

# Good Photos

in  
Bad Light







## Good Photos in Bad Light

How often have you headed out to make photos only to have the light sizzle and die? Where's the awesome alpenglow, the crisp blue desert skies or the glowing sun ball over the ocean beach? All you have is grey smudgy skies and uninspiring light. And why does it happen that everytime you go out, the light sucks? Trust me I've been there, too many times to count!

But the truth is... there is no such thing as bad light, only bad attitudes. We all want to be rewarded with shimmering shafts of light, dancing rainbows and fire in the sky. When we don't get nature's be-jeweled finery we feel ripped off. But nature rewards those with open minds and open eyes. All we need is to drop our expectations of 'trophy' light and accept the little gifts to be found in 'bad' light. Great photos can be made anytime, even on grey, drab days. Here I share with you a few of my favorite tips to help you take good photos in bad light.

*<< A wet, cold and grey day may seem a perfect time to grab a cup of coffee and sit by the fireplace, but for those who venture forth with camera and an open mind, there are many opportunities for wonderful photography.*



## Shoot Tight

The easiest way to get better photos from flat light is to shoot tight. Simply eliminate that overcast sky and concentrate on details in the landscape. Often I'll just spend some time looking around for interesting patterns in the landscape. The easiest way to do this is to mount a telephoto zoom lens on your camera and scan the land until you see something in your viewfinder that 'clicks' (sorry about that bad pun).

The advice 'grey light, shoot tight' is solid advice but just cropping out the grey sky is not enough to make a good photo. Fine images are all about the marriage of light and subject wrapped up into a cohesive composition. In the photo to the left the composition is balanced by two triangles: one in the lower left and one in the upper right corner. These triangles book-end the diagonal pattern of trees in the center of the frame.



^ Overcast days are perfect for extractive landscape photography. Forests are one of my favorite subjects especially in the spring (as in the photo above) and fall when the forests are a palette of colourful hues. A polarizing filter helps bring out the colours even more by removing washed out highlights from the reflective surfaces of the leaves.





The wonderful thing about overcast, grey days is that there is no big dramatic light to chase and no rush to make a composition before the light fades. In grey light you can take your time to fine-tune your compositions. In the two photos on this page I was deliberate with my compositions taking a lot of time to get things just right. In both cases I worked the diagonal lines in the scene to lead the viewer through the frame in a balanced dynamic manner. Use grey light to your advantage to practice your composition and design skills.





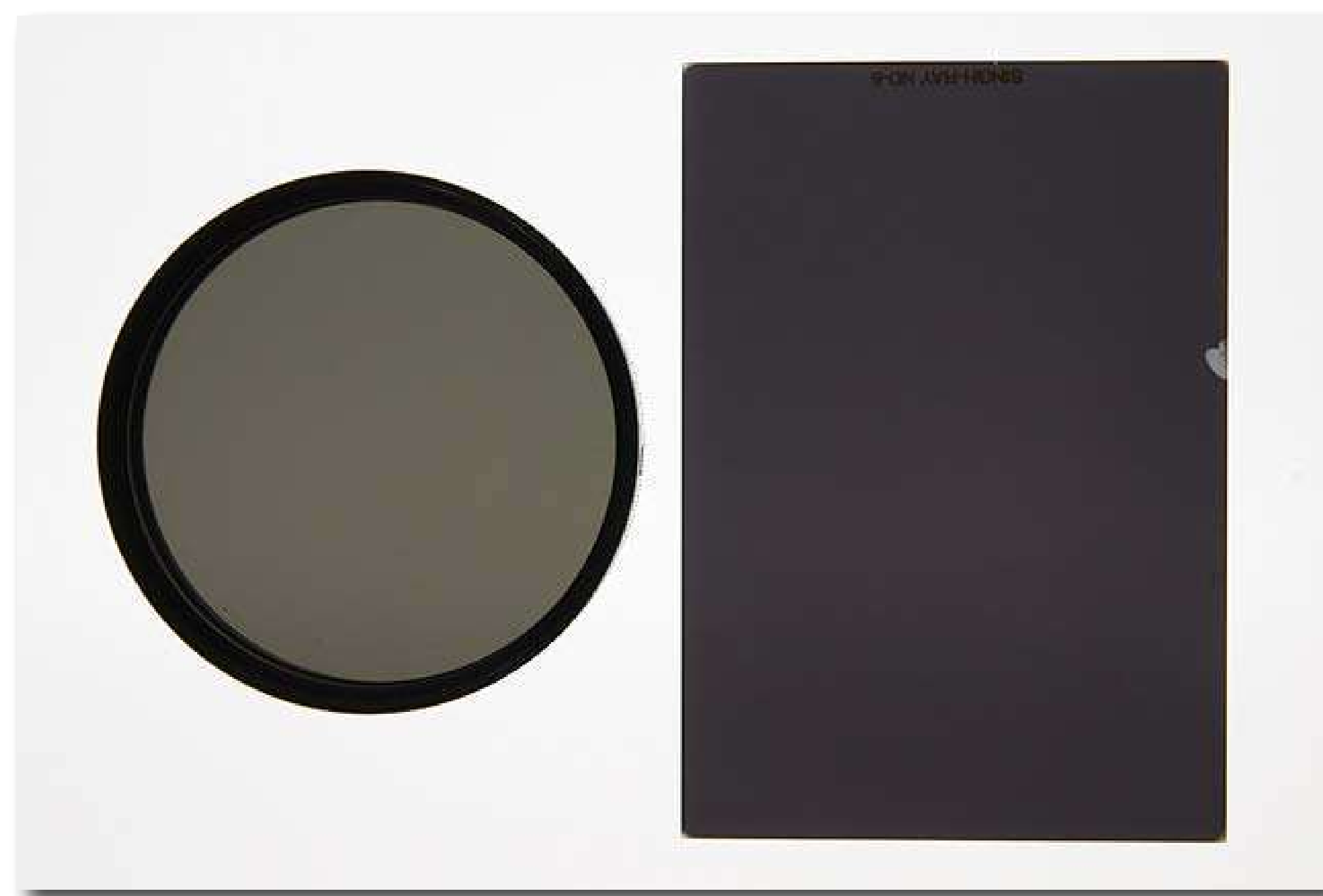
## Shoot Long Exposures

Often, overcast days are windy. My efforts to make sharp, detailed images of vegetation can be hamstrung by the wind. Rather than giving up, I work with the wind to show the motion and fluidity in nature. I simply set my aperture to a larger number (e.g. f16 or f22) which results in longer exposure times so that the movement of vegetation or flowing water shows up in the image. To get motion effects in photos, I try to get exposures of at least 1 second or longer.

To push towards even longer exposure times, I add a special filter, called a neutral density (ND) filter, to my lens. Comprised of dark glass or resin, the filter reduces the amount of light coming into the lens which means I'll need longer shutter speeds to get proper exposure. Long shutter speeds record movement in the landscape (such as wind-tussled flowers, cascading waterfalls, blowing clouds) as streaks of painterly motion.

You can buy an ND filter as either a screw-on type or as a drop-in type that fits into a filter holder. Whatever type you purchase, look for an ND filter that reduces light by at least 4 or 5 full shutter speeds (e.g. a 4 or 5-stop ND filter). Filters of this strength do a better job of showing painterly motion than ND filters of just 2 or 3-stops.

If you find you like the painterly effects of an ND filter you may want to invest in a Vari-ND filter from Singh-Ray which allows you to alter the amount of light coming into the lens from 2 to 8-stops. This functionality gives you incredible flexibility to pick the exact shutter speed for any effect you want.



*<< ND filters, screw-in filter on the left, drop-in filter on the right.*

*>> Further learning on shutter speed effects can be found on Visual Wilderness.*





<< The image on the left was shot without filters at a shutter speed of 1/8th of a second. The water movement is blurred but not pleasingly so. The image on the right was taken with a Singh-Ray Vari-N-Duo filter which is a combination of a warming polarizer with an ND filter. The polarizing part of the filter removed reflections from the rocks and enhanced the warm tones in the photo. The ND part of the filter lengthened exposure time to 20 seconds which returned an ethereal, misty veil of water.

The photo on the next page shows a 30 second exposure made with the Singh-Ray Vari-N-Trio filter which is a combination of an ND filter, warming polarizer and colour intensifier filter all in one.

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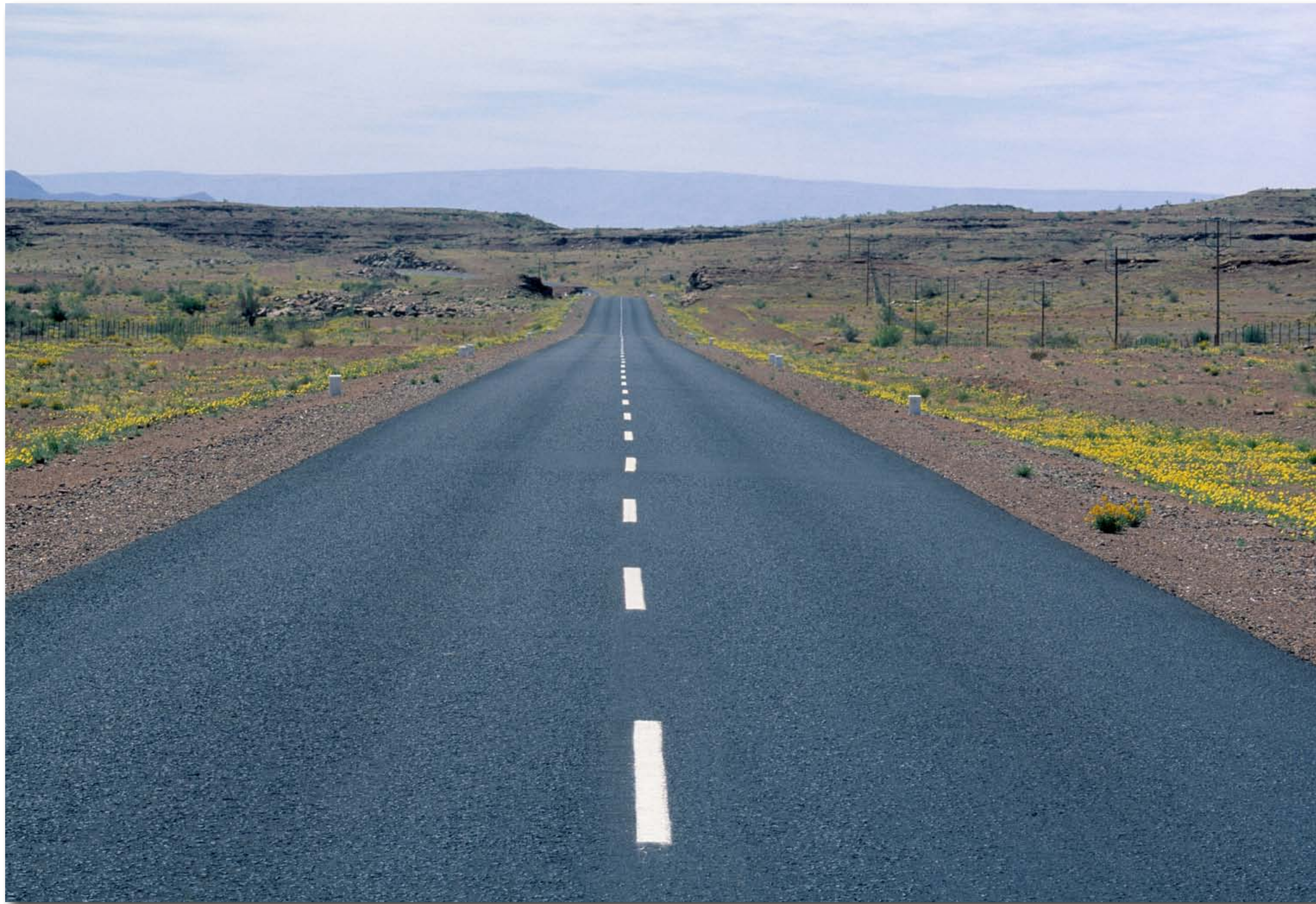




*This image was created by using a Singh-Ray Vari-N-Duo filter which is a combination polarizer and ND filter. The polarizer saturates colours by removing reflective glare and the ND filter allowed me to use a 30 second exposure to blur the wood lilies in the gusting wind.*



## Add Colour

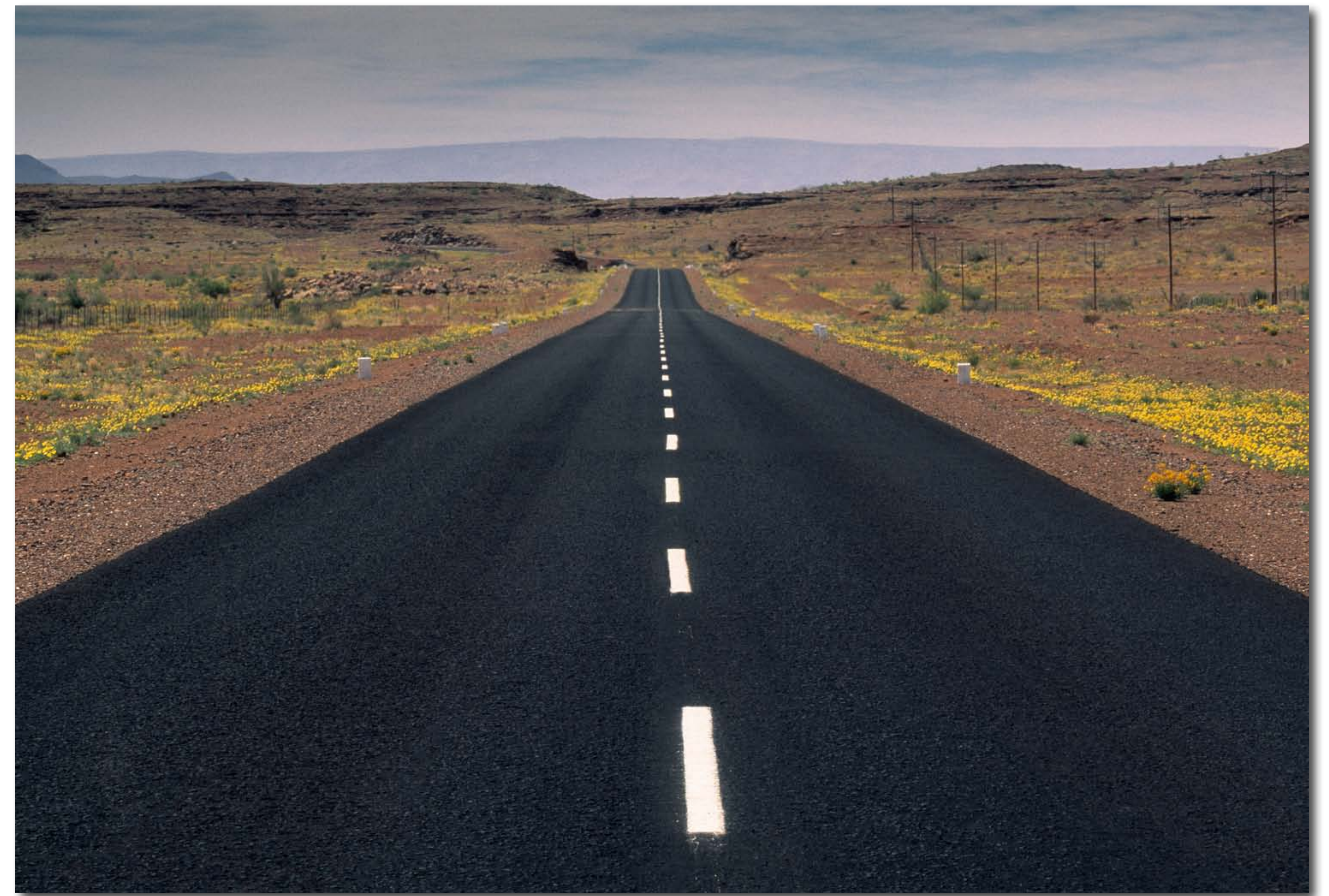


<< The image on the left was shot without filters. Notice how the road and the landscape are washed out from reflecting back the overcast sky.

The addition of Singh-Ray warming polarizer removed reflective highlights from the road and the landscape resulting in rich saturated colours. The polarizer has a built-in warming filter which removes the strong blue cast of an overcast day. I like how the warming filter neutralizes colours.

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Grey light often means drab colours. One of the best ways to punch up lackluster colours is with a polarizer. Polarizers remove reflective glare from shiny surfaces like leaves, wet rocks, and the surface of water to give images with more vibrancy. Polarizers are easy to use; just screw one onto your lens and rotate the filter to see the polarization effect wax and wane. If you like what the polarizer does to the scene, snap the photo.

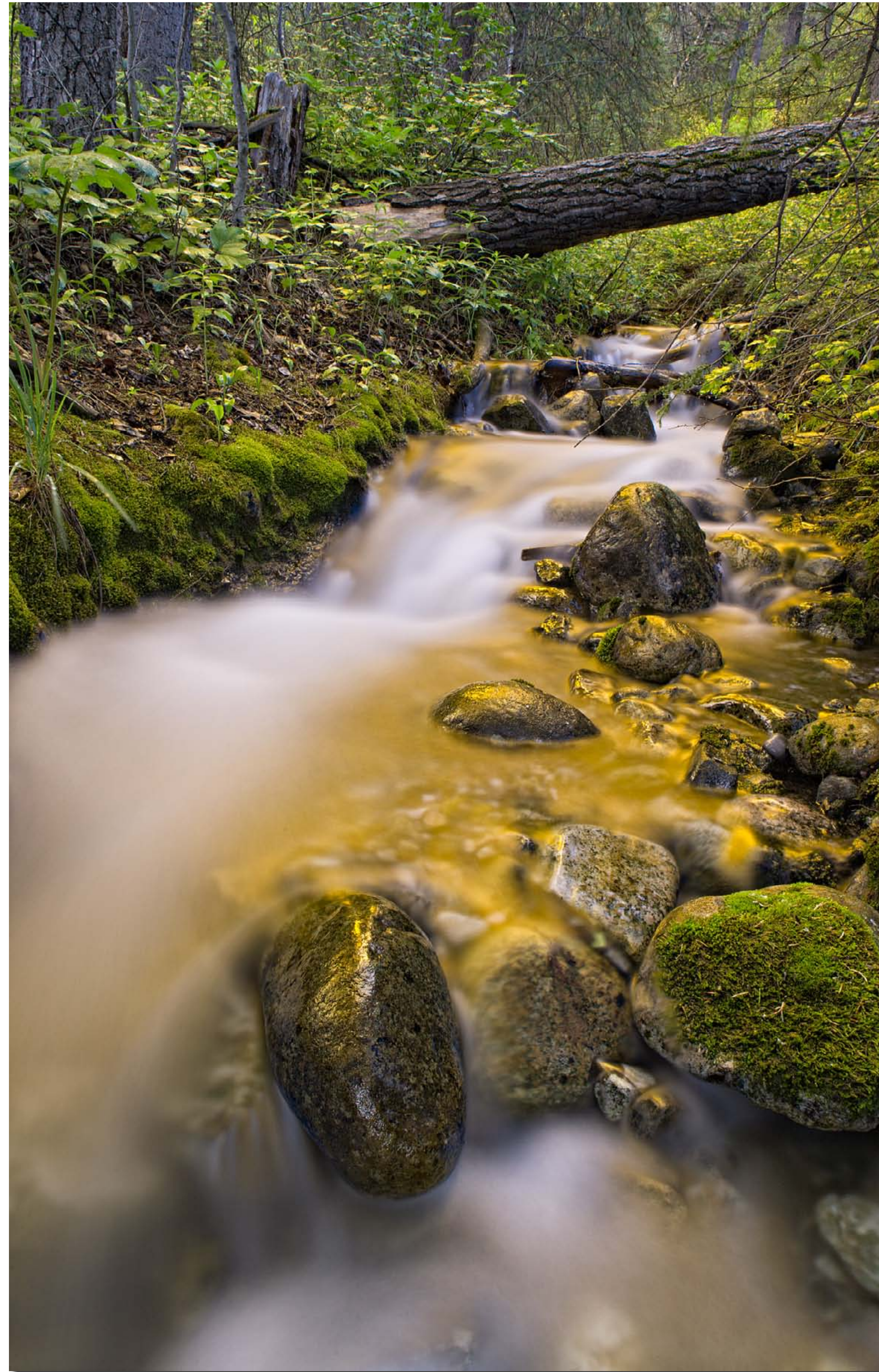
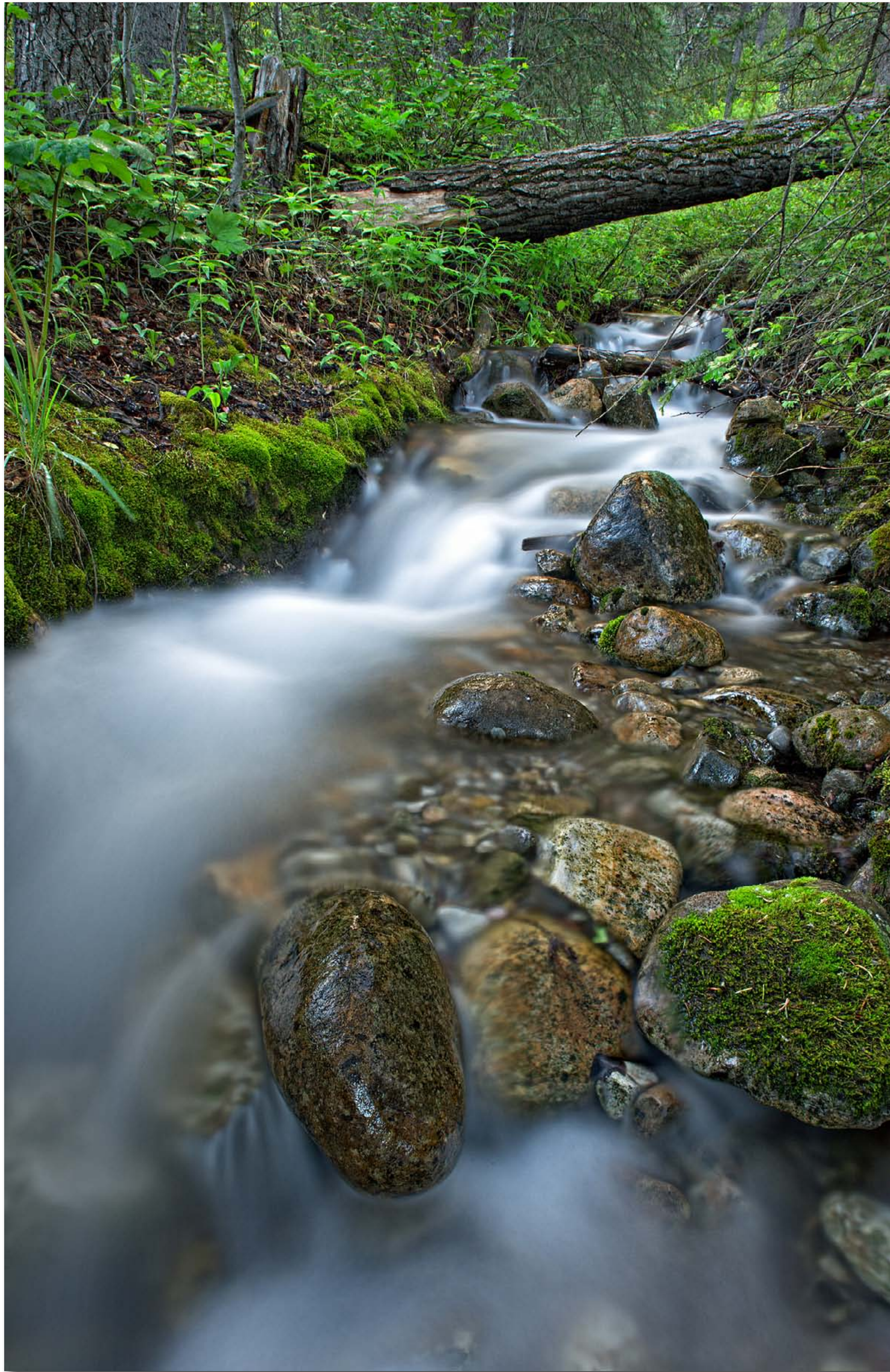




A specialty polarizer from Singh-Ray called the Gold-n-Blue polarizer is one of my favorite filters for adding colour to monochromatic scenes in grey light. Rather than removing reflective highlights from a scene, the Gold-n-Blue polarizer colours the highlights either gold or blue for dramatic images. In the photo on this page I rotated the filter to give me electric-blue highlights to add punch to this image from Namibia, Africa.







<< The image on the far left was shot with a warming polarizer to remove reflective highlights from the water and the leaves. The colours are pure and saturated and the image looks much better than if shot without a polarizer.

The image on the near left was shot with the Singh-Ray Gold-N-Blue polarizer with the polarizer rotated to give a golden hue to the reflective highlights. The end result is a warm inviting photo that is a far cry from the grey light I was working with that day.

The addition of both a warming polarizer and a Gold-n-Blue polarizer to your photographic arsenal will take your drab light photos to new coloured heights.

Remember: gear alone will not make your photos better! You still need to master composition to be a decent photographer.



## Take Away Colour



Sometimes a polarizer just doesn't do much. Perhaps the Gold-N-Blue polarizer looks too over the top, or the scene does not have much colour to begin with. Sometimes colour just gets in the way. In cases like this often the best solution is to take your RAW captures and remove all colour by turning your image into a black and white photo.

There are as many ways to convert a digital colour image into a black and white photo as there are photographers but my favorite way is to use Nik Silver Efex Pro software which is a plug-in for Photoshop, Lightroom or Aperture. This software lets you easily and intuitively convert your drab colour images into Ansel Adam masterpieces!



It's hard to 'see' in black and white when you are looking through the viewfinder at a world full of colour! But here is a neat trick that I use to help me make better black and white photos with my digital cameras. I set the "Picture Style" (Canon) or 'Picture Control' (Nikon) to "monochrome" so that the image that plays back on the camera LCD is black and white. But, and here's the cool thing, I still shoot in RAW mode so that I have a colour image to manipulate in the computer. A colour image gives me more possible post-processing options for black and white conversion than would a JPEG processed as a monochrome image in the camera.

And here is another little known fact. If you set your camera to monochrome and then use Live View, you'll be seeing the scene on your camera's LCD, in real time, converted to black and white! Pre-visualization has never been easier. With Live View and a monochrome picture style you can see what the photo will look like as a black-n-white before you even press the shutter.

*I set my picture style to 'monochrome' and used Live View to see what this scene would look like in black and white. In colour it looked un-inspiring, but as a black and white, it worked very well! >>*





## Add Light

When nature gives you plain light, you can often spice up the dish by adding your own supplemental light. A touch of fill flash or maybe some alternative light sources like flashlights, headlights, or street lamps can often add that little extra zing to take your drab light photos to the next level. You will usually need to wait until dusk to add supplemental light because even though grey days are dim, the overall ambient light is much brighter than the light from man-made light sources. I find that the shooting at dusk when the brightness of your supplemental light source is slightly brighter than the ambient light results in interesting photos.



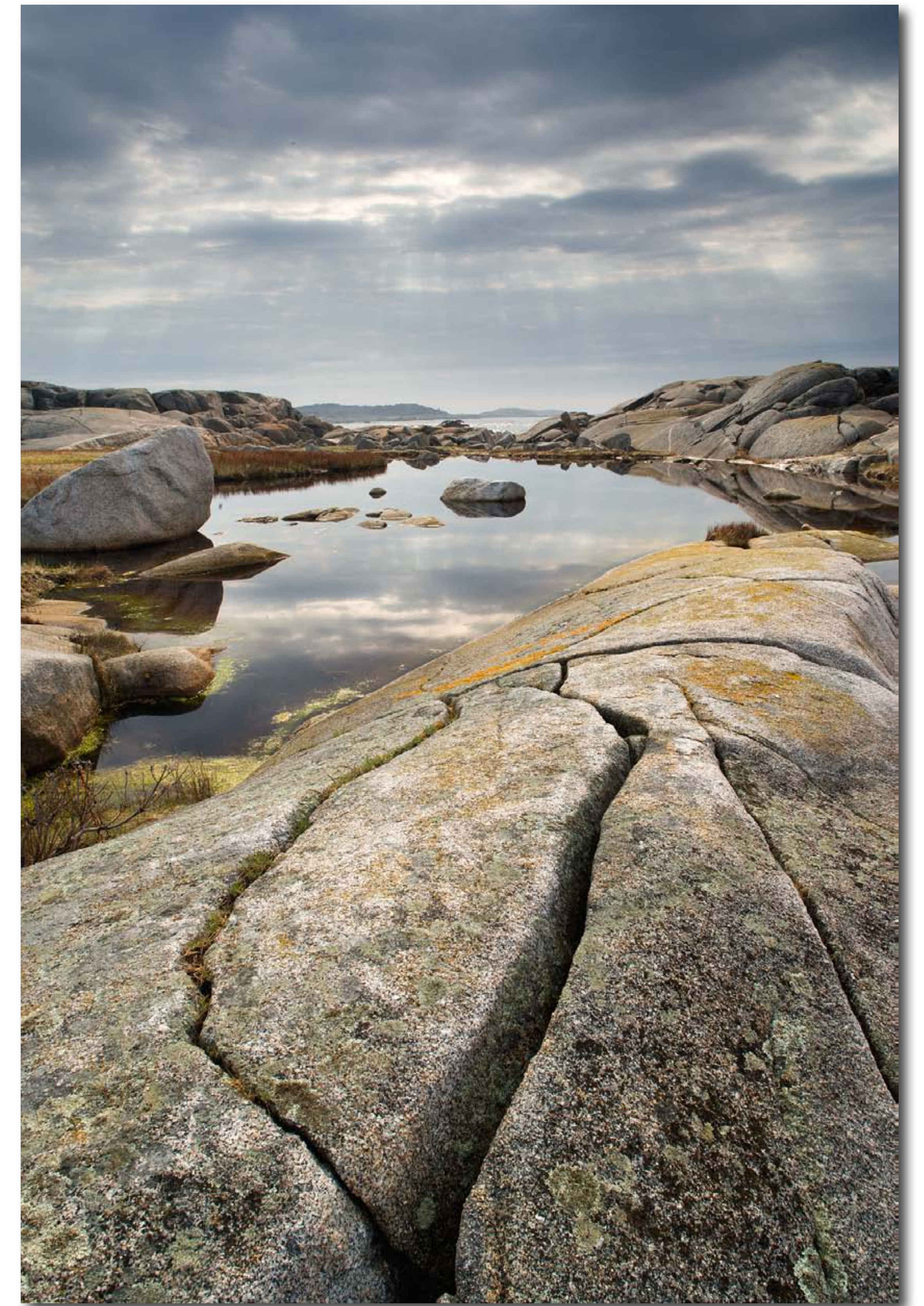
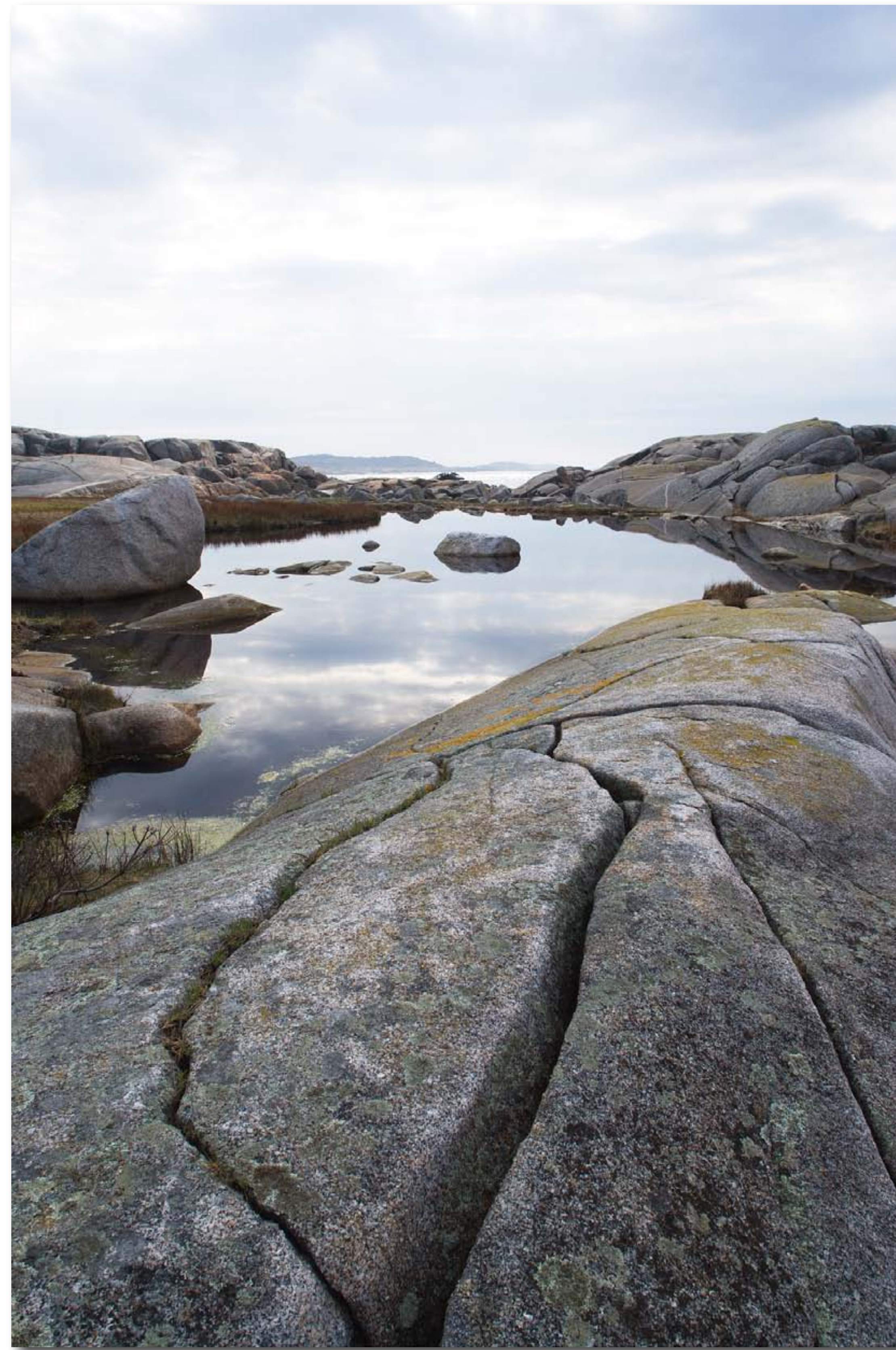
<< On cloudy days I will often stay out until dusk so I can add light to the scene to make the photo more interesting. Here I used the headlights of my car to illuminate the road with warm light to contrast with the cool blues of dusk.

To learn more about the creative addition of light to your landscape images see the Visual Wilderness 'Basics of Light-Painting' eBook.   
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## Take Away the Bright

Often, we want to include the grey overcast sky in our composition. But the sky is so bright that if we expose for the foreground then the sky will burn out to glaring white. To keep detail in the photo we need to use a specialty filter called a neutral density graduated filter (ND grad) which holds back exposure in the sky while allowing full exposure of the darker foreground. I often use a polarizer and an ND grad together to give me great control over the tonal range in my photos. The polarizer removes washed out reflective highlights while the ND grad filter properly exposes the sky. The result is often a very pleasing image as long as you properly use the filters.



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*The image on the left was taken without benefit of filters. The image on the right was taken using a combination of a Singh-Ray Warming Polarizer and a Singh-Ray 2-stop hard-edge ND grad filter. The right image is clearly much more saturated, has a pleasing colour balance and there is a lot of detail in the overcast sky.*

*<< To learn how to use a polarizers and ND grad filters together check out the 'Essential Filters' eBook on Visual Wilderness.*



## Shoot It Wet



*<< I used a plastic bag as a protective rain cover for my camera and lens and shot this image in a light drizzle. A polarizer on the lens made the colours sing. There is no need for post-production saturation souping when your in-camera capture is this good! The less work needed in post-production, the better. Quality in means quality out.*

Don't let a little drizzle and grey skies ruin your outing. You can take home great shots in the rain because vegetation is saturated with colour when wet. Remember to use your polarizer to further increase colour saturation. I often use two rubber bands to hold a plastic grocery bag over my camera and lens to keep them both dry while I venture forth in the wet weather to find dripping colours. But you can buy specially made photographic rain covers if you want a more user-friendly and elegant solution than my plastic bag-and-rubber band contraption. Check your local camera store or type in "camera rain covers" on your internet search engine for a pail-full of solutions.



## Go Out Anyway!

I used to play a game while on photo trips. I would wake up at the sound of the alarm and stick my head out of the tent—if it was overcast, I would sleep in. If it was clear or mixed clear sky with cloud I would get up. Numerous times I went back to bed only to be awakened by brilliant colours diffusing through the tent walls. Sure enough my overcast, ‘bad’ light turned into ‘good light’ with spectacular colour. Now when on photo trips I always get up at the ring of the alarm and many times I have been rewarded with spectacular light even when the sky was totally cloudy and rain was spitting from the heavens. Being out there is the key—the more you go out in all types of light the more great shots you’ll come home with no matter what the light!





## Conclusion



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*Simple subjects often make the best photographs. It was a grey and cold day and the light just seemed boring. But by spending a little time looking at the details in nature, I found subjects that lent themselves to a lovely result despite the drab light. This image is a shot made without any special technique: no filters, no special gear, just a standard 50mm lens and some patience to find a good composition. Good photography is all about 'seeing' no matter what the light.*

Bad light does not mean bad photos. To make the most of drab light, photographers just need to look around, take their time and find subjects that look good in the flat light. Intimate landscapes and macro studies usually look great in grey light.

For landscapes that include the sky, often an ND grad filter will help even out exposure across the scene and give details in the clouds. If it is windy, or if there is movement in the scene, a solid ND filter can create painterly motion effects.

And finally, intense colour (e.g. a polarizer in wet conditions) can help draw the viewer into the scene. Or, try the opposite; use black and white to convey mood through tonality.

In the end, bad light *can* produce great results — just 'look' a little harder and dig a little deeper.



# Darwin Wiggett

Darwin is one of Canada's most well known and widely published landscape, nature and outdoor photographers. He is the author of 11 books of photography including the best sellers *Dances with Light—the Canadian Rockies*, *Darwin Wiggett Photographs Canada*, and *How to Photograph the Canadian Rockies*. Darwin was awarded the prestigious prize of *Travel Photographer of the Year* in 2008. His images are represented and sold through the stock photo agencies Getty Images, First Light, and All Canada Photos.

Darwin actively teaches photography through lectures, workshops, photo tours and on-line courses. He is currently a columnist and contributor to [Outdoor Photography Canada magazine](#) and staff contributor at [Naturephotographers.net](#).

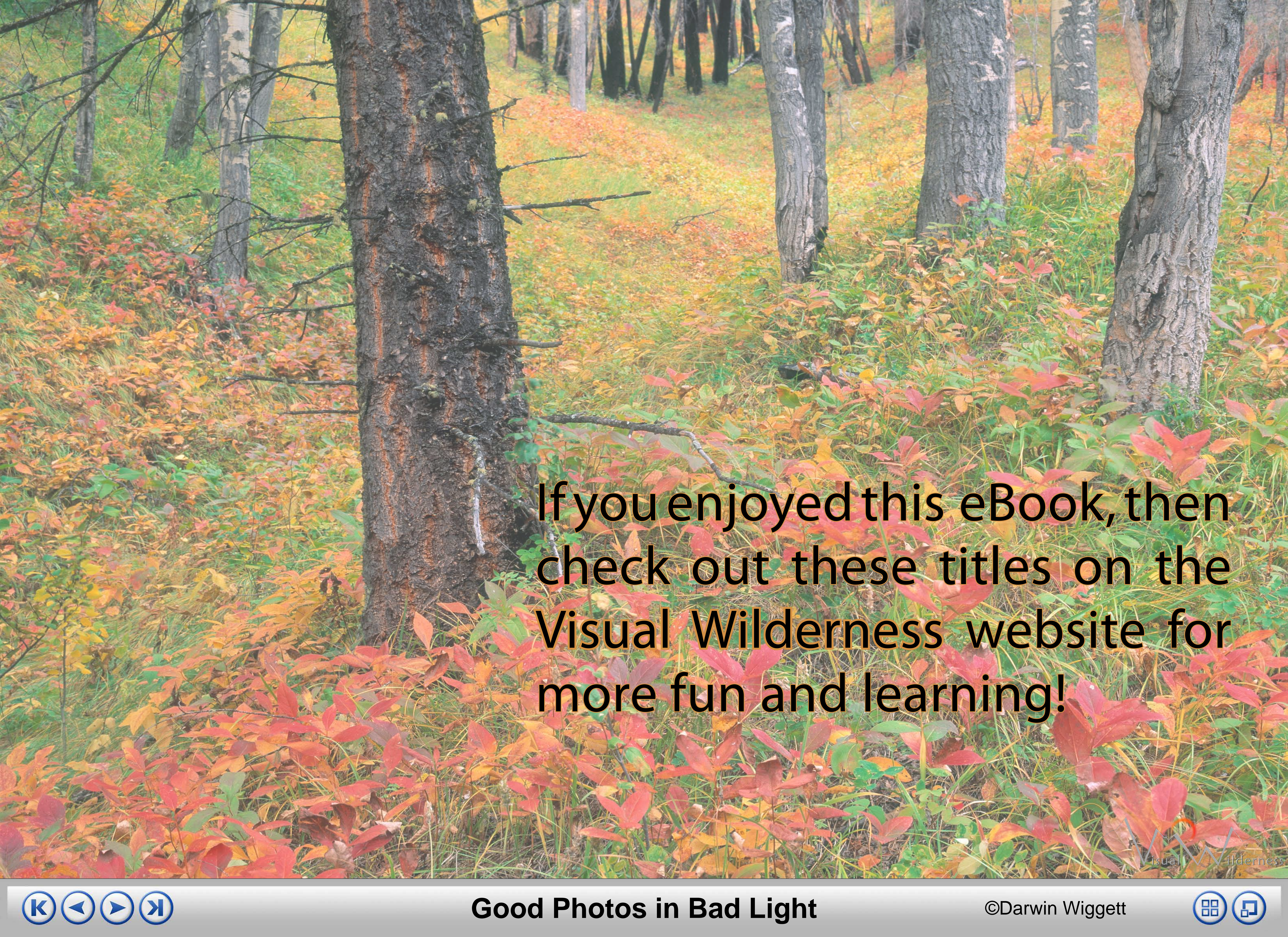
Darwin's website is [www.darwinwiggett.com](http://www.darwinwiggett.com) and his popular blog is [darwinwiggett.wordpress.com](http://darwinwiggett.wordpress.com)

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## Darwin's Equipment



A photograph of a forest floor covered in vibrant autumn foliage, including red, orange, and yellow leaves. Several tree trunks are visible, with a prominent dark, textured trunk in the foreground. The background shows more trees and a dense carpet of colorful leaves.

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