



USING PERSPECTIVE TO CREATE DYNAMIC LANDSCAPE SHOTS

Quick Guide

Written by David Veldman

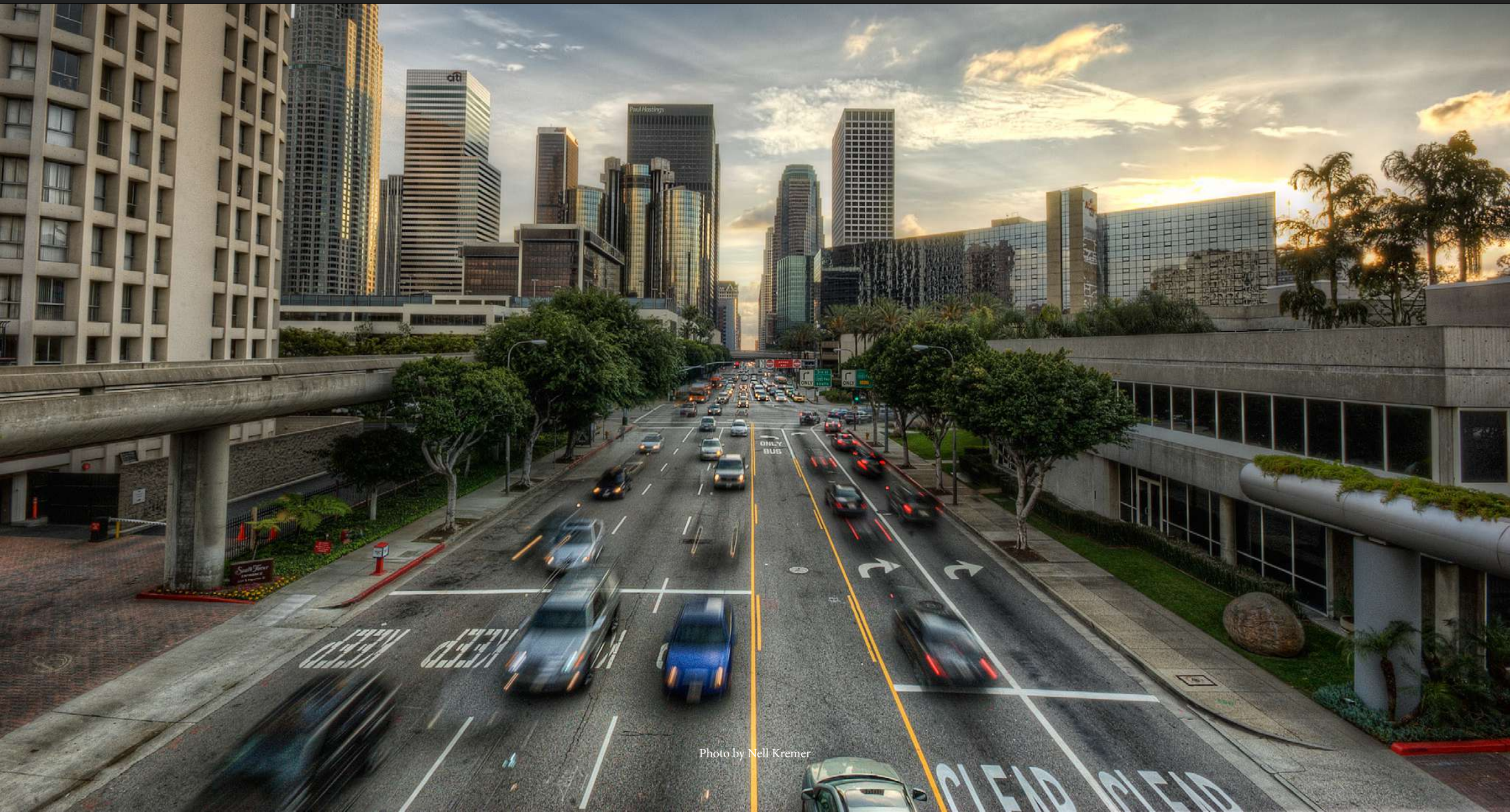


Photo by Nell Kremer

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INTRODUCTION TO PERSPECTIVE

Landscape photography – the idyllic pastime. You, your camera, and beautiful scenery stretching into the distance. The setting is perfect, the light divine, and you confidently snap frame after frame, certain that you're capturing the perfect image.

Once you get home, you load the SD card into your computer, and begin to browse through the images in Lightroom. You notice that your shots are well exposed, and you haven't blown your highlights or lost detail in the shadows. Your depth of field is deep enough, and you absolutely nailed the focus. Despite that, you can't help but ask yourself: "Why are these shots so bland?"

If this has ever happened to you, this tutorial can help. In it, I will explain why certain images work while others don't. I'll show you why, even with perfect light and a beautiful landscape, you may need one more ingredient to create a truly eye catching landscape image.

That ingredient is 'Perspective,' a critical part of composition, and understanding how it affects our images is a critical skill in photography.

Landscape photographers face a unique challenge when shooting. Unlike portrait photographers they cannot control the movement of the subject. When shooting portraits, you

may decide that you want to see the other side of the subject's face, so you simply direct them to turn their head. Landscape shooters, fortunately, cannot command the natural features of the earth to rearrange themselves in a more photogenic fashion. So what do we do? We move ourselves in relation to our subject, so altering the perspective of the shot.

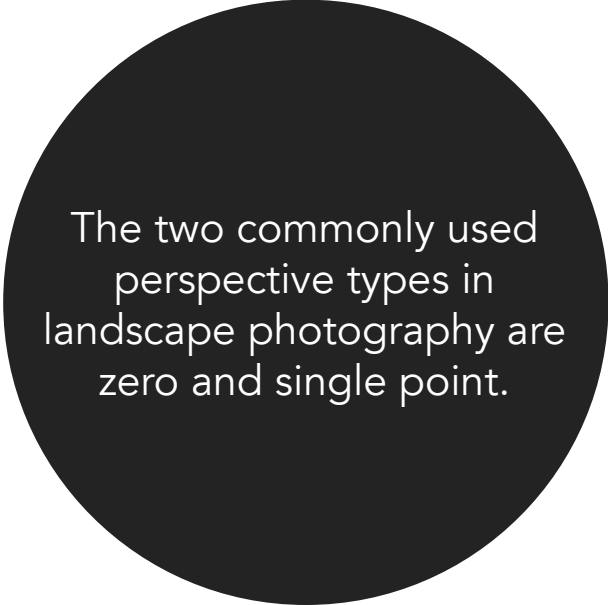
It is important not to confuse perspective with composition, although the two are closely related. Composition is a broad term that includes perspective, but also what we choose to include or exclude from the shot.

Note: If you want to learn more about using composition to improve your photography, take a look at Kent DuFault's best-selling guide, [Advanced Composition](#).

Perspective with regards to visual arts is defined as "the representation, on a flat surface, of an image as it is seen by the eye." It's vital to note the word 'flat.' Because our camera sensors are flat and the world is not, we can run into issues like converging lines and vertical distortion. Every time we move our camera, we are introducing distortions, but we can use this to our advantage to create dynamic images.



Photo by David Veldman
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/themercurist/24455945669/>



The two commonly used perspective types in landscape photography are zero and single point.

PERSPECTIVE CLASSIFICATIONS

Moving our cameras around may affect our viewpoint, but regardless of where we choose to shoot from our images will still fall into a class of perspective.

When I began to research the subject, I found that the most useful studies came from graphic artists and painters. Although a painter has the advantage of being able to create any perspective that they can imagine, they usually strive to follow natural laws. Like photographers they are interested in capturing a 3 dimensional world on a 2 dimensional medium. They classify perspective into five categories, from zero point to four point. The word 'point' refers to the vanishing point, an important concept which I'll explain shortly. As zero point and single point are the most commonly used in landscape photography those are the two we will focus on.



Photo by David Veldman
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/themercurist/18456620755/>

SINGLE POINT PERSPECTIVE

You may be wondering why I started with single point instead of zero. The reason is, that with single point shots it becomes very obvious what is meant by the term 'vanishing point.' In the shot on the left you can see the bridge leading into the vanishing point, accented nicely by the vertical lines of the lamp posts. We can also see another key aspect of perspective – the further away something is, the smaller it appears. The lamp posts shrink into the distance, and provide visual cues that enhance the feeling of depth in the shot.

Single point shots tend to rely heavily on leading lines. I've joked before about every photographer taking at least one shot of train tracks during their first year of shooting, and I was certainly no exception. On my 13th birthday I received a Vivitar 35mm point and shoot camera, and the second shot I captured was, you guessed it, a lovely set of train tracks converging into the distance.

Single point shots are simple, but effective. They draw the viewer into the image, and lend themselves well to strong, centered compositions.

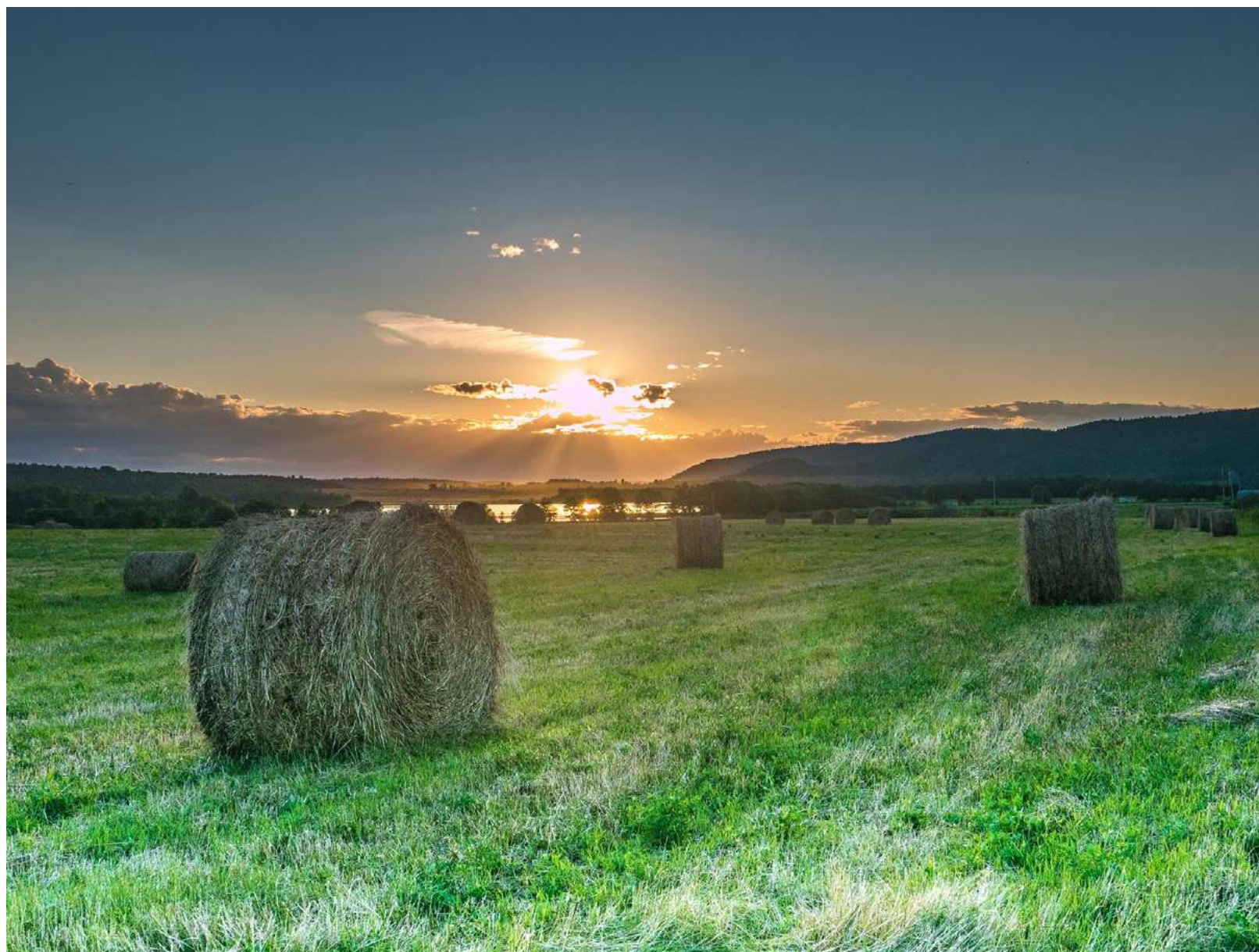


Photo by David Veldman
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.ZERO POINT PERSPECTIVE

Zero point perspective is perhaps most common in natural landscapes. When photographing in an urban area, you may find yourself dealing with single point, two-point, or even three-point perspective. Rarely will you find yourself dealing with a zero point situation. However, in nature it is quite common to find a scene that does not contain a true vanishing point. This is because vanishing points rely on parallel lines. Nature is often 'non linear' and such parallel lines may simply not exist.

The image on this page is a sunset in rural Quebec. The absence of a vanishing point is quite obvious, but note that this does not mean there is no focal point. Zero point shots can still convey depth using size cues and shadows; in this case the hay bales diminish in the distance. Use these techniques to prevent the image from becoming totally flat.



Photo by Carlos ZGZ
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/carloszg/15650972377/>

In this particular shot, your eye is directed towards two points in the frame. It has a vanishing point on the right, and another perspective point on the left.

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVE POINTS

Two and three point perspectives can be captured in landscape photography as well; they are more commonly found in man-made settings though.

The image on this page is an example of a two-point perspective. Urban landscape shots like building corners and fork-in-the road scenes usually provide this type of vantage point.

Understanding the different types of perspective can be somewhat confusing at first, particularly with all of the 'arts' jargon. However, once you attempt to look for vanishing points, you will begin to see them in the world around you. Recognizing the different types while shooting will greatly improve your composition.



Photo by Carlos ZGZ
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/carloszg/15650972377/>

Now that we've identified a few different types of perspective that can exist in the scene, let's look at a few ways to alter our perspective creatively.




Photo by David Veldman
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/themercurist/25455609805/>

WORM'S VIEW

Worm's View is another way of saying 'get low.' The majority of shooters, especially the casual snapper, will automatically shoot their photographs from eye level. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with shooting at eye level – the viewer will be able to easily identify the scene from that perspective. Still, shooting only at eye level quickly becomes boring, so dust off your knee pads and prepare to get muddy.

Worm's view implies a very low vantage point, but it is a broad term that covers essentially, anything below eye level. This could mean kneeling (at which point you'll almost always realize you knelt in a puddle) or getting into the prone and really rolling around on the ground.

The shot on the left required lying down on a slush covered road. I wanted to accentuate the tree against the sky while still including a sliver of the mountains in the background, and that required some contortion. Fortunately, many cameras come equipped with tilting LCD screens – use this to your advantage and avoid becoming a speed bump.



A strong foreground
element is key to a well
balanced landscape shot

Shooting low gives the subject a feeling of power, it can turn even a small shrub into a magnificent redwood. Keep in mind the first rule of Perspective – objects that are further away appear smaller. This means that any vertical lines will suffer from distortion and appear to be curving.

Another advantage of the worm's view is that it becomes easier to include foreground. A strong foreground element is key to a well balanced landscape shot. Generally speaking, you want to include at least a bit of foreground in most shots.



Picture by Chris Moriss
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/7840760@N05/17370286185/>

BIRD'S EYE VIEW

Not to be confused with a top down shot, bird's eye view is anything significantly higher than eye level. As you may have guessed, bird's eye view removes the power from the subject and instead places it with the viewer.

Note as well in the photo on the left, that we see two-point perspective, with the split in the road serving to create two separate vanishing points. You are more likely to see multi-point perspective from a bird's eye view than from the worm's view.

Getting this vantage point may require considerably more physical exertion than worm's view. The reward for the effort is often a striking and powerful vista. Most bird's eye shots are taken from mountains or other natural high features. On more than one occasion, I have climbed a tree for a vantage point, but of course exercise caution when doing anything like this. Recently, the rise of drone photography has opened the door for more photographers to experiment with high vantage points.



Photo by Jeremy Keith
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/adactio/7859788420/>



Photo by Abdul Rahman
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Photo by Davide D'Amico
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/davidedamico/15851034569>

Compare these three cityscapes– worm view (left), bird's eye view (center), and the eye-level view (right). Can you see how each perspective presented the buildings differently?

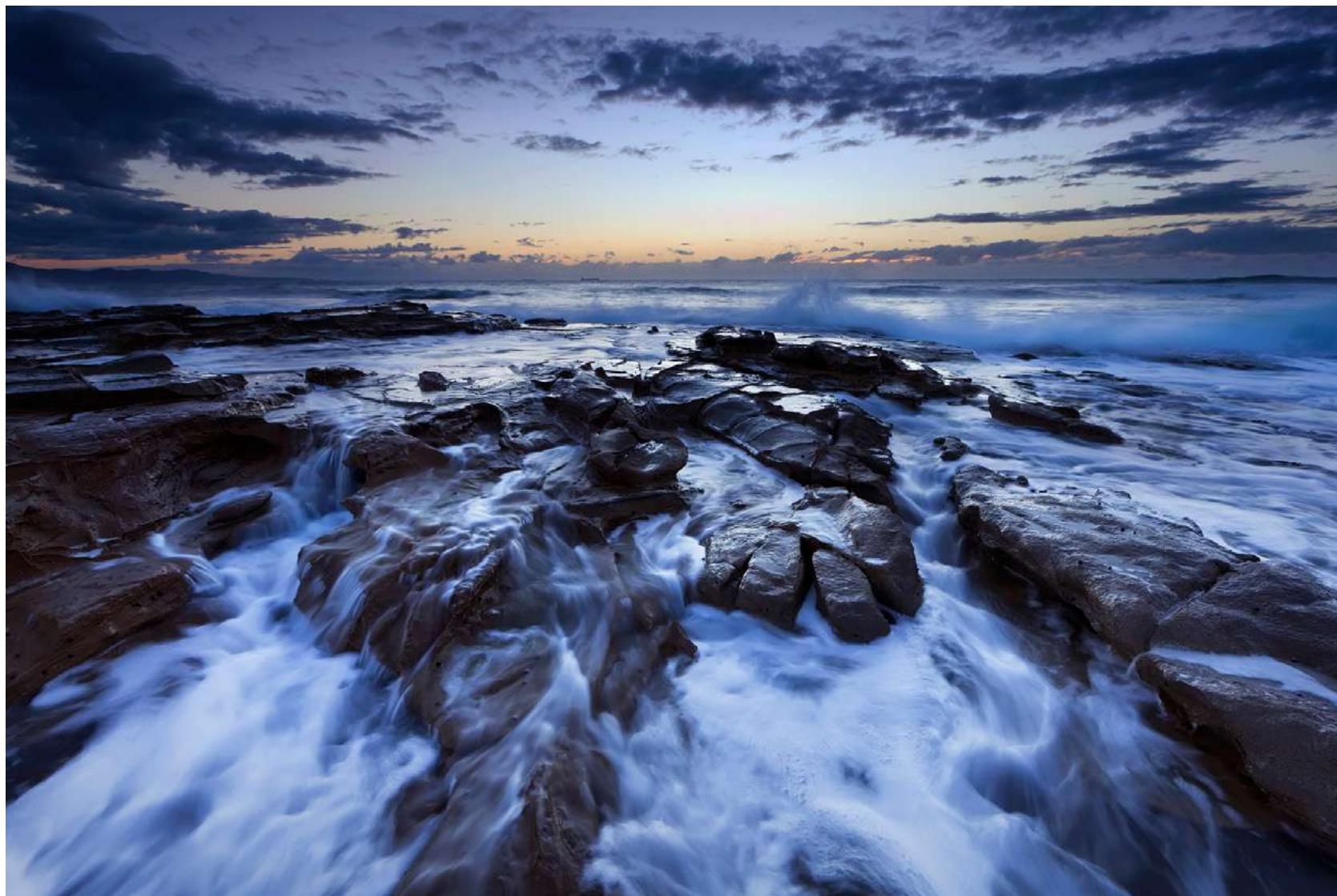
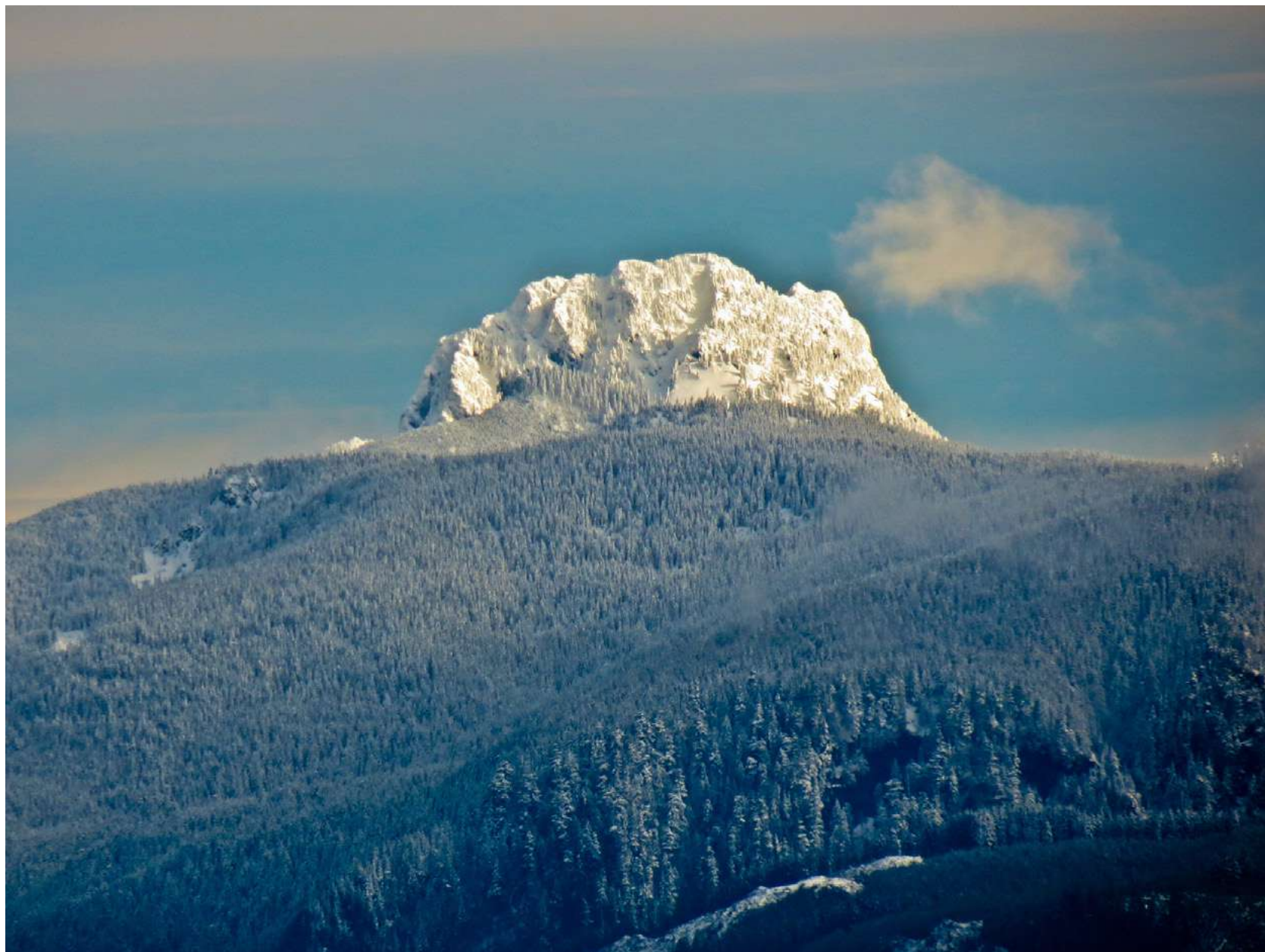


Photo by Gemma Stiles
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/gemmastiles/7001356442/>

WIDE ANGLE LENS

The majority of landscape shots are taken with wide angle lenses. This is hardly surprising – most natural vistas are vast and even a 50mm will struggle to capture the entirety of a scene. Landscape shooters prize wide lenses, sometimes even shooting in the 10-20mm range. When shooting with a wide angle lens you can reduce the distance from you to your subject, which increases the sense of depth and exaggerates the perspective. This is generally a desirable outcome when shooting landscapes, less so for portrait shooters.

Note: If you want to learn more about how to capture amazing landscape photographs, take a look at Kent DuFault's best-selling guide, [Complete Landscape Photography](#).



Picture by Mark Smith
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/mjsmith01/8297926325/>

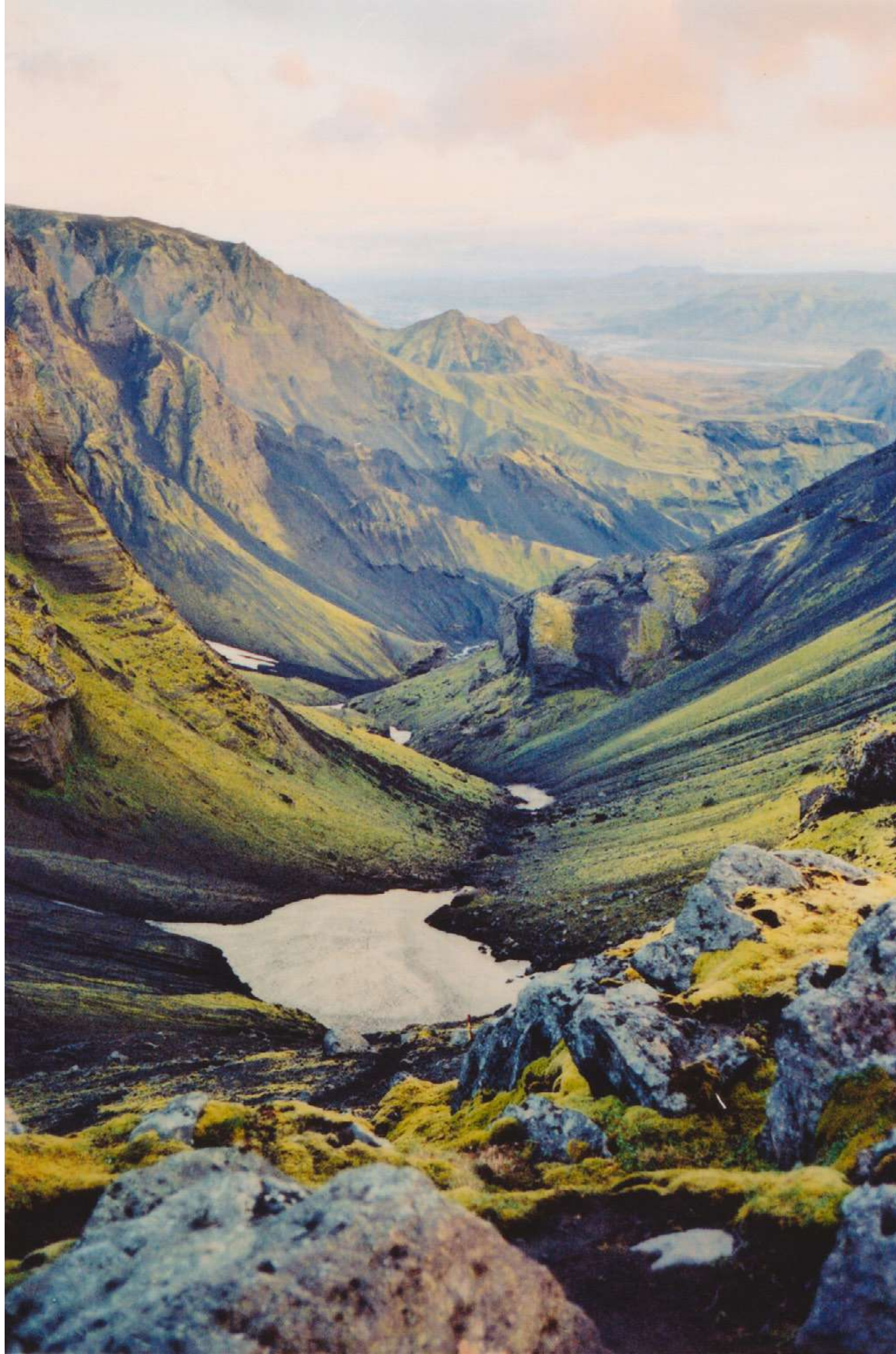
TELEPHOTO LENS

As stated above, most landscape shooters use wide angle lenses. This does not mean that telephoto lenses have no use in landscape photography. In fact, their unique properties can serve to affect perspective as well. While a wide angle lens exaggerates perspective and creates depth, a telephoto lens will of course, do the opposite.

Notice how the photographer compressed the perspective by using a telephoto lens. Again, the lens does not directly create this effect, it is caused by the distance from the subject increasing. This is a tricky technique to use, but if done well it can create surreal, beautiful images.



Photo by Nell Kremer
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/neilarmstrong2/5480544493/>



CONCLUSION

Learning to consider perspective in our photography is not easy. Despite that, it is worth the extra thought, and it will pay dividends. Study the different classes of perspective, and try to watch for them in the world around you. Remember, you don't even need your camera to do this, you can practice just using your eyes.

Most importantly, when you go to shoot feel free to take the obvious eye level shot. However, don't stop there. Examine the low angle, or try to get to a vantage point. Move around your subject if possible and ask yourself what mood you are trying to create. Are you trying to create an ominous feeling by photographing a twisted leave-less tree? That might call for a low shot that causes the tree to tower over you. Asking these questions will help kick start your creative engine and force you to think deeper about each shot. And don't forget to check out Kent DuFault's best-selling guide, [Complete Landscape Photography](#), to take your landscapes to the next level.

I am sure that in no time you'll also be lying on the ground in the mud and climbing trees to find your perfect perspective.

Photo by Richard P J Lambert
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/auspices/15145354757/>



Hey there!

Let's get real for a minute... Learning photography can be super challenging! But we're here to help you every step of the way! Here are 3 of our most useful (*and FREE!*) photography resources:



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About the Author



David Veldman wants to be a better photographer, and he hopes you will join him on the journey of learning. Best of all, he's doing it on a budget! When not taking pictures David and his wife are hiking, snowshoeing, or discovering new culinary delights.

Blog: <http://themercurist.blogspot.ca/>.

Website: <http://driverv.wix.com/mercurist>.

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