



# SNAP

THE COLD

BY MICHAEL SNEDIC

With more than 20 years' experience shooting, including in some of the coldest places on the planet, Pro photographer Michael Snedic shares his advice for staying warm and shooting smart in icy environments.

There are many photographic locations, in Australia and across the globe, that can be very cold. Unlike in more temperate climates, shooting when it's freezing carries its own challenges and risks that can come with being unprepared. I've been lucky enough to spend many years photographing in these extreme environments and have learned, by trial and error, how to ensure success. Here's my top tips.

I was travelling in a Zodiac with my photography expedition group, cruising the calm waters of Svalbard, in the Arctic. We turned a corner and there right in front of us was this incredibly beautiful scene of blue ice. I waited for a bird to fly through the scene before taking the shot. Nikon D810, 70-200mm f/2.8 lens, 1/2000s @ f5.6, ISO 250.



LEFT: Photographing others, photographing this Adelie Penguin while it was snowing, was one of the funnier moments while in Antarctica. Nikon D810, 70-200mm lens with 2x convertor @ 210mm, 1/1600s @ f5.6, ISO 800.

BELOW: It was bitterly cold in the Russian Far East, but all was forgotten when this Horned Puffin flew straight past me across the surface of the water. My finger immediately pressed the shutter button! Nikon D810, 70-200mm f/2.8 lens, 1/6400s @ f5.6, ISO 800.

BOTTOM: It was imperative I used a protective lens and camera cover while photographing during snowfall in Antarctica. Harsh conditions, but if you are prepared, it's worth the hardship and you can end up with some very moody images. Canon EOS 5DS R, 120-300mm lens @ 171mm, 1/800s @ f5.6, ISO 400, handheld.

### 3 CHOOSE THE RIGHT BAG

There are two major styles of camera bags, sling or side bags, and backpacks. I prefer to use a backpack, and when possible, a drybag. There are many on the market but the one I use is the Lowepro 'Dryzone'. This backpack is specially designed for keeping camera gear dry and is fully-sealed, with clips that lock, creating a waterproof seal. This backpack also has a double-padded section which sits at the bottom to protect your camera and lenses from being damaged. The outer membrane is made of thick, waterproof plastic. This type of backpack is particularly useful when travelling in a zodiac as your contents are protected from splashes.



### 1 BRING THE RIGHT CLOTHING

It's important to have the right clothing while photographing in very cold conditions. There is nothing worse than shivering away, feeling miserable, while standing in some amazing location and not being able to warm up. Having the right clothes is absolutely invaluable!

I suggest wearing lots of thin layers underneath your main outer jacket, as this will work better as insulation and will wick perspiration away from your body. It is also easier to slowly take off one layer at a time as it warms up. A beanie is a great way to keep your head warm, without peaks from caps and hats getting in the way when you are looking through your camera's viewfinder. When in extreme conditions, such as icy winds and snow, or when travelling on a zodiac, a balaclava is also a piece of clothing that I recommend. If you are out in the wilderness and don't have immediate access to shelter, you need to carry some sort of waterproof shell with you, in case it rains. In very cold environments (snow, ice, glaciers) it's often not a bad idea to wear a lined jacket that will keep you warm, but is waterproof on the outside. If it's not so cold, a waterproof Gore-Tex lined jacket or similar will suffice.

The correct footwear is also critically important. If you plan on visiting a location that has a lot of snow, it's important to have footwear that is sturdy, waterproof

and with decent grip on the tread. There are specialist snow boots available on the market, which are lined and waterproof, but these can be quite bulky and expensive. You could also wear a pair of Gore-Tex lined (and therefore waterproof) hiking boots, with a pair of gators over the top. The gators prevent melted snow from dripping into the top of your boots and socks, and will also keep the bottom of your pants dry.

### 2 THE SECRET TO KEEPING YOUR HANDS WARM

Keeping your fingers/hands warm is always a challenge as being on the outer extremities of your body, your hands and fingers are one of the first things that become cold. The easiest solution would be to wear a pair of very thick gloves but there is a problem with this - you can't use your fingers to press the camera's shutter. The solution is a pair of thin cotton 'liner' gloves, followed by a pair of fingerless gloves, that become mittens when you pull the ends over your fingers. The fingerless gloves allow you to feel and operate the controls on your camera and when you have finished doing this, you pull the flaps of the mittens across to keep your hands warm.



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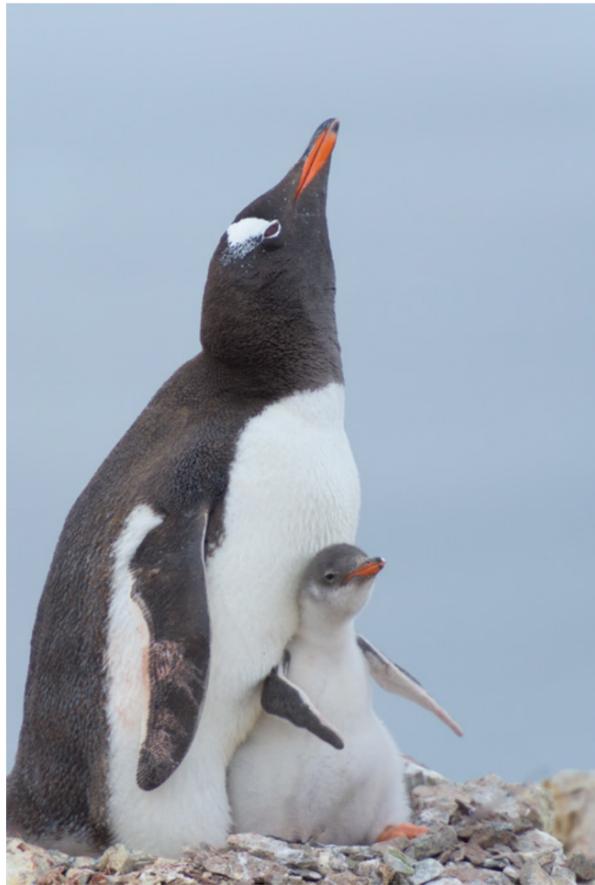
### 4 PROTECT YOUR GEAR

I've learned that you need to be prepared for every eventuality, including rain or snow, when out in the field. A decent waterproof bag that covers the camera and lens (which can be bought to suit specific lens sizes), while allowing you to still operate dials on the camera will be invaluable. Even though many cameras are either water resistant or waterproof, it's not good to get your gear absolutely soaked. I suggest having a couple of 'practice runs' with the lens and camera cover, before taking it out in the field. That way you will be familiar with how to attach and detach it. Remember, the faster you get at putting on and taking off your waterproof bag, the warmer you will be!



## 5 INSULATE LENSES AND TRIPOD LEGS

Handling a metal lens in extremely cold environments is a must, but they can be painful on your hands and fingers when it comes to adjusting focus or changing lenses. The solution is neoprene covers. These covers come in different sized pieces and are lens-specific, so that each piece fits exactly onto the lens (or lenses) you own. The neoprene is much more comfortable to hold and there is much less chance of the lens slipping from your hand. Tripods can also be painful to handle in the cold, especially in freezing conditions. Purchasing wrap-around covers which fit on each leg and are secured with Velcro can help here.



## 6 MINIMISE LENS FOG

Lens fog can be a problem. When bringing your photographic gear from a warm environment and into the cold, put your camera and lenses into zip-lock (or clip-lock) bags, before venturing out. Once the photographic equipment has been in the warmth for a short while, unseal the bags and remove the gear, ready for use. On your return, when the camera and lenses are cold and you are entering a warm room, I recommend placing the gear under a doona or blanket on your bed, so that they slowly 'acclimatise' to the surrounding temperatures. Should condensation be unavoidable in some circumstances, then a lint-free lens cleaning cloth can be used to carefully wipe away the moisture on the lens. Just make sure you use a circular motion to avoid any smudges.

## 7 BEWARE OF FREEZING BATTERIES

When temperatures fall below freezing, it's quite common for batteries to also 'freeze', rendering them inoperable. Rather than keep your batteries in camera, I suggest putting the battery in your jacket pocket. Your body warmth will keep it warm. When you are ready to shoot, insert the battery into your camera. It's also worth carrying plenty of spares as you may also find battery-life is significantly shorter in colder conditions.



LEFT: It took lots of patience to finally get a shot of the parent Gentoo penguin calling, plus the chick out in the open while in Antarctica. I was ready with my finger on the shutter, as soon as the moment happened! Nikon D810, 70-200mm lens with 2x convertor @ 400mm, 1/1250s @ f5.6, ISO 400, handheld.

TOP: The Arctic is simply one of the most stunning locations on earth for wildlife and adventure photography. Just make sure you're prepared with the

right gear and you'll have the trip of a lifetime. Nikon D810, 24-70mm f/2.8 lens. 1/2500s @ f5.6, ISO 400.

ABOVE: We were watching this walrus in the Arctic (Svalbard) very closely, when it decided to go under our zodiac and surfaced only meters away, looking directly at my camera. Nikon D810, 70-200mm lens with 2x convertor @ 400mm, 1/2500s @ f5.6, ISO 800, handheld.



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## THINK ABOUT YOUR SUBJECT

One of the things that makes for a great photo in a cold climate is untouched snow. This allows for the perfect minimalist composition, where your subject can be tiny but stands out due to the snow. Using an aperture of f16, for example, when using a wide-angled lens, will allow for perfect depth-of-field of the whole scene.

Often in snow covered environments it is worth trying to give a sense of scale in your images. You can do this with a wide-angle lens, ensuring you place your subject in the distance. Close-up shots are great, but by including a few wider shots too, it will really help give a sense of the enormity of the landscape to the viewer

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## THE IMPORTANCE OF CORRECT EXPOSURE

Getting the correct exposure at the best of times can be tricky, but add in an all white environment and it's another challenge entirely! If the scene you are photographing is completely white and you are shooting in aperture priority, I recommend you use Evaluative Metering (Canon), Matrix Metering (Nikon) or Multi-segment or Multi-pattern (other brands), as this metering mode will read the whole scene you are photographing. Basically, the camera will turn the scene to a 'grey', so if shooting in Aperture Priority, you will need to use positive compensation (slower shutter speed) in order to achieve the correct exposure. Always check your histogram too.

THIS IMAGE: One of the joys of cruising the waters of Antarctica with your camera is not knowing what's around the next corner. This amazing landscape, with stunning clouds and reflections, was one of the more special moments. Nikon D810, 70-200mm lens with 2x convertor @ 400mm, 1/1250s @ f5.6, ISO 400, handheld.

TOP RIGHT: The Arctic Fox can be quite shy and elusive, especially when photographed. As fortune would have it, this one was more interested in raiding birds nests. It walked only metres in front of my camera! Nikon D810, 70-200mm f2.8 lens, 1/5000s @ f5.6, ISO 800.



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## WHAT ABOUT GLARE?

For photographing landscapes covered in snow and ice, as with scenes with lots of water or wet surfaces, I suggest using a circular polarising filter. This filter has the benefit of reducing unsightly glare from the snow or ice. It is important that you spin the circular polariser until the glare disappears. Some circular polarisers have a dot or triangle on the outside ring, which you spin until the dot or triangle is positioned 90 degrees to the sun. You generally lose 1.5 - 2 stops of light when using this filter, so a tripod is recommended.

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## GET IT RIGHT IN-CAMERA

To the thousands of photo workshop and tour participants I have tutored over the last 15 years and the numerous camera club presentations I have done, my motto has always been "Get it right in-camera". By learning the correct settings and using proper techniques out in the field, you have a much higher chance of getting the best possible shots, without having to try and 'fix' poor images in Lightroom or Photoshop. The less you have to try and 'bring back' exposure or sharpen blurry images, the better your image will look. Also, I can assure you that I would much prefer to be out in the field, photographing wildlife and beautiful scenes in nature, than to spend long hours on the computer correcting poor quality images! 🌞



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Professional photographer, Michael Snedic, has been presenting wildlife and nature-based photography workshops and tours to the most stunning wild locations on earth for the past 15 years. He loves sharing his knowledge and passion for photography with others!

*(Michael has been a regular feature writer for 'Australian Photography Magazine' since 2006)*

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