areas of

contrast - ie the dark and light areas. In the picture below of Felixstowe docks the bright white of the lights sit against the black of the night sky creating a striking visual contrast. It is this that draws the eye into the image.



Felixstowe Docks
Nikon 24-70mm lens at 24mm, F1.6 at 6 seconds exposure, ISO 400, aperture priority.

The image above is a high contrast image. It is the visual difference that is striking and it is this element that creates the impact.

Low contrast images are much more subtle and work with much softer shades of grey. However despite their understated appearance they can evoke just as much mood and emotion.

The image below is another from my Hollesley Marshes project and was taken on a really misty morning. It has a very subtle feel to it, has no black elements but I still think it captures the mood of that particular morning.



The Witness Tree
Nikon 70-200mm lens at 70mm, F7.1 at 1/400 second exposure, ISO 800, aperture priority, handheld.

In the image of Felixstowe Docks the tones range from black to white, in the Hollesley Marshes image the tones are much narrower in range and stretch from mid tones to white. These are dictated by the available lighting. There are other ways to portray lighting and tonal range in an image and that is through high key and low key shots.

High key images are ones that consist of mostly black and white with very few mid tones. The background should be bright and the idea is to focus the viewers attention to the subject. The image below shows Southwold Pier on a bright day with only fine wispy clouds in the sky. I used a slow shutter speed to blur the water and slightly over exposed the image to create a very milky effect in the sea. I then used post processing to reduce the tones in the sky and make the pier really stand out from its background. Narrow apertures of F14 to F16 work well as they reduce the transition between whites and blacks making a high contrast image.



Southwold Pier
Nikon 24-70mm lens at 30mm, F14 at 7 second exposure, ISO 100, aperture priority, 0.6ND grad filter.

Low key is a low contrast image where the tones of the highlights and shadows are all very similar and mostly dark. This works really well for evoking emotion and creates an intense, moody image. The example was shot in a dark wooded area at Ebbor Gorge in Somerset. I wanted to use the shadows to create a tunnel through the woods using the light in the far distance to draw the eye into the image. Wide apertures of around 5.6 work well as they

make the transition from highlights to shadows less defined creating a low contrast image.



Path through the gorge
Nikon 24-70mm lens at 70mm, F4 at 1/80 second exposure, ISO 800, aperture priority, handheld.

Using patterns and texture

Patterns and textures are fantastic for adding interest in black and white photography and work really well in the foreground of a shot. They add tonal contrast and detail to specific areas of the frame and can be used as compositional elements in their own right. In this image below the patterns in the sand are accentuated by their shadows and form a curved line into the image.



Bawdsey Beach
Nikon 24-70mm lens at 24mm, F16 at 2 second exposure, ISO 100, 0.6ND grad filter.

Textures are everywhere in the landscape, you just need to look for them. They often involve some kind of repeating pattern and can be found in rocks, sand, grasses, tree bark, timber, leaves or building materials. The grasses in the image below form an interesting texture and pattern in the foreground of the shot. They work well because they contrast nicely with the darker tones in the image.



Shingle Street
Nikon 24-70mm lens at 52mm, F5.6 at 1/6 second exposure, ISO 100, 0.6ND grad filter.

When photographing textures the lighting plays an important part in their prominence. Try to avoid harsh midday sun as this illuminates everything from above and minimises shadows. Shooting when the sun is low in the sky will accentuate the shadows and the tonal contrast and make the texture appear more prominent.

When incorporating textures in your images try to get as close to the texture as possible so that it is prominent in your frame. You want your viewer to feel what it was like to be there. Shooting from a lower viewpoint will also accentuate the appearance of texture.

The piles of slate in this next image create a foreground that is full of interest and the slate wall and arch lead the eye towards the distant hills which have a much smoother texture.



Welsh slate quarry
Nikon 24-70mm lens at 55mm, F11 at 1/125 second exposure, ISO 400, aperture priority

Tips for good black and white images.

1. Shoot in RAW but set your camera to monochrome to make seeing in black and white much easier.
2. Concentrate on your composition, with the absence of colour strong compositions are essential.
3. Look for lines, shapes, patterns and textures and work hard to incorporate these into your images.
4. Dull, misty and drizzly days are perfect for black and white so don't be put off by the weather.
5. Don't miss out on the golden hours. Even though you are not shooting in colour the low angle of the light at the beginning and end of the day is perfect for black and white photography.
6. Using filters will make a massive difference to your photography. A graduated filter will help retain the detail in the sky which is so important for black and white landscapes. Using a 10 stop ND filter at the coast or by a river will allow you to create a contrast between the texture and tones in your image by blurring the water.
7. Know what you want your final image to look like and learn how to process accordingly.

Post Production

There are a couple of ways of converting your images into black and white in post production. I will talk about Lightroom here as that is what I use but Photoshop is a good alternative. There are also other specialist conversion programmes such as Silver Efex Pro which are worth looking into if you want to do a lot of black and white photography. In Lightroom just under the histogram on the right hand side is a treatment panel showing colour or black and white. Clicking this will take your photo from colour to black and white. However it will not be a very impressive conversion and will probably look very flat.



Colour image above and treatment panel below which will give a very crude conversion to black and white.



The image above shows the result of applying the black and white conversion in the treatment panel. Once you have done this

open the HSL / Colour / B & W panel and click the B&W tab. This opens a set of sliders which control how bright the conversion renders each underlying colour.



You will find as you move the sliders around they have dramatic effects on certain areas of the image. Once you have done this you can then go back to the highlights, shadows, blacks, whites, contrast and clarity and fine tune your image. The key to doing this is to have a feel for what you want your final image to look like - which areas you want to emphasise etc. In the image below, which is the one on the cover of this issue, I wanted to draw the viewers attention to the mud stone in the foreground and the texture and patterns it contained. I did this by increasing the clarity and highlighting the tonal contrast between the mud and the water.



Inspiration

In researching this article I have come across some inspiring black and white photographers. These are some of my favourites:

Lee Acaster

I first came across Lee's work a few years ago when he captured some really moody black and white images at Shingle Street. His black and white work is very much about contrast within the landscape and his portfolio includes many images captured on the East Coast.

www.leeacaster.com

Steve Gosling

Steve is a professional photographer who specialises in producing creative and contemporary landscape images. His signature style is moody, atmospheric and minimalist black & white photographs.

www.stevegoslingphotography.co.uk

Vanda Ralevska

I only discovered Vanda's work recently through a mailing from the Landscape Photographer of the Year. Her work has a really delicate feminine feel to it and I especially like some of her black and white

images in her Woodland Poetry and Winter Solitude galleries.

www.mylenscapes.uk

Greg Bottle

Greg is a multi-genre photographer based in Kent. He has a diverse portfolio of black and white images on his website including some lovely landscapes from Iceland. He also has a collection of images featuring Antony Gormley's "Another Time" sculptures which are black and white with a hit of colour.

www.gregbottle.com

The Art of Photography by Bruce Barnbaum

This is a book I refer to regularly for its interesting chapters on composition and visualisation. It features a lot of black and white images and has several sections on black and white photography including film as well as digital work.

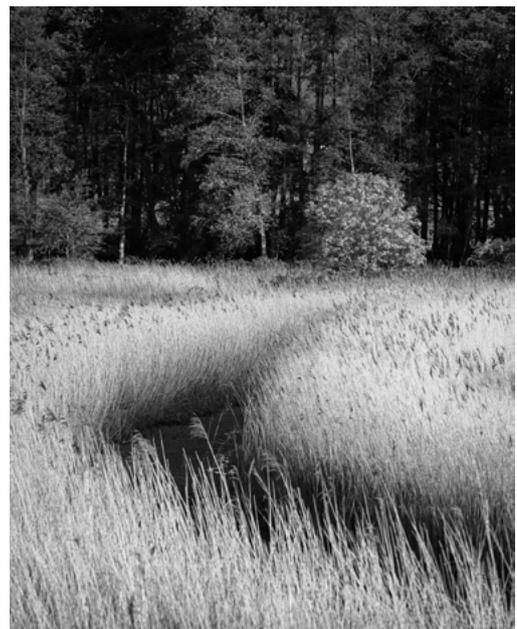
ISBN:978-1-68198-210-6

June's black and white challenge

June's photographic challenge for those wanting to take part is to take a series of black and white images that illustrate the following:

1. strong composition
2. patterns and texture
3. a high contrast image
4. a low contrast image
5. a high key image
6. a low key image

I am really happy to offer feedback and would love to see your images so please get in touch
gill@gillmoon.com



Grounded - a project



Grounded – a year of nature connections on Hollesley Marshes started as a project in January 2020. It began as a piece of work to document a year in the life of Hollesley Marshes. This is an area I walk to every morning with my dog, it is somewhere I have learnt so much about simply by observing the landscape and wildlife on a daily basis.

In March 2020 the Covid-19 pandemic overtook all our lives and my project turned from a straight documentary to one which detailed my connection with the landscape through the constraints of my permitted daily exercise. The images portray fleeting moments captured during a morning walk. They were not pre planned, were shot without a tripod or filters and represent my reaction to a scene at a particular moment in time. They are intended to be viewed as a visual sketchbook of a special place.

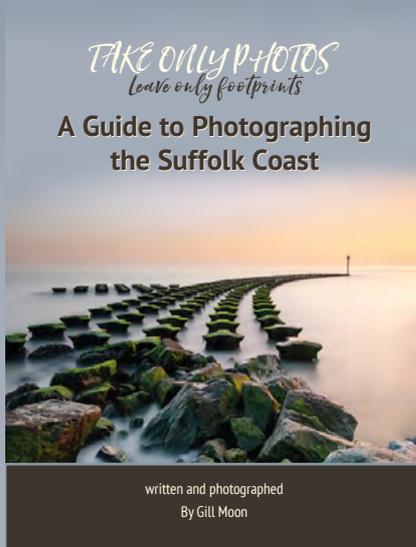
The project and the pandemic are still ongoing, but the images I took during lockdown have been made into a free to download Ebook. The book contains 54 pages with 31 images split between sections on the marsh, path, river, fields and creek.

The contents of the Ebook form part of a new publication 'Grounded' which will depict Hollesley Marshes throughout 2020 and will be available in a limited edition printed format in 2021.

To download a copy of my ebook please visit www.gillmoon.com/projects/grounded

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