

Trouble-shooting Field Techniques

When orthodox methods won't work, what do you do? Experienced landscape and wildlife shooter *Michael Snedic* outlines a range of unconventional tricks he has applied in the field.

Taking a good landscape photo involves using correct equipment and good techniques. As much as I've tried to keep to the techniques recommended by expert landscape photographers, there have been situations that required more unconventional approaches. Ironically, it's often been the photos taken by such methods that have proved to be the most interesting and successful.

I always recommend following tried and proven techniques when taking landscape photos, but don't be afraid to try unconventional methods. A bit of

compromising can create opportunities that may not otherwise be there. No one will laugh at your attempts, you'll have a great time trying, and who knows what you'll end up with in the process? Here are some methods that are traditionally recommended for landscape shooting, followed by alternate methods that have worked for me in the past.

Use a tripod

The experts recommend a stable shooting platform to obtain maximum detail and depth of field. As a rule tripods should be

sturdy, with their legs locked into position and well braced.

The Alternative: If there's no stable ground on which to position your tripod, you can open just one or two tripod legs and these can be wedged amongst rocks or strapped to tree trunks using elastic straps. This will allow for more stability than hand-holding your camera and photos can be taken even in the harshest of terrains. This technique is fine to use with small, wide-angled lenses, but it isn't recommended for large telephoto or zoom lenses as mirror-slap can create blurry photos.



Yellow Water, Paperbark Swamp, Kakadu NP

A number of years ago I had the opportunity to take a boat to Kakadu National Park and photograph its landscapes and wildlife. I went to the Yellow Water swamp in the centre of the park and cruised around for 11 days, looking for the best photographic opportunities. The spot where this photo was taken is known as the Paperbark Swamp and I wanted to spend time capturing its beauty.

It was early morning and the light was perfect. Another nature photographer and I were in an aluminium dinghy, heading for the Paperbark Swamp. I spotted a beautiful pink water lily nearby and decided to use this in the foreground of my photo. The only problem was how to position myself to be at eye level with the plant. I could have achieved this by submerging myself in the water, but I wasn't keen to stay in wet clothes all day, and there are plenty of crocodiles around. I tried to contort my body over the boat's edge and nearly fell into the water in the process. My mate then suggested he hold me up by the back of my shorts while I leaned over and took some shots. Because I wasn't using a tripod, the only solution was to remain as steady as possible while clicking the shutter. Sure, we cheated on technique, but in the end it didn't matter - the shoot produced some decent photos!

Grass Tree, Lamington NP, Qld

At the top of a mountain in Lamington National Park there was a magnificent grass tree in the foreground of a stunning valley. The early morning light was perfect for photography, but unfortunately I was too low to capture the scenery in the background. I solved the problem by climbing a nearby tree and wedging my tripod in the join of some of its branches. The tripod was virtually used as a monopod with the other two legs protruding in mid air. It wasn't perfect, but it was enough to stabilise the camera and composition was easy.



PRACTICAL: *Alternative Techniques*

From a boat

When you're making landscape images from the water the preferred way to shoot is from a small boat and to use a lens with vibration reduction (VR) or image stabilisation (IS). Even if the boat is moving slightly, these inbuilt mechanisms compensate for any movement.

The Alternative: If you don't own a lens with image stabilization, but you're still working on a small boat, another way to take sharp images is to take the boat to a shallow area, extend your tripod legs fully and push the pod into the mud or sand over the side. Make sure the tripod head is level, compose your image and take a shot. I've used this method successfully a number of times.

In the wet

Many people pass up an opportunity to shoot when it's raining, but some great landscapes can be made in wet environments. Still, it isn't a good idea to use your equipment when it's raining since cameras and lenses can easily be moisture damaged.



Winter morning, Lamington NP, Qld.

Awaking very early one freezing winter's morning, I headed out along the track in Lamington National Park, hoping to take some misty, sunlit shots of the rainforest. It was bitterly cold walking along the track before sunrise, but I managed to keep warm by moving at a cracking pace. Suddenly, the sun appeared through the trees and rays of light stretched through the canopy.

I moved around in every direction while searching for the best composition, eventually attaching my camera to the tripod and shooting some pictures. The rays of light in this image lasted only minutes, but luckily they are now preserved forever. In all the years of shooting landscapes in Lamington National Park I have yet to see the same effect recreated. I got this because I stayed flexible.



The Alternative: When there isn't any cover available and you want to continue shooting a scene, alternatives can be found. One of these is to always carry a poncho and short lengths of cord with you when you're out in the field. Use the poncho to make a canopy over the camera and tripod, and the cord to tie each corner to nearby branches. This won't work for fast-changing scenes (like some wildlife), but for many landscapes it allows you to work comfortably (and safely) in adverse conditions.

Making long exposures

If you're trying to photograph a waterfall, flowing stream or creek and you're after a "milky" effect that signifies movement, the accepted way to do this is to use a tripod, set a long exposure and use a cable release to take the image.

The Alternative: Here's another technique. Try wedging the camera and lens in the fork of a tree or placing them on a rock. Then set the shutter release timer on the camera to a few seconds.

Antarctic Beech Trees, Lamington NP, Qld

It seemed like I'd been waiting an eternity for perfect conditions to photograph this group of Antarctic Beech Trees at Lamington National Park, in south east Queensland. One morning when the clouds were light grey and perfect for this type of photography, I walked into the forest. After trekking six kilometres with a heavy pack and a tripod the heavens opened up and I needed to shelter under a tree. It soon eased off into a light, misty rain so rather than head all the way back and miss an opportunity, I decided to stay and make the most of my situation. I used a large poncho in my pack to create a makeshift awning and left the rest of my gear sheltered at the base of a tree. The awning was held up with string tied to each corner of the poncho and secured to nearby branches. Once secure, I placed my camera and tripod and took some photos. Had it not rained, the lush green colours of the moss on the beech trees wouldn't have looked so crisp and rich. When viewing this image I think back at how easy it would have been to venture back to a dry, warm home. In the end, persistence paid off.

This stops any movement to the camera caused by pressing the shutter.

Composing a scene

The accepted way to compose a landscape scene is to set up your tripod, position your camera to the tripod head and compose. This may require moving the camera, lens and tripod around many times before finding the "right" composition. Doing this repeatedly can be frustrating and tiring, especially if you own a heavy tripod.

The Alternative: Connect your lens to the camera and put the viewfinder to your eye, then move around your scene until you



Yellow Water, sunset, Kakadu NP

After a day of cruising the wetlands of Yellow Water in Kakadu National Park the sunset was creating some majestic colours. I moored my boat on the mudflats and started to take out my camera, lens and tripod. The only problem was the mosquitoes, which were starting to congregate by their thousands! As I didn't have any insect repellent handy and I wasn't going to miss this opportunity for the world. There had to be another solution. I wrapped my head, neck and hands with spare bits of cloth I had lying around the boat. Yes, it was awkward operating the camera and I certainly must have looked a sight, but this was too good an opportunity to miss. Getting there had taken nearly 4000 kilometres of driving. There was no way a horde of "mozzies" was going to stop me!

find a suitable composition. Then you can set up the tripod, attach your camera, recompose and take your photo. This is much easier than having to repeatedly move your entire set-up.

Michael Snedic is a professional nature photographer specialising in Australia's fauna, flora and landscapes. He has been doing so for nine years and his work is published widely. To see more of his images and articles or to purchase prints, please visit www.michaelsnedic.com



Moran's Falls, Lamington NP, Qld.

The lighting conditions on top of Moran's Falls in Lamington National Park were a fraction too harsh, so I waited for the sun to set a little more. As soon as the sun was behind the branches on the right-hand side of this image, I set up my tripod very low and composed the scene. Unfortunately, there was still some flare in my lens. I recomposed the scene and held my hat in my right hand just over the camera to prevent undesirable lens flare. I then used the cable release in my left hand and took some shots.