

2020: Photography in the Time of Covid

3 “unique” perspectives

- A long time ICU physician
- A high risk person (age)
- A traveler who was on the road 13 of last 15 weeks

2020 photography issues

- Risk / safety in a time of Covid pandemic
- Reduced availability of lodging with high demand
- Severe smoke & haze with western fires

My decision to travel followed June experiences with visitors to GTNP chasing the bears. I have never seen such crowds and such irresponsible behavior around wildlife. I had to leave the area and avoid high public use areas.

Problems with summer 2020 travel

- Far larger, record-setting crowds in almost every national park
- Closures created lodging / campground stress – new reservation rules
- Too many people where people like to get away

2020 had record numbers for RV sales, rentals, and occupancy / use. Many public campgrounds were closed or had reduced capacity and many started new reservation requirements using on-line tools (usually not available in remote areas!) Every campground host or manager we spoke with had ever experienced such high demand / occupancy.

Happily, we were able to find a campsite in every region we visited (except one) – perhaps not our first choice of campground but something close. We visited Grand Teton NP, Shoshone NF, both the east (Lander) and west (Pinedale) access to the Wind River Range, Bighorn Canyon NRA, Shell & Ten Sleep access to the Bighorn NF, Flaming Gorge NRA, Dinosaur NM, Colorado NM, Capitol Reef NP, Grand Staircase Escalante NM, Bryce Canyon NP, Kanab region, and Death Valley NP. We were in 7 states (3 only briefly) and hiked / photographed 3-11 miles every single non-travel day. I lost 24# including all of my Covid spring isolation blubber.

Medical perspective observations were eye-opening and I understand why the US response to Covid is so poor. Almost nobody wore facemasks in central Wyoming. Social distancing was not observed at all – Lander was the very worst. Colorado was pretty good about following the guidelines and mask use. We actually ate out a few times and felt reasonably safe. Utah was

almost criminal in their denial of the pandemic and their flagrant opposition to distancing and mask use. (It is no wonder that the ICUs in Salt Lake City are practically overwhelmed.) We were actually mocked several times for wearing masks while hiking in Utah and “flipped off” for wearing a mask in the towns. California was amazing with nearly every person wearing a mask when out of their vehicle. We ate out several times and were delighted that to order you were required to give your name and phone number for potential contact tracing. Good job CA!

People show little concern for others, deny the pandemic, and are generally selfish. I had a former boss and mentor tell me “Loren, don’t expect too much from people, it’s a C- world.” He was an optimist.

While I enjoy wildlife photography the most, because of very low wildlife density in the desert areas, about 95% of my shots were landscape and scenic shots. Almost everything was shot with a Sony A7R2 using a Metabones IV adapter to a Canon 24-70 f/2.8 lens. Some shots used a new Sony A9ii with a 100-400 GM lens and a 1.4x teleconverter. I didn’t take a single shot with my Canon 5D3 and 600mm f/4 lens!

The biggest factor impacting my summer photography was the western wildfires and the near constant smoke and haze. The smoke was extreme for 8 of the first 9 weeks out. The week that was “clear” had 5 days of “robin egg blue” skies and only 2 days with nice cumulus clouds. This caused some major changes in my general concepts of landscape photography.

What did I learn, photographically?

- First, frame all shots carefully and avoid all distant backgrounds. The frames of rocks, brush, or trees helps focus the viewer away from the haze in the distance.
- Second, close-up scenes were much better than broad views. Waterfalls, trees (autumn color), and rock worked well.
- Third, gray skies and flat light reek havoc on color so consider more monochrome images.
- Fourth, look for shape, texture, and form – these won’t be destroyed by flat light.
- Fifth, you **can’t** get it right in the camera! Post processing is essential to “salvage” flat light images. I found the following processing helpful:
 1. If there is any sky in the image you will need a gradient adjustment to reduce exposure and highlights and sharpen any clouds that might be there. I found I needed a luminosity mask on almost all gradient filters with a cut-off of 40-55% to preserve brightness on mid-ground / background objects.
 2. Always boost contrast with flat lighting.
 3. Use the “dehaze” tool in Lightroom. I know I have always poo-pooed over-use of this tool but it really does help especially in the gradient tool.

4. You may need to boost vibrance and even (sometimes) saturation in color images. I know, I have also poopooed the saturation adjustment as being too harsh but with flat light and gray skies, it helps.
5. Crop more than you would normally to remove boring, washed out areas and help focus the viewer. I loved the 42 megapixel Sony sensor for this.
6. Consider HDR or at least exposure bracketing. The camera wants to factor that awful gray sky and will often under-expose the foreground. Also, consider 1/3 or 2/3 stop exposure compensation knowing you can deal with the sky in editing.
7. Consider more sharpening (always mask out the sky), more clarity, and more texture than usual. This really helps with abstract forms and desert rocks.
8. Be creative with local adjustments and use the radial filter and brush tools to help enhance the central subject of the image and perhaps “blur” backgrounds.

I hope some of these thoughts will be of value if we have more crazy 2020 summer issues in our future.