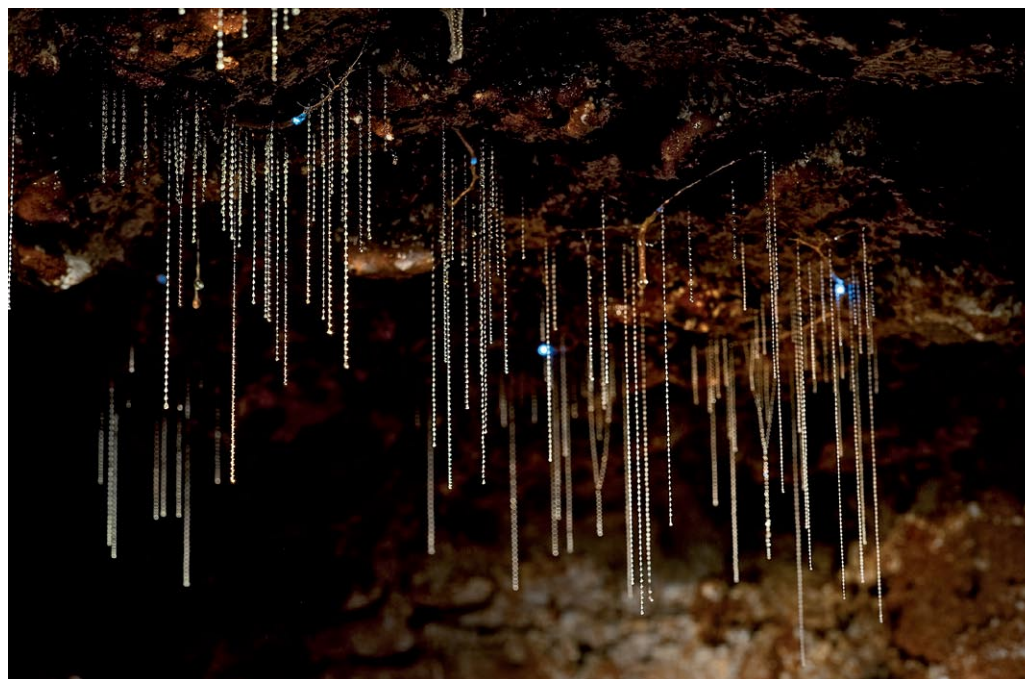




ABOVE Nikon D200, 10-20mm lens, f/5 @ 0.7 seconds, ISO 320, Manfrotto tripod. This pair of Tasman Boobies was resting on top of a cliff face, overlooking the Pacific Ocean at Norfolk Island. The light coming through the clouds naturally diffused the scene, but it was the ray of sunshine shining through the clouds and onto the ocean which gave this photo an extra "lift". It only lasted a few moments.

RIGHT Nikon D700, 150mm f/2.8 macro lens, f/14 @ 30 second exposure, a torch used to "paint with light", cable release, Gitzo tripod. In this photo I wanted to have the glow worms in the background as well as showing the threads the glow worms produce. Dedicated flash was too strong, so I set up my camera on a tripod and focused on the threads in front of the worms. I diffused a torch with a tissue and "painted in" the area with diffuse torchlight.

RIGHT Nikon D300, 80-200mm f/2.8 lens, f/4 @ 1/4000s, ISO 400, handheld. This Falcon's wings were backlit. Using a wide f/4 aperture I eliminated distractions by blurring the background.



The Importance of Light

Professional nature photographer Michael Snedic discusses the impact of that most fundamental element of image-making - light - and how to use it more creatively in shooting nature images.

Having been a nature photographer for the last 15 years, more and more I understand the importance of good light when I'm trying to shoot a "special" photograph. Although good composition, correct depth of field and other camera settings are important aspects in creating strong images, subtle lighting is perhaps the most essential component of a great nature photo. Here I want to outline a few tips on how to capture the best light in nature photography, both naturally and with the aid of equipment and props.

Lighting Landscapes

Preparation is really important. When I'm setting off to shoot some magnificent Australian landscapes, I make sure I've thoroughly prepared the night before. I

choose the best equipment for the shoot, charge my batteries, and make sure I have plenty of memory cards. I will also have researched when and where the sun will rise. In the morning I head out to my designated spot before sunrise and set up my tripod and camera. There's nothing better than a photo taken just after sunrise, when the light is usually at its best. Just prior to sunset is also a good time to shoot, as the light is again generally at its most subtle.

On bright sunny days I try to refrain from taking landscape photos during the middle hours because of the harsh light. If I'm in a rainforest, however, and the sky is filled with light clouds, I'll take photos at any time during the day. The clouds create what I call "nature's diffuser", and it doesn't get much better than to shoot in a rainforest just after some rain and with cloud cover

around. Harsh lighting in a rainforest makes for photos with overblown highlights and overly dark areas in the one photo - which isn't ideal! Another tip is to head into the rainforest early in the morning, if possible after some decent rain. You'll often get rays of sunlight piercing through the canopy. This may only last a few minutes, so you need to be set up and be ready to take your photos as soon as those shafts of light appear. I highly recommend taking a series of shots using different metered settings; you might be surprised by the difference between using evaluative metering (called matrix and multi-segmented in some cameras) as compared to centre-weighted or spot metering. When there is backlight present, spot metering can create quite pleasing results, although I tend to use matrix (for Nikon) mostly for my landscapes.

How To: *Use The Best Light In Nature*



ABOVE Nikon D700, 150mm f/2.8 macro lens, f/36 @ 1/6th of a second, ISO 400, Gitzo tripod, live view, cable release, mirror lock-up. After a huge torrential storm I ventured out into the rainforest. The storm had passed and the light coming through the rainforest canopy was sublime. I noticed one group of fungi which was perfectly backlit, so I quickly set up my camera and tripod and took this shot. Within minutes the light had completely changed, but it didn't matter – I had the shots in camera.

RIGHT Clouds over Mt Barney, Queensland. Nikon D700, 24-70mm lens, f/22 @ 3 seconds, ISO 200, Gitzo tripod, live view, cable release, mirror lock-up. Mountains often have a covering of clouds at sunrise, which burns off as the day warms up. The clouds and diffused light can create a more moody effect.

One of the great joys of landscape photography is to take photos of a beautiful scene near water. The best time to photograph reflections in water is on a sunny day with bright blue skies, either early in the morning or late in the afternoon, when the light is soft. When there's no wind and the water is perfectly still you can create great shots of reflections. You might want to opt for a photo of a landscape where two thirds of the photo is of the landscape and the other third is its reflection (sticking with the "rule of thirds" which is a fundamental with many landscape photographers). Choose a low ISO setting (to eliminate too much "noise"), a high-numbered (small) aperture for good depth of field (ie; f/16 or f/22), matrix or evaluative metering, and a tripod for stability. To get the whole scene in focus, I often use a wide-angle lens and focus about a third of the way into the landscape.

Backlighting & Mist

When photographing wildlife in the field, one of the techniques I like to use is "backlighting". By positioning the sun behind your subject (thereby eliminating

direct sunlight from ruining your image) you can create a rim of light around the outside of your subject's body. This effect can be quite spectacular and is best achieved when the sun is not too strong. For mammal photography in particular, this method is worth trying, because the halo-effect will emphasise the animal's fur. This method worked really well for me when I was photographing a grey kangaroo. I slowly followed a female kangaroo until she paused for a scratch. I positioned myself as close to eye level as possible, placed the sun right in front of me (but behind my subject) and set my metering to spot. I composed my photo, leaving room in the direction the kangaroo was facing, and focused on her eye. I saw the rim lighting around the 'roo's body and took my series of backlit shots.

I'm a strong advocate of photographing wildlife as close to eye level as possible, and most of my photos of wildlife reflect this. There are situations, though, where shooting straight up at an individual is acceptable, as with a bird flying above you where there is blue sky in the background and the sun shining through its wings. Once

again you're using the light nature provides to create great shots. A photo of a white bird with its wings spread out and sunlight shining through them can give the bird an angelic appearance.

Another beautiful atmospheric effect in which to shoot is mist. Locations high in mountains, such as the Bunya Mountains or Lamington National Park in Queensland, where I shoot regularly, have pademelons and wallabies wandering about at close range, often with a joey either in the pouch or near its mother. Many pleasing photos have been taken of these delightful marsupials, but having mist in the background can add great mood to an image. Mist is more prevalent in the early morning, especially on a sunny day, as the sun can burn it off quite quickly.

I'd recommend spot or partial metering for this type of photography, as the subject is the most important part of the photo and the light reading will be centred mainly on the area you focus upon.

Diffused Macros

Out in the natural world there are lots of macro subjects to be found and photographed. Once again, using correct lighting can make all the difference between an average photo and a great one. When I shoot fungi in a rainforest I try to use natural light where possible. If there are plenty of light clouds about I often use a portable reflector to bounce natural light onto the fungi. This effect shows off the fungi's colours and texture, and the lighting is more natural looking than having shafts



LEFT Nikon D300, 80-400mm lens, f/5.6 @ 1/250s, ISO 200, Manfrotto tripod. This Red-necked Wallaby and its joey was near the edge of a rainforest, surrounded by mist. The advantage of shooting wildlife in misty conditions is that the light is generally very even and your shot will look more atmospheric.

How To: *Use The Best Light In Nature*



ABOVE Nikon D200, Nikon 80-200mm f/2.8 lens, f/2.8 @ 1/5000s, ISO 100, minus one step exposure compensation (aperture priority), handheld. I saw a flock of Red-tailed Tropicbirds flying past the top of a cliff-face, but they were all too far away to photograph, except for this lone bird. I used spot metering and underexposed.

of bright sunlight shining directly onto the subject. I sometimes use a macro flash if I'm hand-holding my SLR camera. The extra light given off by the flash will generally freeze any movement you would normally encounter when hand-holding a camera in low-light conditions. Even though a macro flash is nowhere near as powerful as an external flash mounted on your SLR, I still prefer to use the macro flash, but with the power of it reduced. This stops harsh light from bouncing off the fungi I'm photographing. With compact cameras and SLRs which have a pop-up flash, this can also be used to give you extra light, though as a direct source it can sometimes be a bit "flat". I advise using a diffuser such as the Gary Fong "Puffer" or something similar in front of the flash to help create a more evenly diffused (and apparently natural) light.

Sometimes you plan a photography trip way in advance, but of course you can't control the weather! The day arrives, you've planned to photograph flowers in a botanic garden, but the sky is blue and the light is harsh. If you take photos of flowers,

especially white and yellow ones, in these conditions you'll inevitably end up with over-exposed images. Fortunately, there are a couple of solutions. The first solution, whether your camera is a compact or an SLR, is to use the exposure compensation setting (+/-) available in most cameras (when using aperture priority mode – my preferred mode for shooting most subjects). By reducing your metered exposure, you'll also reduce the chance of blown-out highlights. I'm a strong believer in using the "blinking highlights" setting on your camera, if it's available to you, because this is a great way of seeing instantly if the photo is over-exposed. The brighter the sky, the more you need to alter your exposure compensation setting for bright subjects.

The second solution is to use a portable diffuser and hold it over the flower you're shooting. This method is my preferred option, because diffused light over a white or yellow flower looks much more pleasing to the eye than the effects of exposure compensation. I set up my camera, macro lens and tripod and then use a cable release to activate the shutter, while using my other hand to hold the diffuser over the flowers. All the over-exposed areas are completely eliminated and the diffuser spreads out the light evenly. Diffusers/reflectors can be bought at most camera stores and they normally fold up into a compact, manageable size which fits into many camera backpacks.

Long Exposures

In Australian rainforests there is a fungus that's actually luminous at night! It may only last a matter of days, after which it's either devoured by giant Panda snails or it shrivels up in dry and hot conditions. But at night it glows a stunning bright green. The best way to photograph glowing fungi is to set up your camera on a tripod and use an external light source (such as a headlamp) to help you focus on the fungi. Your camera should be set on manual with the "bulb" setting. This allows you, with the aid of a remote control or cable-release, to open the shutter for a determined period of time and shut it when you feel the time is right. In my case I tried various exposures, with 12 minutes ultimately proving to be the best one. I used a low ISO to help eliminate noise and had

my in-camera noise reduction setting turned on, which lasts another 12 minutes.

Painting With Light

"Painting with light" is another effective way of creating light on a specific area of a photo at night. By setting your camera on a tripod and using a long exposure at night, a torch can be used to "paint" the area that needs light. The great part of this technique is that you can not only add light to chosen areas with a torch, but depending on how bright the torch is and how long you shine it on certain areas, you can completely control the way the photo will end up looking. At a night shoot in the Red Centre (in the Northern Territory) I set up my SLR on a tripod, and using a headlamp for light, I composed a shot of a dune with some bushes in the foreground. I focused on the bushes manually and then turned the headlamp off. Using a manual setting and a remote, I released the shutter for about 30 seconds. Taking care not to knock over my camera and tripod, I shone a Dolphin torch over the bushes in an up-and-down, then a left-to-right motion, making sure not to shine the torch in one area for too long to avoid blowing out the shot, or having too much light in one area of the photo.

Another example where I used the 'painting with light' method was during a shoot I did for a magazine, where I was photographing glow worms. I was asked to take photos of the worms glowing, as well as showcasing the sticky pearl-like threads the glow worms release in order to catch any insects that fly towards the glowing light and become their prey. I composed my shot using a macro lens mounted on a tripod and used a 30 second exposure. During the time the shutter was open, I used a torch which I'd diffused with a tissue and proceeded to move the torch in various directions all over the glow worm threads. All the above methods can help you get off to a good start and create more atmospheric images. *

Michael Snedic is a professional nature photographer, writer and tutor. He is co-owner of Trekabout Photography Workshops, which conducts workshops across Australia (and to Norfolk Island).

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