



▲ Cape Mears, OR—dead fir.

▼ Little Bend Park, OR—16mm fisheye.

ALL OF THE

TALL TREES



Concise Lessons— Total Pictures

by Jack and Sue Drafahl

Trees embody so many possibilities. A photographer can learn almost all outdoor photo techniques merely by photographing them. One must work in harmony with Mother Nature. You must listen, watch her signs, and study the details of her handiwork in order to capture the essence of these inspirational giants.

THE RIGHT LENSES

To really appreciate the variations of photographing a tree as the main subject, we come to the first lesson: the

Metolious River, OR—new life.





17-Mile Dr., No. California—16mm.



Alders—wide-angle forced perspective.



Silver Creek Falls, OR—

Three-shot panorama with—

very extreme backlighting.

Rich backlighting creates a silver halo.



uses of lenses and the various focal lengths. To give the feeling of a tree's strength or majesty, a wide-angle lens used very close to its base and pointing upwards dramatizes the base-to-top perspective. This will create distortion, but more often than not, it is necessary in order to get all of the tree in the frame.

For example, many years ago we visited the Giant Redwood Forest, in Sequoia National Park, and met General Sherman, the largest living thing on this planet. Everyone with cameras would have their family stand at its awesome base; then the photographer of the family would start backing up to take the photo. The problem arose as he kept moving back, *and back, and further back* in order to try and get the entire tree in his family photo. When he was almost out of sight, you would

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hear a yell "Smile!" echo through the park as another memento for the family album was created. Little did he know that when they looked at the final photo, there would be a huge tree with tiny people standing in front, no bigger than specks of dust.

We were using a little different lens at the time, a 16mm full-frame fisheye. We waited until the family's photographer returned, and then stepped up to the barricade surrounding this ancient giant, only feet away from the base, and looked straight up and took the shot. We too had all of the great General in our photo. The photographer and his family just walked away laughing at the ridiculous photographers (us), who thought they would get any kind of decent photo. Little did they know that we were laughing, too. We knew what *their* final photo was going to look like.

The wider the angle of coverage, the more distortion in the photo. A normal camera lens will often allow you to get a shot of the tree, but not *the* shot you want to hang on your wall. A 35mm, 28mm, or 24mm would be the better choice.

If you use a wide-angle lens, such as 28mm or wider, the sun can be added to the photo to give perspective and contrast. If the sun is kept behind the trunk or a branch, most autoexposure meters will provide good exposures. If the sun is in the open, a dark silhouette will be the result. An optional method would be to meter with the sun behind the tree, lock in the exposure, and then move the sun back into the picture.

One added benefit of wide-angle lenses is that if you stop the lens down to its minimum aperture when shooting into the sun, you will get a starburst effect without have to use a starburst filter, which sometimes makes the scene look gimmicky.

Using a telephoto lens lets you shoot close-ups. This allows the photographer creativity and variety in choosing compositional shapes, forms, and color. Telephoto shots of a group of trees from a distance tend to compress them all together, giving the illusion of a densely populated forest.

For the close-up photographer armed with macro lens and/or extension tubes, the tree furnishes a myriad

of photo adventures.

Trees are unique in that they provide beauty when they are either alive or dead. Patterns in the bark and the gnarl of weathered branches can be as compelling as elements in an abstract painting.

Leaves can be photographed either as a group on the tree or on the ground—especially interesting when fall colors turn. Close-ups of a single leaf can be made with the main source of light coming from the same direction as the camera. For a more dramatic effect, the light source (flash or sun) can be placed behind the leaf, giving a backlight effect. This type of study usually displays the veins in the leaf, which are similar to roads on a road map.

THE TREE AS A FRAME

Trees can function superbly as secondary subjects, framing the primary focus point of your photo. If an outdoor scenic tends to look flat and two-dimensional, move near a tree and include it as a frame of the main subject, thereby creating a three-dimensional picture. When the main subject is in the sunlight, the tree frame in the shade creates a silhouette, providing depth and perspective. This tree frame has the ability to channel the viewer's attention to the subject in the middle of the photo.

FILM FOR TREES

Since trees are found outdoors, achieving enough light is usually no problem, allowing the use of the slower, fine-grain films. We recommend using Kodachrome 25, Ektachrome 100, Fujichrome 50, or Fujichrome 100 if your final result is to be slides. The color-print photographer can best rely on Kodacolor Gold 200 (grain structure is identical in both 100 and 200). For outstanding black-and-white photos, T-Max 100 seems to give the best tonal range, while maintaining very high resolution.

SEASONS

Trees are great year-round subjects. They reveal a different side of themselves with each passing season, and this should all be reflected in your images. The tall pines, covered with a white blanket of fresh-fallen snow at first sunlight, evoke a feeling of reverence and awe. As the new leaves appear on the tall trees, it seems to renew one's confidence in the power of Mother Nature. Trees can offer solitude or simply shade from the hot summer's sun. And as you shuffle through the fallen leaves that blanket the forest floor in the autumn, you



Trees as pattern.

can't help but feel good about the cycle of life that sustains us all. Sometimes it feels like an honor to document it.

Return to your favorite spot several times during the year and be sure to capture the trees on film from different angles. You can then assemble the different prints in a montage depicting seasonal changes surrounding one tree or a grove. If you shoot slide film, you can use the slides of the trees from season to season to make the transition from one projector to the next.

The lighting on a tree can be changed simply by changing your point of view or by photographing at different times of day. Move around the tree as you shoot, and each time you'll get a different lighting and point of view. You could then display several different views of the same tree, each evoking a different feeling, as well as providing the viewer with a better feel of the location of the tree.

Since sunlight is the main light source, you must study its effect. The sun low in the sky in either morning or late afternoon creates long shadows. The sun gently skimming the sides of the tree shows the texture of the bark and the dimension of the tree. The sun directly behind the tree creates an eerie silhouette. The sun over your shoulder creates a common, flat photo lacking depth.

Trees offer something to entice every photographer. It may be close-ups of trunks soaring into turquoise-blue skies, or just simply a straightforward image of stately stands. However you chose to address them, if you are attentive, the images they answer with can teach you a lot about photography, and maybe even something more. ■