

Hird About The Place

The Scene by Hird Newsletter.

Edition #16: September 2005

Dear Friends,

Spring is about to hit the Goldfields, and Kalgoorlie-Boulder just loves spring! Race Round, wildflowers, tourists and warmer weather – so many good things to look forward to when September rolls around

“Painted Cliffs” of the Goldfields

As promised in earlier editions of “Hird About The Place”, here is the shot I made after driving 300km north of Kalgoorlie. I “found” the location on my trip back from Cue at Easter and noted it for mid-winter as a place of interest. This shot will be a future “Photo of the Month”, so look forward to seeing a fabulous print soon.

The time of the year a shot is made is very important for many landscape shots. I anticipated mid-winter to be the best season for this shot: that is when the sun rises at its most northerly azimuth, providing just the right “side lighting” for this image.

It is possible to predict the preferred direction of lighting by carrying a compass in your camera bag. I use mine by selecting a vantage point from which I imagine a great shot can be made (the process of imagining a shot is often called “previsualisation”, but that sounds like an oxymoron to me). I then walk into the scene and stand next to the subject which initially caught my eye in my visualised shot. From that location, I point my compass at the clear part of the horizon (be that to the east or west) from where I want the sun to shining. I note that bearing for later reference.

If the optimal bearing is similar to the current sunrise or sunset bearing of the sun, I may return within a few days (or hours) to make the shot. If the sun is a long way from the optimal location, I’ll return home and log onto one of a few web sites which allow me to calculate the Sun’s apparent location throughout the year. By

comparing the optimal sun direction with the predicted direction, I can accurately calculate my return date, knowing the sun will be in just the right place to make my shot.



The “Painted Cliffs” of the Goldfields

That’s the process I undertook here, and it’s also why many of my shots take months to plan and execute. Being in the right place at the right time takes careful planning!

Esperance

During August I was lucky enough to have my mother visit with us. She is a talented painter in her own right, having won many awards for her work in QLD. It was her first visit to this part of Western Australia and I was keen to show her the best the region has to offer. As part of that tour, I took her (and a small assortment of Hirds) to Esperance for the weekend.

We left Kalgoorlie at around 1.00 on Saturday afternoon, after the gallery closed its doors. I put the bikes on the back of the Landcruiser and packed the camera gear and suitcases in the back. It’s amazing just how much we can take with us on a three day trip!

We left in bright sunny conditions, and though the forecast was good, we were fully expecting the weather to close in on us as we approached

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Esperance – after all, that's what normally happens doesn't it?

On Sunday, the family had a ball – beach combing, wave chasing, bush walking, sight-seeing, whale spotting*, bike riding, mini-golfing, fish'n'chips on the foreshore and fishing from the jetty. We were flat strap having a good time, however Sean was still as disappointed as a six year old can get: he didn't get to fly his new kite!

On Monday at 4.30am my alarm woke me: I was off to Cape Le Grande to climb Frenchman's Peak for sunrise. My plan was to get there well before the sun touched the top of the mountain, and be ready to make a shot of the landscape framed by the cave as the sun's first rays peaked inside the cave.

The drive to Cape Le Grande had taken longer than I expected due to heavy fog reducing visibility. It was more by good luck than good planning that I had left the caravan park so early, but I'm glad I normally sleep so few hours – I needed every minute of the "panic time" I had built into my plans for the morning. ("Panic time" is the extra time I allow when going on a shoot – it takes me such a long time to set my camera up that I aim to be at my location at least half an hour early, just in case)

My preferred method of making landscape photos is to scout a location thoroughly, well before taking my camera there (days, weeks or months before). In this case, I had never climbed Frenchman's Peak before, so this was going to be a combined scouting and photographic trip. I knew there would only be a slim chance of actually being able to make the shot I had in mind that morning – the sun had to be coming from just the right direction at sunrise, and I had no idea what that direction would be yet.

Loaded with my backpack, tripod, water and a torch, I made my way along the very well defined track to the summit. As I set off into the fog, I was only just able to make out the peak to my left in the faint light of the pre-dawn. Frogs welcomed me with their peeps and chirps: "This is what

nature photography is all about!" I shouted to them. They kept on chirping and peeping, oblivious to the madman in their midst (and their mist ☺).

After twenty five minutes of hard walking with 15kg of camera equipment strapped to my back, I reached the windy summit and made my way into the cave. I had arrived 20 minutes before the sun was due to rise, so I should have been greeted by a wonderful vista.



"Frenchman Peeking"

One of the good things about dynamic weather is the magnificent quality of light as it clears. At least, that's what I kept telling myself as I peered into a blank, magenta coloured fog which greeted me. My anticipated "wonderful vista" was little more than glimpses of green through the swirling, wind-swept mist.

"Ah well, I still had twenty or thirty minutes before the optimal time – maybe it will clear. And besides, it was a nice walk" Ever the optimist – that's me! I put my backpack down, had a drink of water while I caught my breath and walked the area, looking for the best possible composition. Several options presented themselves to me and I moved my gear to the best of them.

One thing I have learnt over the years is to have faith that the light **will** improve and the shot **will** magically appear at just the right time. If I'm not ready when that happens, I only have myself to blame for the missed chance! Getting myself ready on this occasion was never in doubt, especially after making so much effort just to be there.

* Well, we would have been if the whales had cooperated and been there – somewhere!

Accordingly, I went through the motions of putting my camera on the tripod, mounting the lens and composing the shot – for I knew that not doing so would incur the wrath of the Troll Gods (who inhabit these High Places). Their wrath ALWAYS engenders the emotions of regret and frustration for missing a great shot.

There is serenity associated with waiting for the weather to clear – you know there is nothing you can do but wait. There is also an anxious period when you can see it's going to happen but you're not sure if the light will still be good when it does.



View from the balcony of the 'Troll Gods' Home

This morning was one of those where it did not quite make "Spectacular!", though I was pretty happy to have witnessed the first rays of sunrise illuminating the mist with an apricot glow just outside the cave.

I made a few shots that morning, but I realised I'd need to come back in December to make the shot I want – the sun is just too far north at this time of the year for the shot I have visualised.

On my reconnaissance walk of the cave, I had noticed small pools at the edge of the cave. Now that the sunrise light was over, I further explored them with my viewfinder. Brilliant blue reflections played in the puddles like Kalgoorlie kids after rain – time to pull the camera out again!



Playful Reflections ...

I was in the cave for around 90 minutes, just enjoying the view and the experience of being the only person seeing this view today.

As I was leaving the park that morning, I glanced to the right in salute to the Peak and saw the sun trying to break through the mist. I recognised the potential of a shot with the sun just sneaking over the top of the hill, so I parked the car and hastily made my way back on foot to an area which was still in shadow.

I set up my camera and put on two graduated filters, knowing the dramatic sky I wanted was only achievable by drastically holding back the light using these filters. "Frenchman Peeking" on the previous page was the result of that work.

Later that day, I returned to Cape Le Grande with my family for lunch at Lucky Bay and a coastal bush walk. We departed from Thistle Cove for what I thought would be a one or two hour walk – 3½ hours later we staggered into the car park at Hellfire Bay. It seems I forgot to allow for "Photo Time" and "pant-pant-pant" time: those hills are a somewhat bigger than "Kalgoorlie Mountains"!

All in all, the trip to Esperance was a fantastic break from the everyday drudgery of work. Cape Le Grande would be an excellent location for a 4 day landscape photography workshop and I will put together an itinerary to run one there. Drop me a line if you'd be interested in attending such a workshop and I'll put your name onto an "expressions of interest" list. The workshop could not happen before the end of 2005, so consider a tentative date of January or February, 2006 for your diary.

Photo Tip – Photographing Flowers

With the good rainfall in the Goldfields in the final week of August, this year's wildflower season looks set to be one of the best in recent years. In preparation for photographing this annual natural event, I thought I'd share some tips on photographing flowers.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of flower photography: the "whole paddock" photo and the "single flower" photo.

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Large fields of flowers are not too difficult for most photographers because no “special equipment” is needed for this style of shot. The important thing to remember is to use a large “*f*” number to get as much in focus as possible. If your camera allows it, use aperture priority (often called Av or A) and set the control to *f*11 or greater.

The single flower is a shy beast: photographing one is like being paparazzi trying to capture a lone celebrity on film. If flowers had hands, they’d be holding them up in front of the lens and sternly shouting “No photos please!”

To successfully photograph a single wildflower you should own a macro lens (and extensions tubes for 1:1 size flower images on film), a versatile (i.e. “expensive”) tripod and a flash which can be dismantled from the camera (or even better - a ring flash). You will need to get down to the level of the flower and hold the camera centimetres from the flower (hence the tripod). You will need to use a very high *f* number ($\sim f22$) to get as much of the flower in focus as possible, however such high *f* numbers severely reduce the amount of natural light reaching the film or sensor.

Flash is required to provide enough illumination to the flower while also freezing any motion the flower may be experiencing (wind *always* blows the flower just as you expose the film – it’s something to do with unhappy Troll Gods, I think.) Try to shield the flower from the wind and wait for the flower to stop moving before pressing the shutter release button to avoid out-of-focus shots.

As you can see, single flower shots are not easy and not for the faint-hearted. If you don’t already own the equipment required, you are likely to be fighting a losing battle, so it’s usually best to avoid such images.

A good compromise is to use a tripod to hold your camera low in the field of flowers (close enough to make out individual flowers in your shot), manually focus about 3 metres ahead and use a high *f* number to ensure good focus of those nearby flowers. Point the camera downwards so that only a sliver of sky is showing in the viewfinder – after-all, it is a picture of flowers, so make sure nobody could doubt your intentions.

Matted Prints

Many prints from our range are now available in mats. They are mounted on an archival foamcore substrate with a coloured mat board window surrounding the print. The whole item is then encased in shrink wrap to protect it from dirt, moisture and fingerprints.

These prints are ideal as gifts when the budget does not quite stretch as far as you’d like it to. Some are less than \$100 and are perfect as “going away” presents. They are also great for people who intend to travel with their print, since they are very light and contain no fragile glass.

The matted prints are on display in specially constructed stands around the gallery. We will now be able to display many more prints than we ever have before, since our limited wall space no longer restricts the number of prints we can show. I expect to hear even more people complaining from now on – “There are too many to choose from!” is already a regular comment from visitors. Well, it’s about to get a whole lot worse!



A future candidate for the Matted Prints Collection?

Come in and have a browse through the new prints – I’m sure you’ll be impressed by the work I’ve been unable to display regularly before.

This new look for our newsletter is a trial for us – brought on by the failure of our printer. I guess we just pushed it beyond its limit once too often – we now print more than 600 newsletters each month! Let us know what you think of it – it may become a permanent change of format.

I hope we see you in September and I’ll write again next month.

Graeme Hird

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