

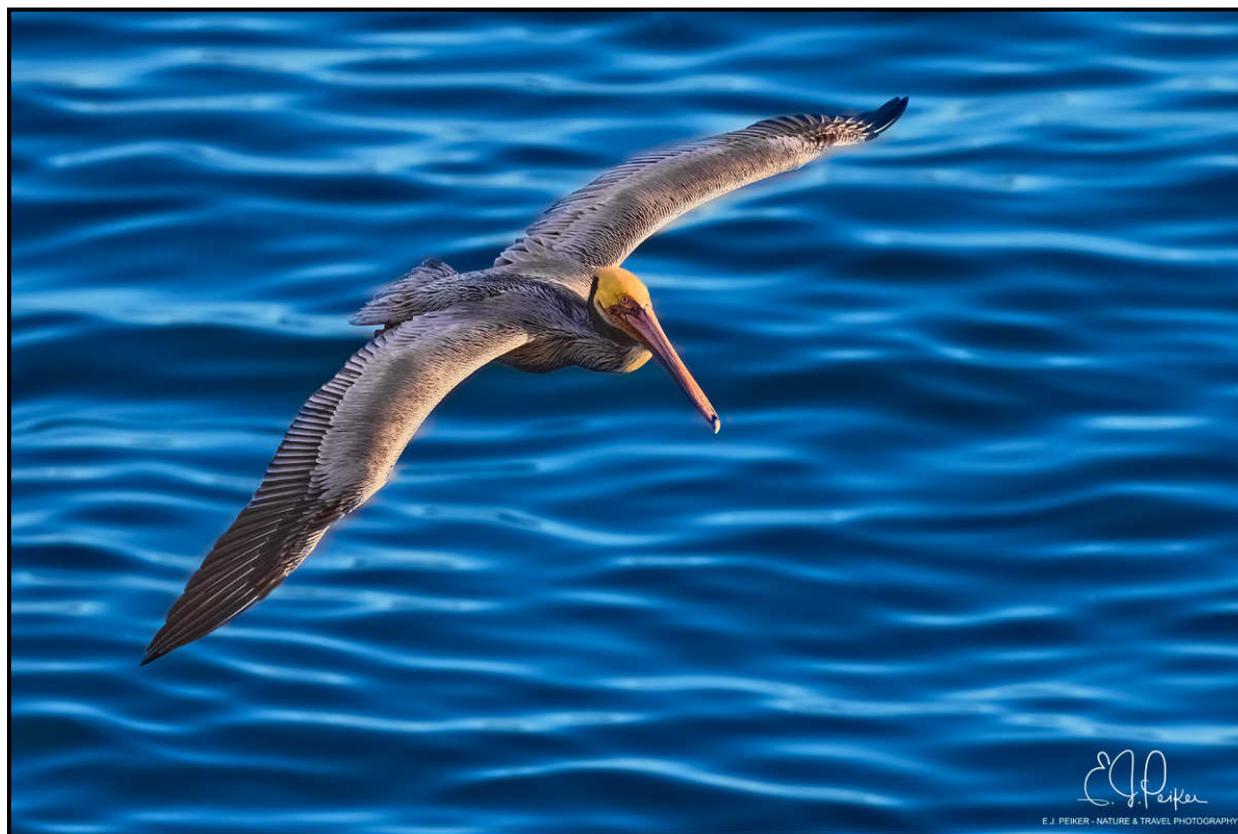


The Newsletter of E.J. Peiker - Nature and Travel Photography

Spring 2022 - Vol. 21, Issue 2
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Welcome to the 21st year of the photography newsletter from E.J. Peiker, Nature & Travel Photography and www.EJPhoto.com. In this quarterly publication, I share with fellow photographers my photographic experiences, photo equipment reviews, photography tips, processing tips, and industry news. I also inform subscribers about upcoming workshops and products that I offer. All content is copyrighted by E.J. Peiker and may not be reproduced but it is permitted to forward this newsletter in its entirety only. If you would like to be added to the mailing list, unsubscribe, or access back issues, please visit:

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Brown Pelican (Sony a1, 200-600mm)

Winter Bird Photography

While I was not nearly as prolific as pre-pandemic Winter bird photography, I did finally get out and do some bird photography in the first three months of 2022. I rung in the New Year with a New Years Day drive to San Diego for a one week mini-vacation which included three days of bird photography in the area. I had one primary target - the Brandt's Cormorant. This bird had eluded me in my many visits to that area even though I would often see them flying by. Thanks to a tip from a friend, I found their exact roosting location which is in a small area no farther than 200 yards from where I had been trying in the past. While there I also stumbled upon a couple of Black Oystercatchers, another bird that I had only limited luck with before. Of course I also photographed the usual suspects in the area, mainly breeding plumage Brown Pelicans, White Pelicans, Heerman's Gulls, Whimbrels and others. In an area that I had done a lot of Wood Duck photography in years and decades past, I found only one Wood Duck pair and it was not in a shootable situation.

Back home, I continued with my 300 to 350 mile per week bicycling habit, even building my own ultra high-end custom endurance race bike from individually purchased components – I reached nearly 16,000 miles of cycling in 2021. Riding takes me by many local ponds. While out on a ride, I was surprised to find, for the first time ever, a relatively large flock of Common Merganser in a pond only about 2 miles from my house. As usual these birds were very skittish but patience paid off and I got some of my best shots of the species. Additionally, the more common ducks in my area, including American Wigeon, Ringnecks, Northern Shovelers, Ruddy Ducks, Neotropic Cormorants, Double-crested Cormorants, and more were in abundance this year.

Another surprise for the local area was an abundance of White Pelicans, in numbers never seen before. Many bodies of water in the Phoenix area had them, some were absolutely teeming with them. Overall it was a pretty good year for water birds and I hope this continues next winter despite constant habitat loss. Fortunately, most communities that spring up in previously wild areas are putting in stocked man-made ponds and the birds seem to have adapted well.



I shot all my bird photos with the Sony Alpha 1 and the 200-600mm lens, some with the 1.4x converter and I could not be happier with the performance.

The Nikon Z9 (revisited)

Last quarter I provided my first impressions of the Nikon Z9 and since I am not going to get one to evaluate hands-on, I have polled a number of photographers that I know well and respect that have now amassed quite a bit of experience with this new mirrorless flagship. In general the users fall into four camps: those that just now switched from a large body DSLR like the Nikon D5/D6, those that switched from a smaller body DSLR like the Nikon D850, those that had previously switched to smaller body Nikon mirrorless cameras like the Z7, and those that had previously switched to another brand of mirrorless, most notably the Sony Alpha 1 and are trying out the Z9 because they used to be Nikon shooters and still identify with that brand. Based on which of these types of Z9 users they are, the feedback can be pretty different in a number of areas.



Let's first run-down some of the major highlights of this new Nikon mirrorless flagship camera again:

- 45 megapixel stacked sensor
- Full DSLR style sized body with integrated grip weighing a hefty 1340g
- 30 frames per second in JPEG mode, 20 FPS in RAW mode
- 1000 frame buffer for compressed RAW images
- Reduced resolution JPEG mode that can shoot at 120 frames per second
- Lossless RAW, Lossy RAW, 1/2 size RAW
- Full time electronic shutter (no shutter curtain but has a sensor shield)
- People, mammal and bird eye auto-focus detection
- Planes, train, auto, motorcycle, bicycle auto-focus detection
- In body stabilization that coordinates with any lens stabilization (all called VR for vibration reduction in the Nikon world)
- Dual CFexpress Type B card slots
- 3.69 million dot EVF
- Partially articulating 2.1 million dot rear LCD
- 8K/20p max video resolution

The area that people are most interested in is autofocus performance. This is one of the areas where the camera the user came from plays a big role in the impressions. For wildlife shooters that came from either a large or normal sized body Nikon, words like incredible, outstanding, and fantastic are not uncommon. This is because it is the first time these photographers have experienced eye AF, specifically mammal or bird eye AF. For those that came from a camera like the Sony a1 or to a lesser degree the Canon EOS R3, words like disappointing, sub-par, and just OK are common. One of the issues that many photographers using the Z9 are reporting is that when there are multiple subjects in the frame, the camera either gives up on detecting eyes or it jumps around from subject to subject rather than locking onto one and then sticking with it. Similarly, if a subject goes out of the frame and comes back, it doesn't always re-find that subject's eye. Both Sony and Canon track an eye better to the edge of the sensor than the Z9. In situations such as shooting from a blind, where the subject is always within the size window of allowing the eye focus to capture the eye, there is little difference between the brands. Under very low light at close range, the Z9 may just pick-up the subject a hair faster but picks up the actual eye a bit slower but it is a very close call. One area of sub-par performance on the Z9 is when one is rapidly focusing back and forth between a close and far subject. In this situation, there is a small

stutter as it is refocusing back and forth where both Canon's R3 and Sony's a1 do this without any hesitation. For those coming from lesser Z cameras in the Nikon mirrorless range, the AF is very much next level in every regard compared to those cameras. While Nikon has definitely upped the game within their own lineup for shooting wildlife, neither it's tracking capability, it's ability to lock onto an eye from long distances, or its speed to attain lock on an eye is on par with Sony's and Canon's but Nikon has been improving steadily in this area, not just with new camera models but also with firmware updates. One nice addition with the Z9 is that they finally brought back the very popular 3D tracking and when this is linked with eye-AF, this is the best focusing camera Nikon has made for wildlife and bird photography.

Frame rate is another area that many photographers commented on, especially bird photographers. Again there is a difference in opinion between those coming from other Nikon cameras vs. those coming from a camera like the Sony Alpha 1. Nikon's Z9 can "only" shoot at 20 FPS in a RAW format while under many circumstances the Sony a1 can shoot at 25 to 30FPS. Personally, I feel even 20FPS is insane and since both cameras have essentially unfillable buffers with the right media card, I think this is more about bragging rights than it is about real world usability. Nikon does clear the buffer a bit faster but, again, with the size of buffer that these cameras have, it really doesn't matter in the vast majority of situations.

Size and weight was commented on a lot by those I polled. As expected, those that were still using large DSLRs like a D5 and D6 have no problem with it as it's actually slightly smaller and lighter. The other user groups said that the camera is too large, too heavy, and a pain to travel with. No surprises there as the Z9 is a big and heavy camera more reminiscent of the large Sports focused DSLRs! Other ergonomic comments center around it being a Nikon which means it is among, if not the best camera from a button placement and control layout – definitely better than Sony's which is much improved on the a1 but still not at the level of the Z9 (much smaller size exacts a penalty here) and, for many, better than the more menu reliant Canon. I did get a couple of comments from renowned photographers about the placement of the AF button when using the camera in vertical mode. For some, it appears to be in a location where it is too easy to bump with the palm of your hand causing things to refocus when you don't want them to. An area universally applauded is that Nikon finally did away with two slots of different card format which has always been puzzling to me. The Canon EOS R3 is the only camera of the three flagship action cameras that still uses two different type media cards for the two slots.

I got quite a few comments about image noise at high ISO. Those used to the old 20-24 megapixel DSLRs tend to be a bit disappointed as the files are a bit noisier at the pixel level than those cameras but this is to be expected when looking at noise at the pixel level when you more than double the pixel count. A much better way to look at it is at a fixed subject reproduction size and when you do that, the Z9's noise characteristics are very good, approximately equal to Sony's 50 megapixel Alpha 1.

So far I have focused mostly on wildlife/bird photography as this camera is well suited to that and the Z7 is probably a better landscape photography camera due to its more compact size with a similar resolution. AF raw performance is not a factor in this type of photography. Landscape photographers using the Z9 (or Z7) do appreciate the base ISO of 64 compared to 100 in virtually all other cameras as this does allow slower shutter speeds which can be important in some landscape scenarios.

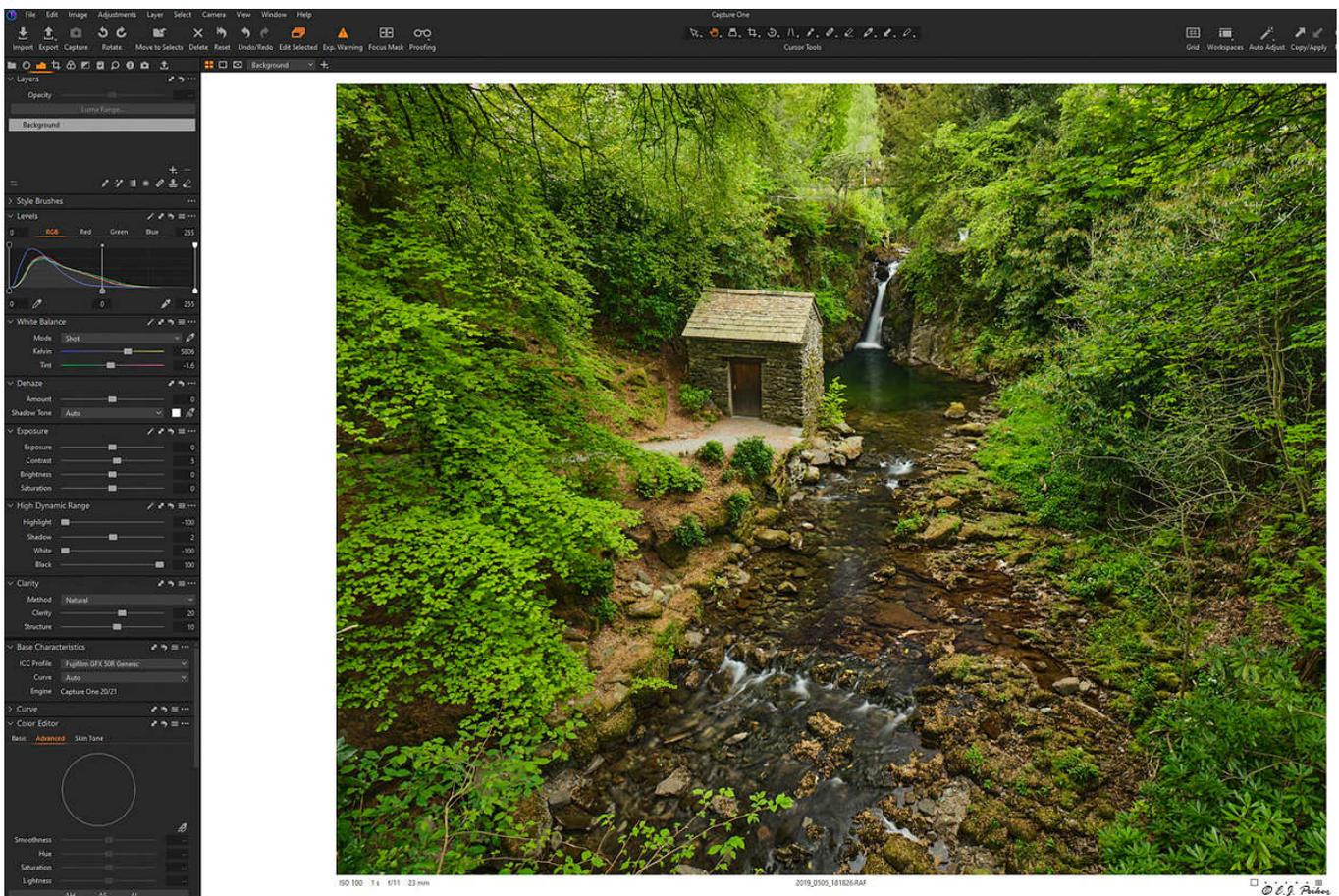
Now that the Z9 has been out for a while and many pros are using it, it does look like this is a formidable entry into the high end mirrorless camera market and a very good camera. Nikon is still lagging a tiny bit in some areas but the differences are now small enough that in capable hands it makes little difference. Nikon has come from a long way behind and closed the gap very quickly. All three flagships are excellent cameras. The big downside for me for the Z9 (and R3) is the size and weight – I could live with any of the other areas where the camera falls short a bit. Overall I would put it in second place behind the a1 but ahead of the R3 largely due to the R3's very low resolution in comparison.

The Orton Effect in Photoshop

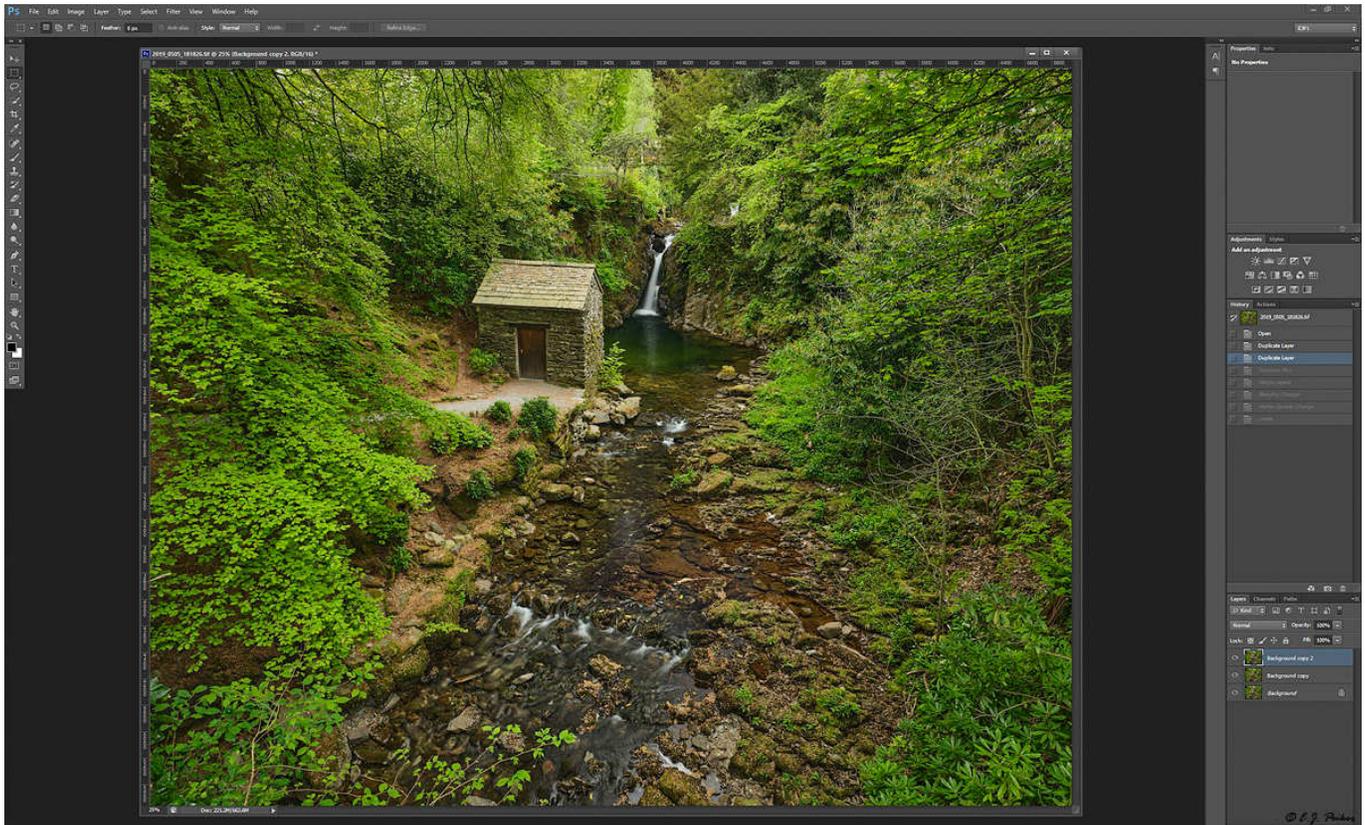
It has been a few newsletters since I put a software tutorial in the newsletter... Often you see images; especially those taken in a woodland setting, that seem to have a bit of a glow that certainly was not captured in the camera. This is due to the application of an effect called the Orton affect. Developed originally by Michael Orton about 40 years ago for watercolor paintings, it combines an out of focus, a brighter layer and the original layer. It can sometimes create a “dreamy effect. While there are third party plug-ins and many methods of doing this, here is a very simple way of doing it in Photoshop. It is preferable to do this with RAW files that are converted to 16 bit TIF or PSD opposed to 8 bit JPEG images.

Here is an example of where I applied this technique to a lush woodland scene in England’s Lake District. The camera used was the Fujifilm GFX 50S; a fifty megapixel medium format camera utilizing a polarizer which really saturated the greens.

Step 1: In your RAW processor, do your normal adjustments for color, contrast, levels, etc and then output the image to Photoshop. Below is the simple RAW edits in Capture One which amount to selecting a white balance, slightly enhancing contrast and then turning the highlights down and bumping up the darkest of shadows. Note that which RAW processor you use does not matter. No other adjustments were made before sending this to Photoshop.



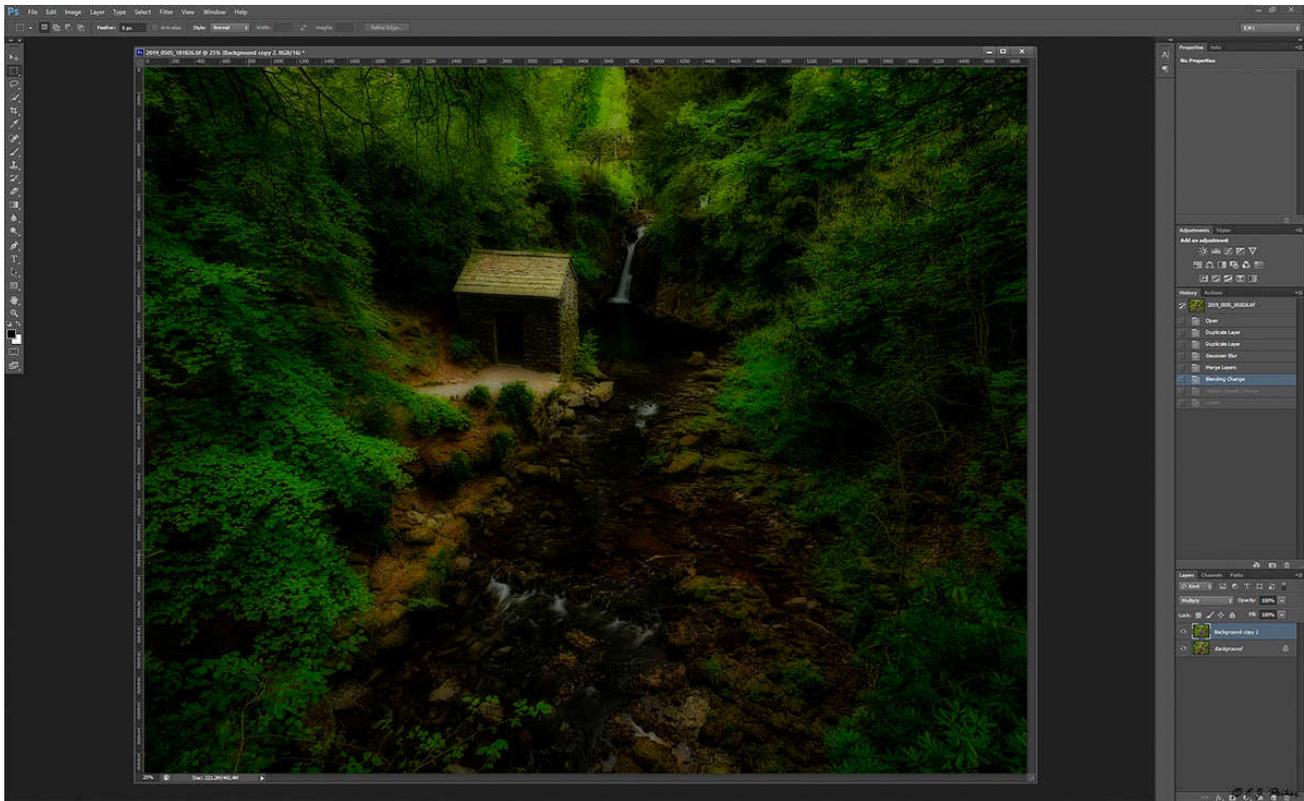
Step 2 and 3: Create two duplicate layers by right clicking the Background Layer in the Layer's palette and selecting Duplicate Layer twice. You can see in the layers panel in the lower right on the next image, two background copy layers.



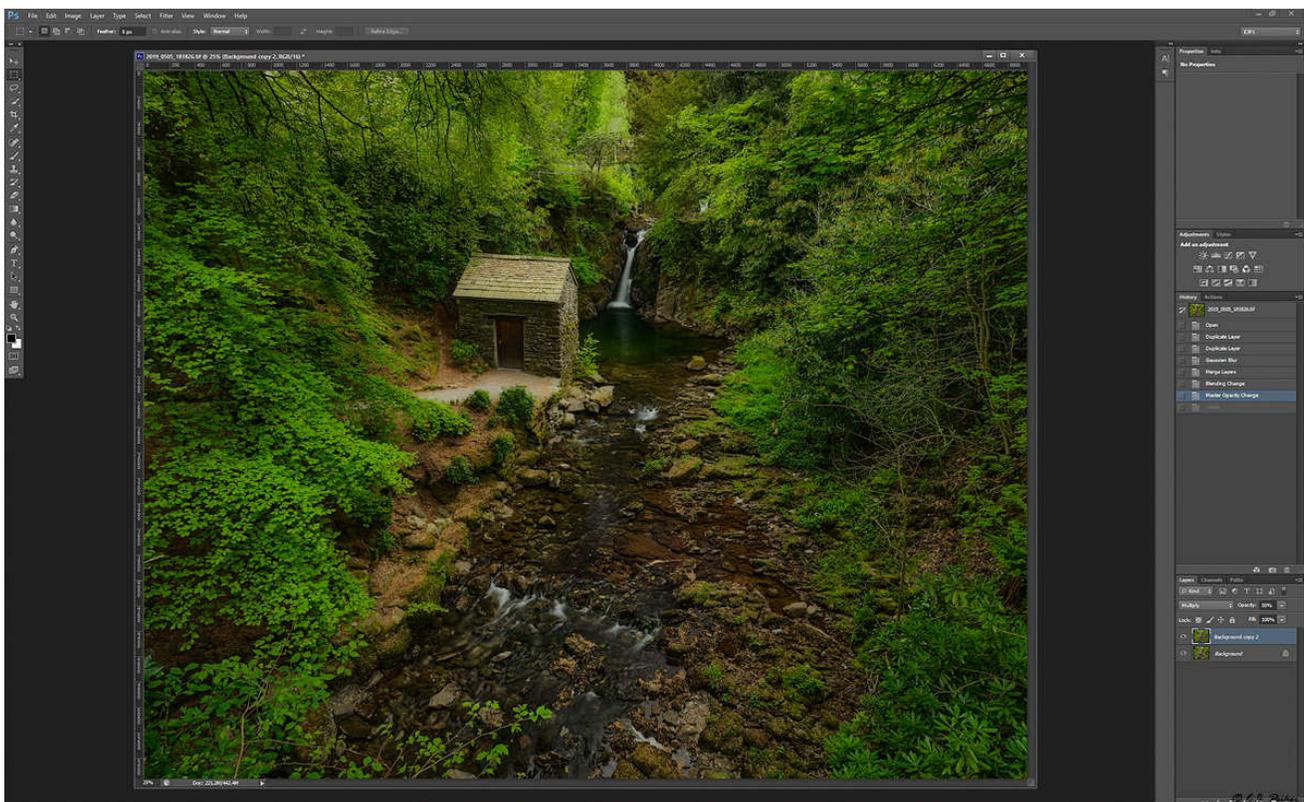
Step 4: Select the top layer (background copy 2) and apply a Gaussian blur with a radius approximately equal to the resolution of the camera. Since this was shot with a 50 megapixel camera, I used a radius of 50.

Step5: Merge the two background copy layers by selecting both in the layers panel, right clicking and then selecting merge layers.

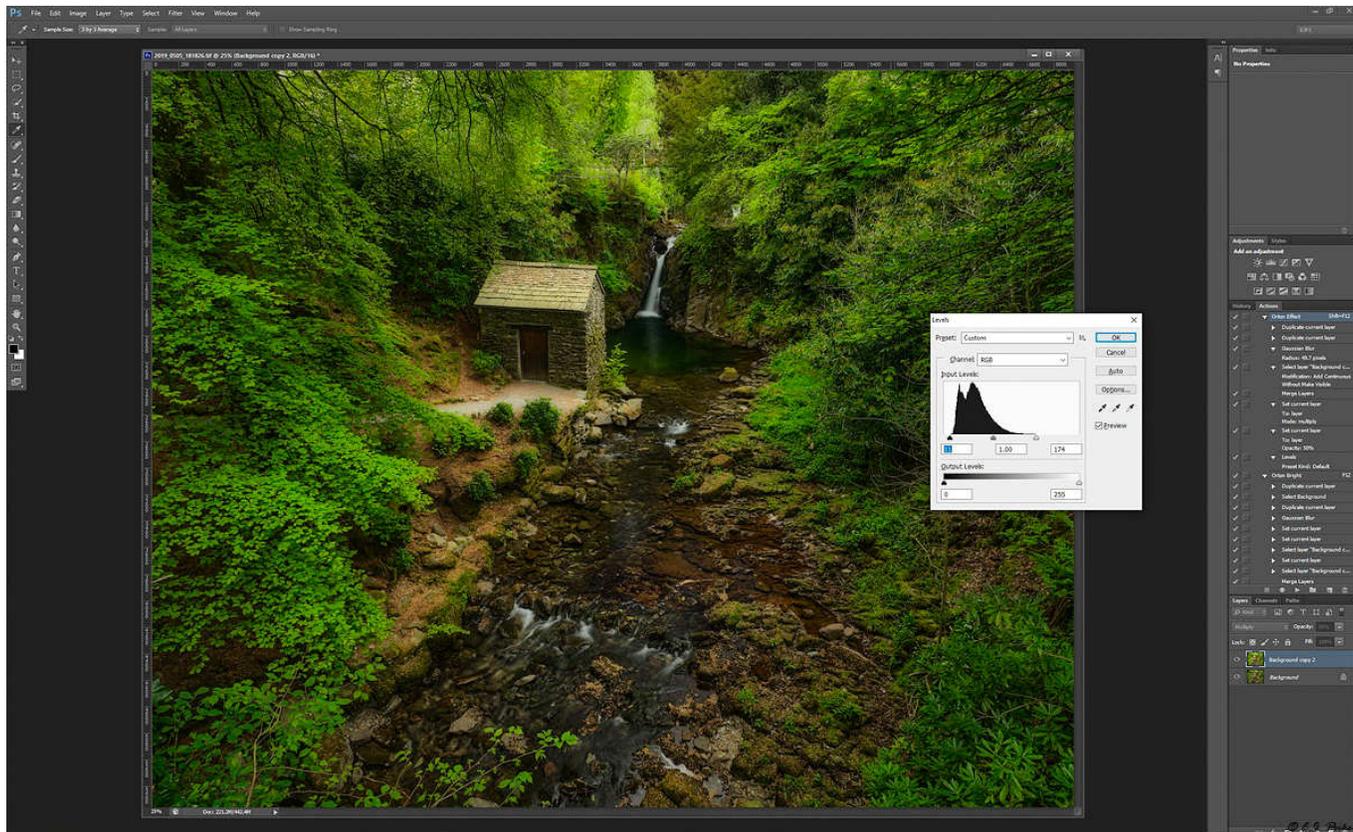
Step 6: Change the blending mode of the remaining background layer to multiply. At this point you will have an image that is very dark but you can already start to see the “dreamy” effect in the image where the detail is still present (although too dark) but there is a bit of a glow around that detail. See the image below...



Step 7: Change the opacity of the background layer to somewhere between 20 and 60% depending on how dreamy you want the image to look. I find that 50% is often the right amount in a woodland scene.



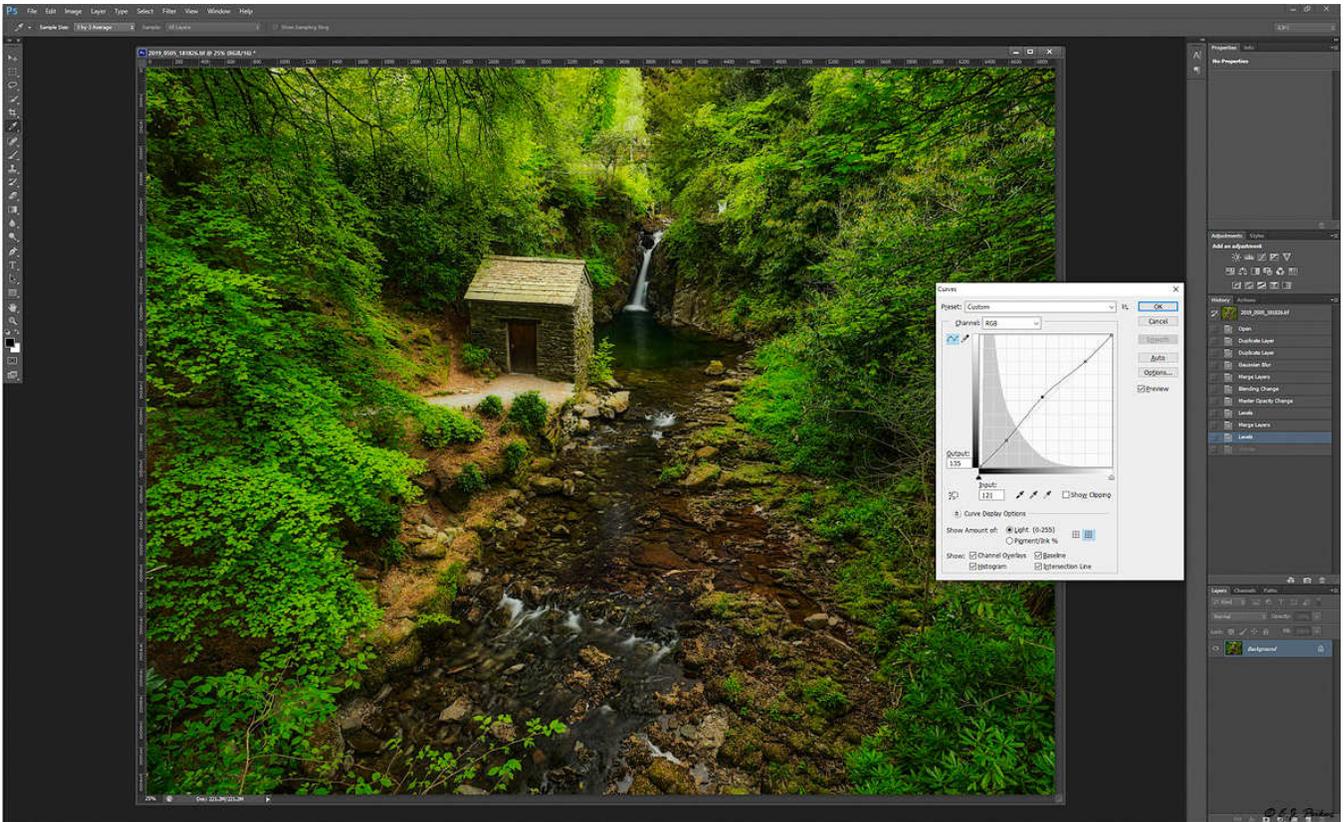
Step 8: Select the remaining Background Copy layer and go to Levels (Cmd or Ctrl L). Slide the white level and black level in to the edges of the histogram in the Levels dialog box. It can be beneficial to hold down the Alt key while doing this and sliding the slider until pixels start to appear on the blank screen and then backing off to just where they disappear again. Note where the carrots below the histogram have been moved to in the image below.



Step 9: Merge the background copy layer and background layer

Step 10: Repeat step 8 by going into Levels (Cmd or Ctrl L) and again moving the black and white points to the edge of the histogram. Holding down the Alt key while doing this is again beneficial.

Step 11: Many images will benefit from a midtone boost at this stage. You can do this by going into Curves (Cmd or Ctrl M) and anchoring the darkest 20% and brightest 20% and then increasing the brightness of the midtones a bit. In the image below, you can see the anchors 2 grid squares to the right and up from the bottom left and two grid squares to the left and down from the top right. This will lock the darkest and brightest parts of the image in place. Now click in the center of the curve and pull up the curve a bit in the middle to taste. You can usually make finer adjustments by clicking on the diagonal line in the middle of the graph and using the arrow keys to move the point up and to the left in equal amounts rather than dragging a mouse cursor.



Step 12: You have now added the Orton glow to your image and you can finish the image with any other adjustments that you would like. In this case I felt that the roof and the path to the little stone house was overly bright and that the waterfall could have been a bit brighter since it is ultimately the subject that the rest of the scene is leading to despite being just a small part of the frame. I burned the path and roof a bit and dodged the falls. I also burned the very top center which also felt a bit too bright. Finally I added a bit of a vignette as this seems to be all the rage in landscape photography these days resulting in the final image on the next page. Note that these images may appear more saturated in the PDF than they are on my screen since the software I use for creating the newsletter is not properly color managed. The final image can be seen on the next page.

I have recorded steps 1 to 7 as an Action in Photoshop so that I can apply most of the changes quickly. I proceed manually through the last few steps so that I achieve the look that I am after as level changes and midtone boost may be different for every image.

Hopefully, for some of you, this answers how to get that Orton look that you often see in images, especially those taken in the woods. As mentioned earlier, there are ways to do this in fewer steps using plug-ins such as Nik Color Effex Pro where often photographers use a bit of Glamour Glow to do this. Similarly, Topaz Studio has a Glow function with many options that can also add this sort of effect to your images as well as many other third party programs.



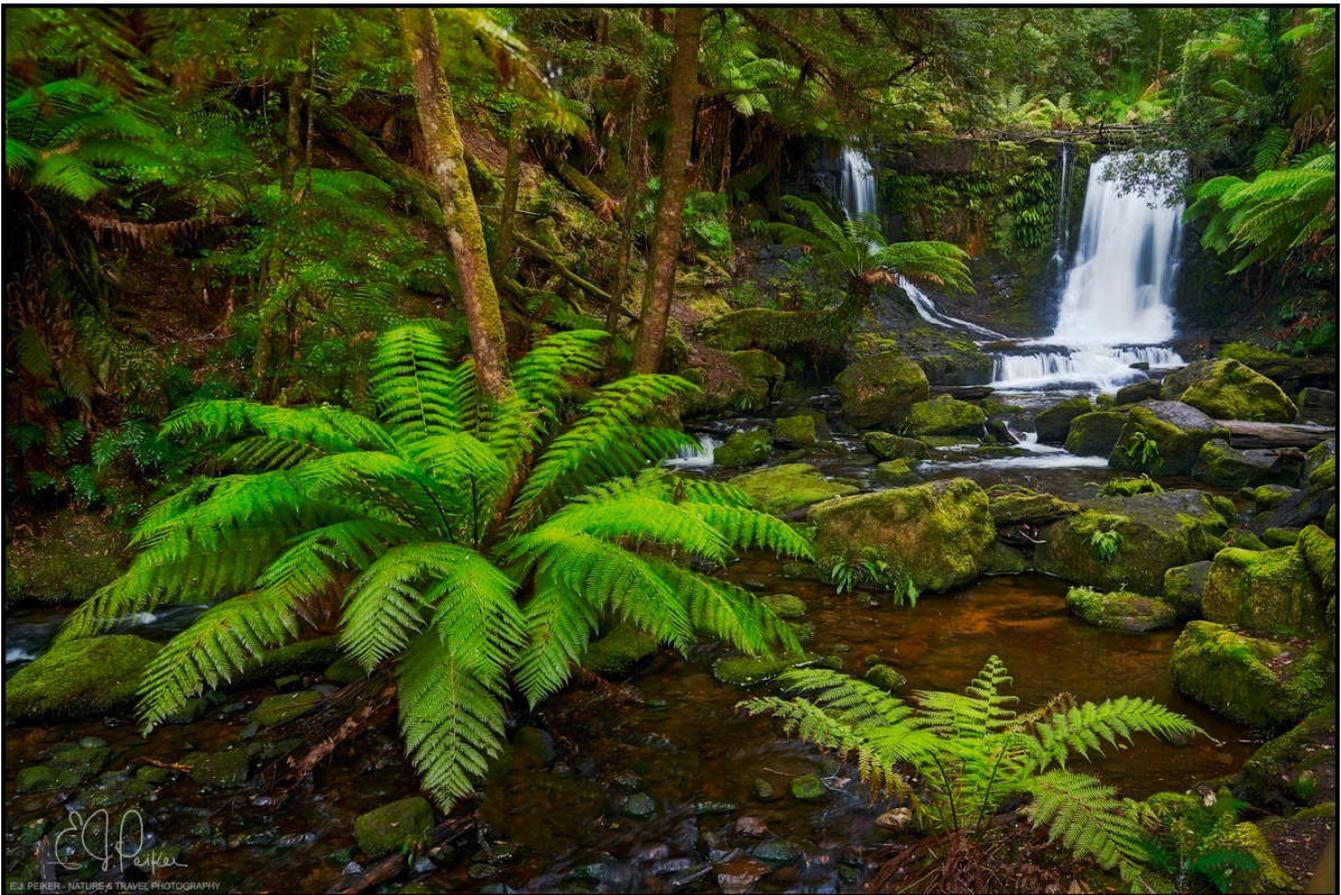
Lake District, England (GFX 50S, 23mm)

The Story Behind the Photo

About 4 months before the world came to a screeching halt way back in October of 2019, I visited Tasmania for the first time. The trip had been several years in the making. Several years earlier I was co-leading an Iceland trip and I met a gentleman from Australia who was a participant in the workshop. We stayed in contact and a few years later I had a 24 hour stop-over in Sydney where he met me and we spent a fun day of photography and eating in this wonderful city. He told me several times over the years that I should come to Tasmania as it is a photographer's paradise. My friend grew up there although he has lived much of his adult life on the mainland of Australia. Tasmania is an island shaped very much like the state of Ohio, but only about 2/3 the size. It is located off of the southeastern tip of Australia and is one of its states. It also shares the approximate latitude of Ohio centered around 41 degrees but of course in this case south of the equator. That's pretty much where the similarities between my childhood home of Ohio and Tasmania end – well almost – it can be pretty wet in both places.

After a couple of years of planning with both the friend that I met in Iceland and a childhood friend of his who still lives in Tassie (as they call it), we put together an ambitious itinerary that would have us

traveling all over this island for two weeks staying in a different place almost every night but maximizing our photographic opportunities. I had been watching a number of YouTube channels that included expeditions to Tassie and had a pretty good idea of some must-see items. My friends from there also knew of many other locations that aren't on these channels that were very much worthwhile. One of these channel's videos featured prominently a waterfall on the eastern interior of the island. As our itinerary worked out, we would actually visit these falls on my very first morning there after arriving the previous afternoon. Conditions were perfect. The hike to the falls takes you by another fairly famous waterfall and then the trail goes on for maybe a $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile beyond that up a steep incline to my target waterfall. After shooting the first waterfall from every possible angle, it was time to move on to my targeted waterfall, known simply as Horseshoe Falls (most definitely not to be confused with the Canadian side of Niagara Falls which is known by the same name). As we embarked to the second fall we encountered a closed trail. Inside I was devastated and we started working our way back to the car. As we got back to the car, and after checking maps on my phone, I decided on trying an alternate route to get there. My friend stayed behind to take care of a few business phone calls. Off I went on about a 1.5 mile hike and about halfway there I encountered why the common trail to get there was closed, the trail was completely washed out in a steep muddy mess. It turns out the original trail merges with this and that's why it was closed but there were no barriers coming in from this less common direction. Fortunately I had my NEOS Overshoes with me which made climbing through the slippery mud possible and I ultimately made it to the spot I wanted to get to. Unfortunately the water flow rate was a bit lower than what I was expecting from the YouTube videos and other photographs, but it was still a beautiful lush scene. My perseverance paid off and I got a number of nice photos including the one below. The rest can be seen here: https://ejphoto.com/horseshoe_falls_page.htm



Horseshoe Falls, Tasmania (a7R4, 24-70mm)

The Best Lenses for Your Nikon, Canon and Sony Mirrorless Cameras

The table of best lenses for your camera is a living document that gets updated every quarter. Changes from previous tables can be seen in **bold** but there are no changes this time because none of the new lenses that would likely make this list are actually available. As development of DSLR lenses for Nikon and Canon have essentially stopped, I am switching this section to covering mirrorless only. On all systems, areas left blank means that there is no lens currently available (or there isn't one that I can recommend – e.g. the Canon 600/800mm f/11 lenses) with that native mount; however, in virtually all cases, a DSLR lens can be adapted to the mirrorless system often with some minor to moderate compromises, primarily in autofocus capability. Currently there are no electronically coupled third party lenses for the Canon and Nikon mirrorless systems due to both manufacturers using a proprietary mount strategy. For my final DSLR lens recommendations for Canon and Nikon, please see the Autumn 2020 Newsletter linked here: <https://ejphoto.com/Quack%20PDF/Quack%20Autumn%202020.pdf>

Lens Category	Canon RF Mount	Nikon Z Mount	Sony (F)E Mount
Full-frame Fisheye			Sony 28mm f/2 + 16mm Fisheye Conversion Lens
Hyper Wide Prime			Sony 14mm f/2.8 GM Sigma 14mm f/1.8 Art
Ultra Wide Prime		Nikkor Z 20mm f/1.8S	Zeiss Batis 18mm f/2.8 Voigtländer 15mm f/4.5
Extra Wide Prime		Nikkor Z 24mm f/1.8S	Sony 20mm f/1.8 G Zeiss Loxia 21mm f/2.8
Standard Wide Prime			Sony 24mm f/1.4 GM Sigma 24mm f/1.4 Art
Moderate Wide Prime	Canon RF 35mm Macro IS	Nikkor Z 35mm f/1.8S	Sigma 35mm f/1.2 Art Sony-Zeiss 35mm f/1.4
Standard Prime	Canon RF 50mm f/1.2L Canon RF 50mm f/1.8	Nikkor Z 50mm f/1.2S Nikkor Z 50mm f/1.8S	Sony 50mm f/1.2 GM Sony-Zeiss 55mm f/1.8
Portrait Prime (short telephoto)	Canon RF 85mm f/1.2L Canon RF 85mm f/2 Macro IS	Nikkor Z 85mm f/1.8S	Sigma 85mm f/1.4 DG DN Sigma 105mm f/1.4 Art Sony 85mm f/1.4 GM
Medium Telephoto Prime			Sigma 135mm f/1.8 Art Sony 135mm f/1.8 GM Zeiss Batis 135mm f/2.8
200mm Prime			
300mm Prime			
400mm Prime	Canon RF 400mm f/2.8L IS	Nikkor Z 400mm f/2.8 TC VR S	Sony 400mm f/2.8 GM
500mm Prime			
600mm Prime	Canon RF 600mm f/4L IS		Sony 600mm f/4 GM
800mm Prime			
Wide Angle Zoom	Canon RF 15-35mm f/2.8L Canon RF 14-35mm f/4L IS	Nikkor Z 14-24mm f/2.8S Nikkor Z 14-30mm f/4S	Sony 16-35mm f/2.8 GM Sony 12-24mm f/2.8 GM Sigma 14-24 f/2.8 Art Tamron 17-28 f/2.8 Di
Standard Zoom	Canon 28-70mm f/2L Canon 24-80 f/2.8L Canon RF 24-105mm f/4L IS	Nikkor Z 24-70 f/2.8S Nikkor Z 24-70 f/4S	Sigma 24-70 f/2.8 Art Tamron 28-75mm f/2.8 G2 Sony 24-70 f/2.8 GM
Telephoto Zoom	Canon RF 70-200 f/2.8L IS	Nikkor Z 70-200mm f/2.8 VR	Tamron 70-180mm f/2.8 Sony 70-200 f/2.8 GM
Super Telephoto Zoom	Canon RF 100-500mm f/4.5-7.1		Sony 100-400 f/4.5-5.6 GM Sony 200-600 f/5.6-6.3 G
Macro	Canon RF 100mm f/2.8L Macro IS	Nikkor Z MC 105mm VR S	Sigma 105mm f/2.8 Macro Art Sony 90mm f/2.8 Macro Voigtlander 110mm f/2.5



Long-billed Dowitcher (Sony a1, 200-600mm + 1.4x)

Gear Garage Sale Continues

Thank you to the great response to my gear sale. I have sold a lot of high quality items in the last quarter including some essentially new stuff. Many filters and camera support items are still. All sales are within the USA to USA addresses only. Prices include ground shipping and I am not charging extra to cover PayPal fees – the price you see is what you pay, no hidden fees. Venmo is now also accepted. See the full and up to date listing here: https://ejphoto.com/gear_for_sale_page.htm

Workshops

I currently have no group workshops planned until the COVID-19 pandemic is behind us. Private instruction in camera operation, landscape and wildlife photography is available as well as image processing training in Capture One, Topaz, Nik, and Photoshop. Photo workstation consulting services are available. These services are currently only available via telephone or video conference. Contact me at ejpeiker@cox.net for more information.

Facebook and Instagram Pages

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/ejpeiker/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/EJPeikerNaturePhotographer>

Newsletter Info

This is the 21st year of my quarterly Newsletter. I try to cover the wide array of digital imaging and products from mirrorless to medium format and everything in between. Throughout the years, the information contained herein has always been free and will continue to be free despite the many hours it takes to put it together and significant equipment and travel expenses. Most of the products that I have tested and reviewed, I have purchased myself. A small minority have been made available to me for review and evaluation by loyal readers and a few by the manufacturers themselves. While the newsletter is free either via eMail subscription or via accessing it on my website at <http://www.ejphoto.com/newsletter.htm>, if you find the information useful to you and you do wish to donate for my continuing efforts, you may do so via PayPal and sending the funds to ejpeiker@cox.net.

Disclaimers

E.J. Peiker conducts consulting services and product design services for a number of photographic product companies. Those that know me know that I would not endorse a product, even for compensation, if I did not feel it were a superior product.

E.J. Peiker is a co-founder of www.Naturescapes.net and leads photographic workshops under the **NatureScapes** Certified Workshops banner.

E.J. Peiker is a **Sony** Digital Imaging Pro and receives some services at a reduced cost or free of charge from Sony USA. <https://alphauniverse.com/prosupport/>

E.J. Peiker promotes **LensCoat** products and receives some of their products at no cost. www.lenscoat.com

E.J. Peiker is a **Wimberley** Professional Services featured photographer and receives non-monetary compensation from Wimberley. Visit Wimberley at www.tripodhead.com

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Western Himalayas (a7R4, 28-75mm)


E.J. PEIKER - NATURE & TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHY