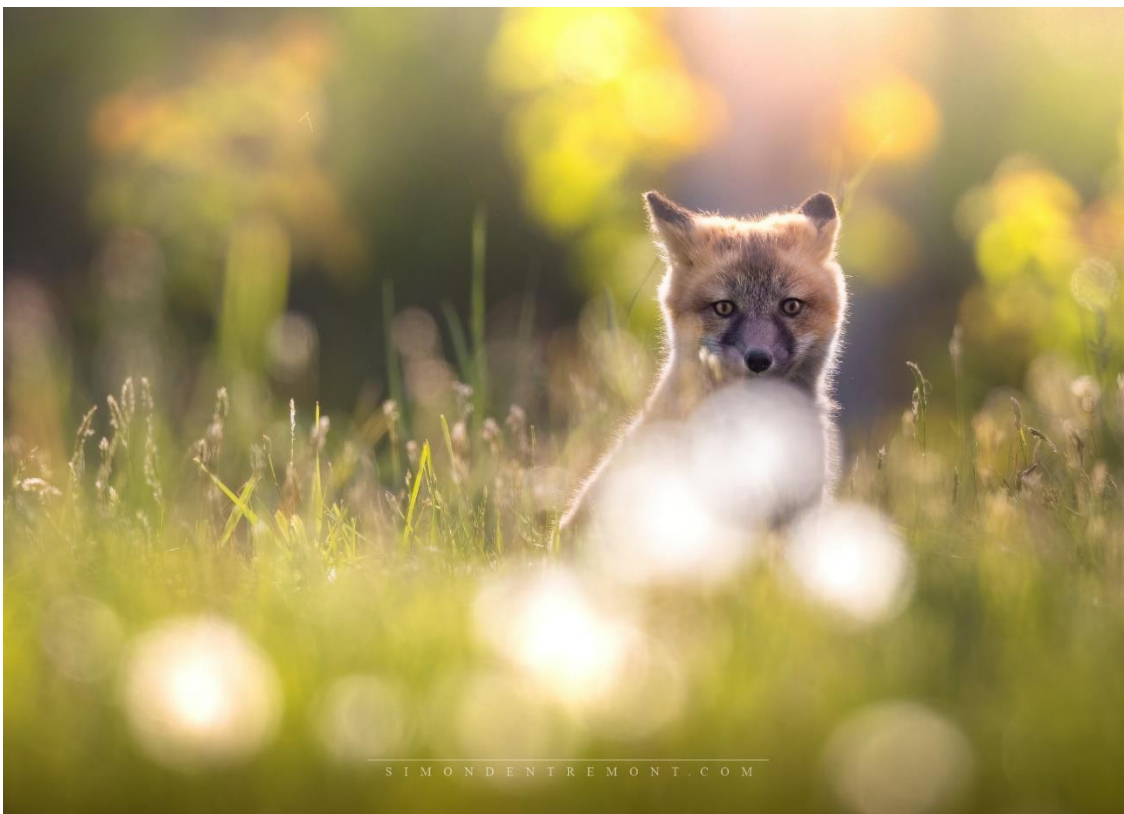# BACKLIT PHOTOGRAPHY

By Simon d'Entremont

Introduction

This Red Fox kit was photographed by using the tips in this guide. Note the nice rimlight which was made more obvbious by the thick fur and clean background. 1/2000 sec, f5.6, ISO 1000

Photography is an art form that allows us to capture moments, emotions, and stories through the lens. One technique that consistently produces breathtaking results is backlighting. That being said, it's one that is often avoided by photographers for two reasons. One, it can indeed be technically difficult to execute. But two, and maybe most importantly, photographers are often advised by photography educators to "place the sun behind you and shoot into your shadow". While this is indeed good beginner advice, it quickly turns into a blind spot to beautiful photos.

When used effectively, backlighting has the ability to transform ordinary scenes into captivating and mesmerizing photographs. In this piece, I'll explore why backlighting makes such beautiful photographs and how it adds a touch of enchantment to the images we capture. We'll also look at what creates the winning conditions for such photos, how to capture them, and how to overcome some of the challenges it creates. We'll finish up with some processing tips to help manage the unique attributes of backlit shots, such as high dynamic range.

Understanding the visual appeal and challenges of backlighting, as well as implementing the right techniques, will enable you to create stunning and captivating photographs. With practice and experimentation, you can unlock the full creative potential of backlighting and take your photography to new heights.

Many of my examples will be from the wildlife and nature photography world, as that's my genre of choice, but this guide will apply equally to other genres of photography like portraiture or architecture or even macro photography.

Part 1 – Understanding Light

In this first section, we will delve deeper into the concept of backlighting and explore why it is so visually appealing.

Backlighting refers to a situation where the primary light source is positioned behind the subject and facing the photographer, creating a beautiful glow or halo effect around the edges, or a silhouette. It offers a captivating and magical quality to photographs that can evoke emotions and add a sense of depth and drama to the image.

The visual appeal of backlighting can be attributed to several types of photographic scenarios which it yields.

Silhouettes: When the subject is positioned in front of a bright light source, such as the sun, the subject's features become dark and create striking silhouettes against the illuminated background. Silhouettes can convey a sense of mystery, drama, and storytelling.

Rim Lighting: Backlighting often creates a rim or halo of light around the edges of the subject. This effect adds a sense of depth and separation from the background, emphasizing the subject's contours and creating a three-dimensional feel.

Glowing Highlights: Backlighting can cause certain elements in the photograph, such as hair, fur, or translucent objects, to glow and become more prominent. This glowing effect adds an ethereal and dreamy quality to the image.

Sun stars: When a bright light source is partially hidden, the light source will show spikes that add a beautiful effect, especially against a dark foreground, which backlighting creates.

While backlighting can produce stunning results, it also presents some challenges that need to be addressed to achieve the desired outcome. These challenges include:

Exposure: Backlighting can trick the camera's metering system, resulting in underexposed subjects or overexposed backgrounds. Balancing the exposure is crucial to maintain details in both the subject and the background.

1/2000 sec, f5.6, ISO 1000

Lens Flare and Glare: When shooting directly into a light source, lens flare and glare may occur, affecting the image quality. Understanding how to control and use these elements creatively is important, and this effect can also be turned from a negative to a positive attribute.   It can also lead to light beams bleeding into the image from a too-bright source, which can be troublesome when not intentional, but beautiful when well executed.

Dynamic Range: Backlit scenes often have a wide range of contrast between the bright background and the darker subject. This high dynamic range can make it challenging to capture details in both the highlights and shadows. Proper exposure and post-processing techniques can help overcome this issue.

To understand both the strengths and challenges of backlighting, we must understand the nature of light. The factors that the photographer must consider and understand before making artistic choices are the lights intensity, direction and quality.

The **intensity** of light refers to its brightness or strength. In photography, we often control the intensity of light using tools such as flash units, diffusers, or getting into the shadows. Backlighting, by its nature, often involves a strong light source positioned behind the subject, creating a stark contrast between the illuminated background and the subject itself.

Backlighting is also very much about the **direction** of light. The direction of light determines the shadows and highlights it casts on the subject. Front lighting, where the light source is in front of the subject, tends to provide even illumination to both the subject and the background. In backlighting, however, the light comes from behind, casting the subject into shadow and creating striking silhouettes or rim lighting effects. While this can be elegant, the difference in brightness between the subject and the background can be a challenge.

The **quality** of light refers to its softness or harshness. Soft light is diffused and creates gentle transitions between highlights and shadows. Harsh light, on the other hand, produces strong, defined shadows and highlights. Backlighting when the sun is low or from softer light sources like neon lights can provide a softer, more diffused quality of light, especially when it passes through or around objects, creating a sense of ethereal beauty, great for wildlife and portraits. On the other hand, sharp-edged backlight when the sun is higher at mid-day or from a sharper pin-point source like a streetlight might be just what you want to emphasize the shape of things, like architecture.

Understanding the fundamental nature of light is the cornerstone of successful backlighting in photography. By comprehending how light behaves, photographers can harness its power to create captivating and visually stunning images. In the next section, we will explore the specific techniques and considerations involved in harnessing backlighting for artistic and impactful photographs.

Light creates shadows and highlights, emphasizing the shape, form, and texture of the subject. With backlighting, the primary light source is positioned behind the subject, casting the part of the subject facing you into shadow. This can lead to striking silhouettes where the subject appears as a dark shape against the bright background. The contrast between the illuminated background and the subject creates a dramatic and visually appealing effect, highlighting the subject's outline.

Backlighting can interact with particles in the atmosphere, such as dust, mist, or fog, creating atmospheric effects that enhance the mood and add a sense of depth to the photograph. The backlight can illuminate these particles, making them visible and adding a dreamy or ethereal quality to the image. Photographers can take advantage of these atmospheric effects to create a sense of enchantment and mystery in their backlit photographs.

So, if you see a situation with a sun low on the horizon, and everything is dusty or you see pollen everywhere in the air, look for interesting shapes, patterns or features into the sun, and see if you can capture a combination of the shapes, colours and lighting to take a beautiful photo!

Quick tip #2

To get highlights and rim light to show up in a backlit situation, position yourself so that the background behind your subject is dark. This way, your highlights will show up much more and create a wonderful effect.

1/2000 sec, f5.6, ISO 1250

The dust and pollen in the air in these farmers fields really added to the layering that makes this shot. The farther from the camera the part of the scene (ie farther in the background), the brighter and more diffuse the light. **1/500 sec, f7.1, ISO 100**

Part 2 – Finding the winning conditions

Backlit photography has a captivating allure, creating stunning images that evoke emotions and leave a lasting impression. To maximize the impact of backlighting, it's crucial to shoot in the best conditions. This section explores the optimal circumstances for achieving breathtaking backlit photographs and how to make the most of these conditions.

Golden Hour and Blue Hour: While backlit photography can also be done with artificial light, sunlight is an abundant and natural light source that really works well in backlighting. The golden hour, shortly after sunrise or before sunset, is widely regarded as the ideal time for backlit photography. During this period, the sun's position low on the horizon casts a warm, soft light that adds a touch of magic to your images. The gentle, diffused illumination during the golden hour enhances the ethereal quality of backlighting, creating a dreamy atmosphere and a soft, enchanting glow.

1/2000 sec, f5.6, ISO 2500

Similarly, the blue hour, occurring just before sunrise or after sunset, provides a serene and cool lighting for backlit shots. The soft, diffused light during this time imparts a tranquil and mystical ambiance, making it perfect for creating captivating backlit photographs, but note that the lack of a direct light source will subdue rim light, and cause mostly silhouettes.

To get the best out of a silhouette, the subject should be identifiable by it's outline and shape, rather than its detailed features, like the photo below of a Bohemian Waxwing. While the species might not be obvious to most, the fact that it's a bird eating a berry is unmistakable. So, the more your subject can be identified by its shape, the better a silhouette photo it will make. Just make sure the subject's orientation exposes its most obvious features.

1/1600 sec, f4.5 ISO 160

Clear or Partially Cloudy Skies: Backlit photography can work well under clear or partially cloudy skies, as long as the sun is on the far side of your subject, shining toward you. Clear skies offer consistent and strong backlighting, allowing the subject to stand out against the background. The direct sunlight accentuates the subject's contours and casts shadows that can be used artistically in the photo.

Partially cloudy skies provide an added dimension to backlit photography. The presence of clouds diffuses the sunlight, resulting in a softer and more evenly distributed light. (note the plover chick on the right, shot in partly cloudy conditions) This diffusion adds depth and texture to the image, enhancing the visual impact of the backlighting. Note that overly cloudy skies usually make backlighting difficult, as it scatters light in all directions, both in front and behind your subject, reducing the light-to-dark contrast of the scene, a key element in backlighting.

Positioning of the Sun: The position of the sun is pivotal for successful backlit photography. Placing the sun directly behind the subject can create striking silhouettes, with the subject appearing as a dark figure against the radiant backdrop. This positioning emphasizes the subject's shape and adds a sense of drama and intrigue to the image. Placing the sun off to the side a bit will usually soften the silhouette, but you may lose some of the colour of the light source.

Experimenting with different angles and positions can yield diverse effects. By positioning the sun slightly to the side, you can achieve a beautiful rim lighting effect, where the light wraps around the edges of the subject, highlighting their contours and adding depth and dimension to the photograph. In the photo below of a Snowy Owl, when the sun was directly behind my subject the golden sunset glow was too overpowering, drowning any detail. When I moved too far off to the side, the beautiful colors were lost. The best position was with the sun about 15 or 20 degrees off to the side, but still behind my subject.

Quick tip #4

The fluffier or fuzzier the subject (or long, thick hair), the more the rim light will be revealed.

If you see these subjects and you can get the sun behind them, give it a shot!

1/1000 sec, f5.6, ISO 100

1/2000 sec, f5, ISO 3200

Quick tip #5

Get down to a low angle to clean up the background, making your subject pop from the frame and highlights show up even more.

1/2000 sec, f5.6, ISO 3200

Complementary Backgrounds: Selecting the right background is crucial for enhancing the impact of backlighting. Look for backgrounds that complement the subject and amplify the ethereal quality of the lighting. Translucent elements like leaves, petals, or sheer fabrics can enhance the glow and add a delicate texture to the composition. Interesting patterns or textures in the background can provide visual interest and depth to the image, creating a captivating visual narrative. Also, dark and clean backgrounds are sometimes needed to bring out rim light on subjects. Otherwise, the rim light gets lost in the bright or busy background where it doesn't stand out.

Sunstars: Also, don't forget that if you partially block a strong light source like the sun, and also close the aperture of your lens down to a small opening (like f9, f11, f13, etc.), the aperture blades will cause reflections causing sun stars, a wonderful feature, like in this photo of a lighthouse below. Place the sun so that a foreground object is blocking about 50 pct of the sun, then move ever so slightly back and forth (inches only) until you find the sweet spot where the Sunstar is at its strongest and most dramatic.

1/6 sec, f18, ISO 100, on a tripod

Conclusion: To create captivating backlit photographs, shooting in the best conditions is key. The golden hour and blue hour provide soft, diffused light that enhances the enchanting nature of backlighting. Clear or partially cloudy skies offer consistent and captivating backlighting, while the position of the sun determines the silhouette or rim lighting effect. Lastly, choosing a complementary background elevates the impact of the backlit photograph. Embrace these optimal conditions, unleash your creativity, and capture breathtaking images that evoke emotions and leave viewers in awe.

Note how the dark background and elegant shapes add to the rimlight effects on this Double-Crested Cormorant. As an bonus, the see-through bill makes a wonderful added touch. 1/1600 sec, f5.6, ISO 400, - 2EV exposure compensation

Part 3 – Mastering Exposure and Metering

Photographing backlit subjects can be a challenge for photographers, as the strong light source behind the subject often leads to exposure difficulties and loss of detail. However, with the right techniques, you can capture stunning images with well-balanced metering and exposure. This section will guide you through the process of getting the metering and exposure right for photographing backlit subjects.

Understanding the Challenge: When shooting backlit subjects, the camera's metering system tends to be fooled by the bright light source behind the subject, often resulting in underexposed or silhouette-like images. This can actually be OK if a silhouette is your goal, that is, a subject without much detail, very dark or black, and whose shape is the defining characteristic, not its details.

If your intention though is to capture some detail in your subject but not overexposure the background, we're often walking on a very narrow tightrope. Should the exposure become a little brighter the sky will be blown out…a little darker the subject is black. The goal is to properly expose the subject while still maintaining details in the background. Here are some essential tips to help you overcome this challenge.

Choice of metering: Spot metering is a powerful tool when photographing backlit subjects, but needs to be used with caution. Instead of relying on evaluative or matrix metering, which takes into account the entire scene, spot metering allows you to measure the exposure based on a specific spot in the frame. To properly meter the subject, position the spot metering point on a mid-tone area of the subject and take the photo. This technique is a good way to get the exposure right on a subject, but it your subject is very dark, it will brighten the exposure significantly, likely leading to a blown-out background if the background is the sky and bright. Leaving the sky blown out and white (called a "high key" photo) can indeed be done for artistic reasons, like in this elephant photo below, where I exposed the photo for the subjects and didn't worry about the sky.
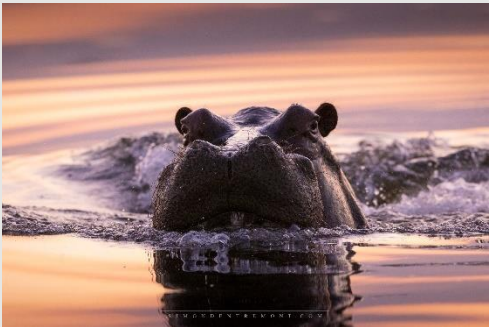
1/500 sec, f5, ISO 10000 (shot after sunset)

In my experience, evaluative or multi (depending on the brand) metering which looks at the entire scene is a much more forgiving metering choice. If the sky is the background, indeed it will expose the scene to be quite dark, but it's easier to recover shadows in an overly dark photo than recover highlights in a photo where the whites are blown out. This was the scenario of the two owl photos below (before and after), where I used evaluative metering to preserve the sky, which underexposed my subject. That being said, the dark subject and foreground could be recovered in post processing.
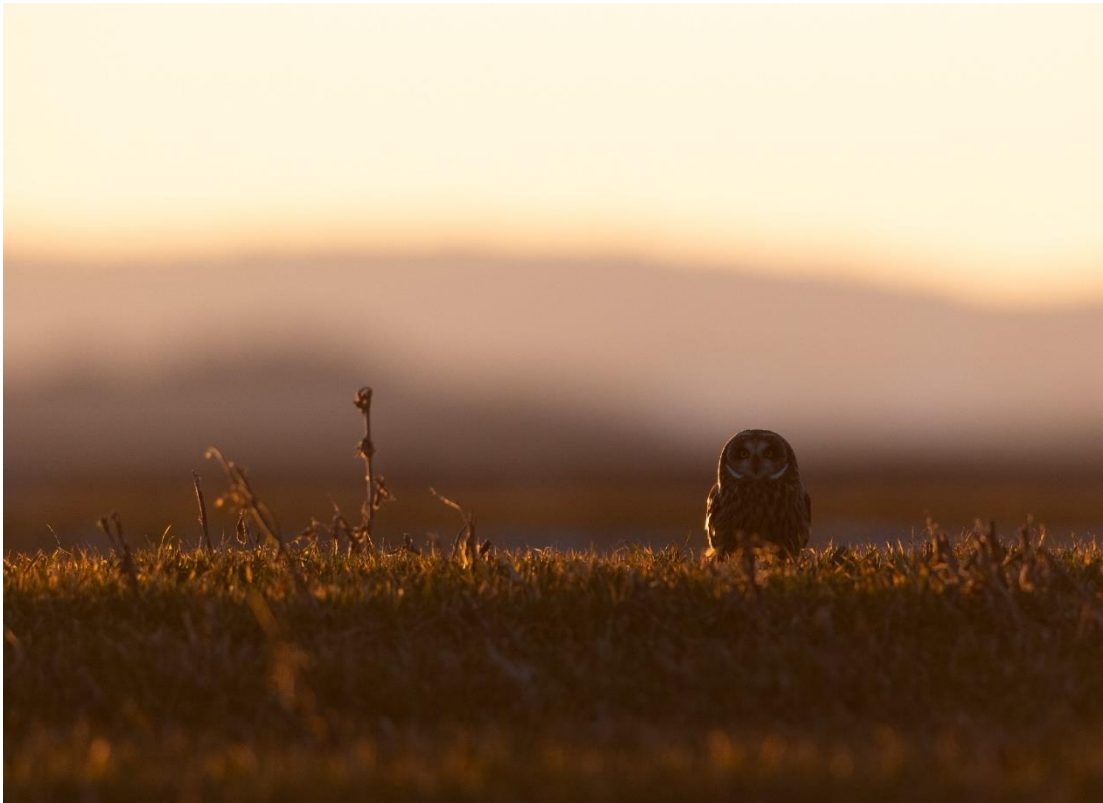
This Short-Eared Owl was photographed using Evaluative Metering, which did underexpose the subject, but also preserved the highlights (above). In post-processing, the exposure levels in the darker areas was raised, leading to the final version below. Using spot metering on the owl would have properly exposed the owl, but left the sky white. 1/1250, f5.6, ISO 1600

Employ Exposure Compensation: Backlighting against a bright sky tends to confuse the camera's exposure meter, resulting in underexposed subjects in strongly backlit scenarios (as the camera will try to bring a bright sky to a more medium-toned exposure). To compensate for this, use exposure compensation to adjust the exposure settings manually. Start with a positive exposure compensation (+1 or +2 stops) to brighten the subject and capture more details. Take test shots and review the histogram to ensure proper exposure and raise it as much as you can without blowing out (overexposing) the sky highlights.

If your background is dark as well as your subject, the camera will try to brighten the entire exposure by raising the brightness of the photo, which may blow out any light areas such as the rim light or highlights in the scene. Lowering the exposure with negative exposure compensation (-1 to start) will keep the exposure from getting too bight, like in the photo of a bird's breath, below.

This photo was shot with -2/3 exposure conpensation to preserve the brightest highlights of the breath, rimlight on the bird, and cattails. Note that the dark background was one of the winning conditrions to make the breath show up. 1/2000, f5.6, ISO 1600

Utilize Manual Mode: Manual mode provides complete control over the exposure settings, making it very useful for backlit situations, as it avoids the camera light meter being fooled by the unusual lighting scenario (as in Manual, the light meter makes no adjustments to the exposure). Begin by setting the desired aperture, a wide open one to blur the background or a closed down one to have all parts of the photo in focus. Next, adjust the shutter speed to what is needed to freeze any subject movement and the ISO until the exposure is correctly balanced. Be mindful of the background, ensuring it is not overexposed or too bright.

If you have blinkies (i.e., Highlight Alerts) or zebras enabled, keep an eye out for overexposed areas, especially in the rim light areas (edges) of your subject. They're usually easy to blow out, especially against a dark background. All that being said, having a thin rim light overexposed isn't that bad. I've made several nice images in the past where the edges of my subject are blown out, and if it's only a thin edge outline, no big deal.

Utilize Fill Flash: When dealing with intense backlight, consider using fill flash to balance the exposure, especially with portraits. By adding light to the front of the subject, you can bring out details and create a well-exposed image. Use a flash diffuser or bounce the flash off a reflector for a softer and more natural-looking light. Set the exposure for the scene and background first, then adjust the flash output power to achieve the desired result on your subject. Note that having an overly bright look on your subject doesn't look very natural...consider adding a bit less light than you think you need to for a more natural feel and look.

1/2000 sec, f5.6, ISO 4000

Bracketing for Safety: To ensure you capture the perfect exposure, consider using bracketing as an insurance policy. This technique involves taking multiple shots at different exposure levels: one at the camera's metered exposure, one underexposed, and one overexposed. Bracketing allows you to choose the best exposure during post-processing, giving you more flexibility and options. Some photos can even be made using an HDR feature such as in Lightroom, such as the elephants at sunset below. The combination of 3 photos of varying exposures allowed the photo to have very low noise in the shadows, yet the sun wasn't overexposed.

3 bracketed images, with first shot at 1/2000 sec, f5.6, ISO 400

Part 4 – Turning Your Photo Into Art

Backlit photos often create captivating and ethereal images with a beautiful play of light. However, capturing the perfect exposure in-camera for backlit subjects can be challenging. Fortunately, post-processing offers an opportunity to enhance and fine-tune your backlit photos, bringing out the full potential of the image. In this section, we will explore various post-processing techniques to help you create stunning backlit images.

A note though. The afrementioned being said, getting the shot right in-camera makes a huge difference in terms of what can be achieved in post-processing. Not clipping or overexposing the whites (touching the right side of the histogram), not crushing the darks (not touching the left side of the histogram) and keeping the ISO low enough to still have good dynamic range (as lower ISOs allow a larger range of tones and colours) will allow you the most flexibility in getting a great final image.

1/1250 sec, f4, ISO 640

1/2000 sec, f6.3, ISO 100

Backlight can make beautiful silhouettes, even before sunrise, and is easier to capture as the light isn't bright enough yet to blow out your highlights. Hope for a colorful sunrise and find an attractive and shapely subject.

Start with RAW Files: Shooting in RAW format gives you maximum flexibility during post-processing. RAW files retain more information and offer greater latitude for adjusting exposure, white balance, and recovering details in both the shadows and highlights. Make sure to shoot in RAW mode to have more control over the final result.

Adjust Exposure and Contrast: Backlit images often have a high dynamic range, with bright highlights and dark shadows. Begin by adjusting the exposure to balance the tones in the image if the image is clearly too dark or too bright. Use exposure adjustment sliders or curves to fine-tune the overall exposure. Be careful not to overexpose or underexpose the image, aiming for a natural and well-balanced look.

1/100 sec, f7.1, ISO 800

Even lighting from above, while not strictly backlit, can give nice qualities similar to backlit shots, like rimlight and light/shadow tricks. 1/640 sec, f5.6, ISO 640

Recover Highlights and Shadows: One common issue with backlit images is blown-out highlights or loss of detail in the shadows. Lower the highlights to bring back details in the bright areas without compromising the overall exposure. Similarly, raise the shadows to reveal hidden details in the darker areas of the image. Strike a balance between recovering details and maintaining a natural appearance.

Enhance Contrast and Clarity selectively: To create depth and enhance the visual impact of your backlit photos, one option is to work on increasing the contrast and clarity, but only on your subject. Many programs like Lightroom have a "select subject" masking feature which is wonderful to make adjustments to your subject only. Experiment by adjusting the contrast slider to boost or reduce the contrast, making the subject and background stand out or blend in. There's no right or wrong move here...this is all taste and artistic flair. Some backlit subjects look better with a dreamy ethereal look. This can be enhanced by sliding the Clarity slider in Lightroom to the left, so negative clarity. This can also be used on the whole image to give it a soft look.

Fine-tune White Balance: Backlighting often introduces warm or cool color casts to the image. Correcting the white balance can significantly improve the overall color accuracy. If you shoot in raw, this can be done in processing without penalty. Use the white balance adjustment tools to achieve the desired look. Experiment with different color temperatures to find the one that best represents the atmosphere and mood you want to convey.

Sunset or sunrise backlighting will often look good on the warm side, so don't be afraid to embrace the orange and reds. Also, you don't need to apply the color temperature changes globally. Try adjusting the background and subject separately. For example, cool (blue) shadows against a warm (orange) sun can make a nice effect.

The photo if the Savannah Sparrow below looked good with a warm yellow tone from the early morning sun, so I increased the color temperature in processing. Note that the subject is dark and underexposed, yet that this still looks ok, so I only raised the shadows slightly. I used a graduated filter to the lower right to darken that corner, giving a stronger impression that the light source was coming from the left (which it was) to match the rimlight on the left of the bird.

Shot at 1/400 sec, f5.6, ISO 250
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Vignette and Graduated Filters: Applying vignettes and graduated filters can further enhance the backlit effect and guide the viewer's focus. Add a subtle vignette around the edges of the image to darken the corners and draw attention to the subject. Graduated filters can be used to darken the sky or background while preserving the properly exposed subject, helping to balance the exposure.

Experiment: Don't be afraid to experiment with creative edits to add a personal touch to your backlit images. Consider adjusting saturation, adding a subtle haze, or applying color toning to evoke a specific mood or atmosphere. Use your creativity to enhance the visual impact and create a unique style for your backlit photos.

Post-processing is a valuable tool for bringing out the full potential of backlit photos. By adjusting exposure and contrast, recovering highlights and shadows, fine-tuning white balance, applying dodging and burning, and utilizing vignettes and graduated filters, you can create stunning and captivating backlit images. Remember to experiment, trust your creative instincts, and develop your own editing style to make your backlit photos truly shine. With practice and patience, you'll master the art of post-processing and elevate your backlit images to new heights.

Quick tip #11

Translucent or transparent elements to your subjects can be highlighted beautifully with backlight.

The darker the background, the more this effect will be revealed.

1/1250 sec, f5.6, ISO 1250

Conclusion

Photographing backlit subjects opens up a realm of artistic possibilities, allowing you to transform ordinary scenes into breathtaking works of art. By understanding the challenges and employing the right techniques, you can capture the ethereal beauty and evoke a sense of magic in your images.

Mastering metering and exposure for backlit subjects is crucial in achieving well-balanced exposures and preserving the delicate details in both the subject and the background. Utilizing the right metering mode, exposure compensation, manual mode, and even fill flash empowers you to take control of the lighting conditions and capture the essence of the scene. Getting it right in-camera makes a huge difference later.

However, the journey doesn't end with the click of the shutter. Post-processing serves as the canvas for your creative vision, allowing you to refine and enhance your backlit photos into stunning pieces of art. With careful adjustments to exposure, highlights, shadows, contrast, and white balance, you can bring out the full potential of your images, creating a captivating visual narrative. Remember, the true beauty of backlit photography lies in your ability to see beyond the technical challenges and capture the ephemeral qualities of light.

Photographing backlit subjects is a continual learning process, requiring patience, practice, and an open mind. So, venture forth with your camera, don't be afraid of mistakes, chase the golden hour, take photographs into the light, and immerse yourself in the world of backlit photography. Capture the magic, harness the light, and watch as your backlit images transcend the realm of mere photographs to become beautiful works of art that leave a lasting impression.

Get out there and get your own amazing photos. I know you can do it!

1/1000 sec, f5.6, ISO 2500