

Cold Weather Shooting

I will tell you what I think are important considerations as far as you the photographer are concerned, and second some important considerations for your camera and equipment.

Important Personal Considerations:

Clothing: The two most important things to bear in mind for winter photography are comfort and safety. You can not expect to take descent photos if you are cold or wet. Dress right, protecting your body should be your first concern. Depending on the climate conditions of where you are shooting will determine how well you should dress.

Gortex is perfect for shooting in cold and wet since it is waterproof and windproof. Good boots and gloves are essential along with head protection since most heat loss will be in these areas.

Also, dress in layers for comfort. You have to be comfortable if you want to stay outdoors in the winter weather

Know where you are shooting and let someone know where you will be and when you plan to be back. This sounds simple, but might save your life in case of an accident. Carry chemical hand warmers and waterproof matches just in case you need to warm up. Watch where you are stepping, sometimes we get so wrapped up in the picture we forget where we are walking. Watch the weather so you are not caught out in bad weather.

Carry only what you really need, you will use a lot more energy in the winter and this will also reduce risk of falling and hurting yourself or more importantly breaking expensive camera gear.

Wrap your tripod legs with pipe insulation to help with cold when you carry

Camera Protection:

Just like cold weather can affect your body, cold weather, especially extreme weather can also affect your camera equipment. Today's digital cameras are mainly electronic instruments, just like your computer.

Camera bag: Keeping your camera in a good bag is the best protection for your camera.

Always keep your camera as dry as possible, some like to carry their camera under their outer coat, but I prefer the camera bag. Keeping the camera next to your body will make it warm and when you take it out to shoot, this could cause condensation.

Lens Protection: Most good lenses are waterproof and can take the weather ok, but to be on the safe side, I usually use the Think Tank system, which is waterproof and has a inner rain hood for additional protection. I also usually take the shower caps from hotels and use over the end of the lens when I am out to keep moisture off the lens. I also use a trash bag cut open on one end to put camera and lens inside of to protect the camera body, which is far more susceptible to the moisture than the lens. Another nice little tool is a small umbrella you can use in conjunction with a tripod, really hard to hand shoot and use umbrella. Mike Hensley has used a zip lock bag for lens protection and could be used with body if large enough

Condensation: Changes in temperature can cause condensation inside your camera and lens. Condensation is water or mist that forms when temperature changes rapidly.

You sometimes will see it on the EVF, LCD, and lens, especially if you breathe on your camera. Outer condensation is not a problem since you can just wipe it off, but when it forms or seeps inside the camera, it can cause the electronics of the camera to short out and could damage your camera. When returning inside from the cold, leave your camera in your camera bag for an hour or two. Leaving the camera in the camera bag will allow for the camera to become acclimatized to the warm temperatures. As a result the warm, moist air condenses on the outside of your camera bag instead of inside which could cause potential problems including frying the electrical circuits. Some photographers even place their camera inside a zip lock plastic bag which causes condensation to form outside of the bag instead of your camera before bring the camera inside. In extremely cold weather, try to avoid breathing out directly on your camera when framing. Otherwise, you may find your camera covered with thin ice. When you go inside the ice will turn into moisture and could seep into and damage your camera.

Batteries and Memory Cards

These are affected by cold weather and should be kept in an inner pocket of your clothing to keep them warm and protected. Batteries that last hours in summer last minutes in winter, so carry spares and keep them warm. There are very few reports of memory cards having problems in low temperatures. There are some industrial cards which are fully tested and specified for continuous use at temperatures down to -40 degrees C, but it seems that it's really not essential to use such cards. The Sandisk Extreme cards are specified for use down to -25 degrees C but even they are probably not required. Most users seem to find that even at the lowest temperatures most memory cards perform without problems. If you are like me, I will be reading a book on the beach if the temp is going to be this cold.

Mike Adkins, mentioned not forgetting the covers to keep from shorting the batteries out or being burned if they come in contact with coins or something metal in your pocket.

I have not tried this but, use a chemical hand warmer on the battery compartment to keep cold from killing your batteries really quickly in the extreme cold conditions. I am not sure how this works for condensation, but it is recommended.

Snow:

Brush it off, do not blow snow off lens with your breath, condensation and freezing will follow, both are bad. Use some form of camera protection in snow or wet conditions. A simple way is to use a plastic bag over camera attached by rubber band around lens, and don't forget changing lenses in bad weather is not a good idea. A small umbrella is a good option. These have been mentioned before.

This has nothing to do with protection of gear, but it is a great tip I forget a lot of the time.

The brilliant color of white will turn a murky gray if you do not compensate for this brilliance. Open up from one to two stops to add more light.

Example: Aperture set at F16 1 stop open - Aperture F11 2 stop open - Aperture F8
Shutter set at 1/125 of a second 1 stop open - 1/60 of a second 2 stop open - 1/30 of a second

Camera Bodies:

Since a lot of cameras have plastic parts, which become brittle in cold weather and will break before they bend. Be careful with doors on the camera. Always remove any snow or dry camera before going back into a warm area. Never rub a camera dry, pat it dry with a towel or wrap it in a towel and wait an hour or so to dry. Before going into a warm area, place camera in camera bag for at least an hour. Another great tip is place all your gear on a table and take a clean dry towel and cover the gear for about an hour after you get back to house or hotel. This helps prevent condensation. Keep your car cold, don't have it warm and toasty and be getting in and out of the car in cold weather, this will cause trouble also.

Joe Browning
joe_browning@hotmail.com