

NATURE'S HOTSPOTS —Through The Seasons

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Being in the right place and the right time is a challenge for the nature photographer.

Resources for picking the right time to photograph distant US locations. The Internet offers a wide variety...just do a search.

- Photo Traveler—a newsletter (also a website) which features several areas per issue but also contains a comprehensive list of photo tours/date which will give an indication when best times are predicted.
- “Photograph America” by Robert Hitchman—newsletters that each feature a single place . Back issues available as is a CD with the full set
- Websites which update fall color in New England the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, Colorado
- Websites that contain reports on spring wildflowers in the deserts of CA, AZ, TX . Carol Leigh's site PhotoCal is great for CA flowers
- Outdoor Photographer magazine and Nature Photographer magazine
- “Birds as Art” by Arthur Morris offers info about major birding areas
- Having a network of friends who are photographers and have traveled these areas or have connections who can report in. A good reason to get involved in a photo club

For more info on how to get to these areas simply do a Google search. Times suggested here are only a benchmark. Some years conditions are earlier or later or not at all.

AUTUMN (a snow fall or winds can quickly exfoliate trees that were at their peak...pre peak can be good so that there is still a mix of green with color...post peak is good since the forest floor offers many macro opportunities with colorful leaves.)

1) **Alaska**: fall arrives early—the last week of Sept and first week of Oct.

Denali Nat'l Park has beautiful fall color on the tundra—berry plant leaves turn red. North Face Lodge/ Camp Denali (at the end of the road have rights to the road which the general public does not) are a reasonable hike from Wonder Lake for reflections of Denali and offer their own vehicles to travel the road. Reservations are very limited and filled a year in advance. Photo tours often book a block of rooms and you will need to use them if you do not plan that far in advance. Katmai NP offers brown/grizzly bear opportunities. The fish camp books up a year in advance likewise. Those who cannot get accommodations there but do have the \$\$\$ may choose to fly in daily by seaplane from King Salmon. Bears eating fish and surrounded by fall colored grasses are easily photographed from the deck provided a short walk away. Waterfall area with bears feeding (only a few in fall compared to June/July—the mosquito season!) is 1-mile hike and the platform very limited.

2) **Colorado** (last week of September first week of Oct)

For the non-four-wheeler: ½ hour from Aspen, Maroon Bells reflection vista (arrive predawn) is short walk from the parking lot; Kebler Pass road (30 some miles of good gravel road west out of Crested Butte has grand vistas plus a drive through the largest continuous grove of aspens; Ohio Pass Rd. leads from Kebler Pass to Gunnison and offers good scenes including some nice ranches. Silver Jack reservoir area south of Cimarron has good jagged peaks with aspen groves in front. San Juan Mts. near Ridgeway and Ouray, especially the Dallas Divide (can shoot right off the road at a parking area and Last Dollar Rd and Red Mountain pass can be good. Tellyride and Red Mountain pass can be nice.

3) **New England** (late Sept, to the second week of Oct.)

While New England offers many opportunities (New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine), it is difficult to find good locations on your own when time is of the essence and you are unfamiliar with the area. My favorite area is the White Mts. of New Hampshire (a scenic main road loop is available) especially following the Kangamas river since there are opportunities to shoot with water that do not

require major hikes. Silver Falls is at the road's edge. Motels book a year in advance for Columbus day weekend which is usually when peak occurs. Camping offers more flexibility but campgrounds often require a minimum of 2-3 days stay on that weekend and nights can be very cold/snow.

4) **Smoky Mountain National Park TH/NC** offers opportunities mid to late October because it is farther south. Since roads take one through a variety of elevations, it is more likely that if you miss peak in one area you can find it in another. Follow the roads along rivers for opportunities that involve water and colors.

5) **The Upper Peninsula of Michigan** (last week of Sept through second week of Oct)

Bond Falls (east of Paulding): The top of the falls area (walk in from the main road crossing a small bridge) offers color reflected in moving water (good abstracts) in the early afternoon (12:30-4:00) when light hits the maples on the far side but the water is in shade. This upper area is approached from the main road just east of the newly built road which goes down to the base of the falls...pass this entrance (large sign) and park on the road well before the small cabin housing the ice cream shop. There is a vertical sign which indicates the path to the top edge of the falls.

Porcupine Mountains State Park...Lake in the Clouds lookout at sunrise (Silver Sands Motel is at the park entrance) offers a view of the lake and the Carp river which winds through colorful trees. Nearby Presque Isle Falls area offers a series of waterfalls to hike to. However, this canyon area tends to be dark and little foliage near the water.

Munising area...many waterfalls especially Wagner Falls and Munising Falls which are an easy paved walk; also many lakes accessed from HWY 13: Pete's Lake, Thornton Lake, Council Lake and Redjack Lake which offer good reflection opportunities. Get a local map and check out any lake that you can get to easily and which is in public forest area so that cabins are not an intrusion. Reflections are more likely in the morning

Along the Lake Superior shore East/ northeast of Munising(Pictured Rocks area):Miner's Castle Beach, the forest roads which lead to Grand Marrais (look for white birch forest, also AuSable sand dunes ...entering from Grand Marrais means less driving on the rutted dirt road), Seeney Wildlife refuge

Areas near the lake turn last. The Keewenaw peninsula is a good place to explore including the Brockway Mt drive near Copper Harbor.

Explore the Taquammanen Falls area

WINTER (birds and desert)

1) **Bosque del Apache, NM** wildlife refuge (November through January).

Stay in Socorro NM (70 miles south of Albuquerque). It is 17 miles to the refuge in pre dawn darkness. Pre dawn (pitch dark and very cold) photographers line up at the "flight deck" area facing east waiting for predawn light and the taking off of thousands of snow geese at dawn hoping for a colorful sunrise (just the right consistency of clouds needed). Once sun has risen proceed back to the lakes along the road which you came in on. Facing west you can have good light on the Sandhill cranes as they take off from their nightly resting area. When they are gone proceed to the farm fields at the north end of the one-way loop road through the refuge. This area is better in November than in Jan. since the fields will get mowed down and the birds feed farther and farther back as the season progresses. Return in the late afternoon to shoot the birds as they fly back into the water areas for the night.

2) **White Sands NM**...several hours drive from Bosque. You can do Bosque in the morning and be on the dunes for late light plus early light the next morning and then be back at Bosque for afternoon light if you hustle. Best to spend at least two days though so that you have time to scout the dunes first. Park opens at 7:00 which is just about sunrise in Dec. You can make arrangements to pay the ranger to open up earlier so that you can be well down the road by sunrise. Hike into the dunes carefully so that you do not lose your way. Keep track of landmarks (the orientation of the mountains at the horizon). If there is no wind drag your tripod to make a trail markings in the sand.

You may need to go in quite far to get pristine areas since dunes close to the road are trod upon. Not good to be there over a weekend. Early and late light is necessary to show the ripples. Park closes around sunset so you need to be sure that you can get out in time. Temps drop rapidly with the sun.

3) **Death Valley CA** (both winter and spring are good).

The sand dunes near Stovepipe Wells are easily accessible. Make reservations at the motel in the park well in advance since rooms are few and the nearest towns are a long distance. Scout the dunes in afternoon light to be ready for morning. You will need to start your morning walk in the dark so pick an entry point that allows easy access. Follow the “valleys” which are harder surfaces and thus easier to walk on. Climbing only when you see the photo opp. Since the road is high you will not get lost. Simply climb a dune and you will see the main road and your car.

4) **Yellowstone National Park:** February is a good time to plan a winter trip.

Initially stay outside the northern entrance of the park There is private auto access to Mammoth and from there to Silver city/Cooke city across the northern most roads of the park. Big horn sheep are often near the edge of the road as you come in from the north into Mammoth. Elk can often be found near the road. Look for snow pillows on the river on the way to Cooke City. Accessing the rest of the park means hiring a snow coach (NOT the bombardier type). This van on treads can easily accommodate 8 photographers. Organizing your own group of photo friends means you are more likely to stop at good photo opps. The coach will be more than \$800 per day with driver who is willing to please. Suggested schedule. Stay at Mammoth hotel the night before leaving, two days of snow coach with an overnight at the Snow Lodge (Old Faithful), one day on foot around Old Faithful—no snow coach. One more day again hiring the snow coach, photographing all day and returning to Mammoth. Reservations must be made many months in advance.

5) **Birds of Florida:** February-April

Late winter for many of us is Spring in FL and the birds are in breeding plumage, building nest, feeding young etc. Best spots;

- a) Anhinga trail and Shark Valley in the Everglades—paved paths easily accessible.
- b) The Venice rookery, at the edge of the town of Venice. Take Jacaranda exit on 75 to 41 and go north a short distance to the road just before the Highway patrol headquarters. Turn left and look for a pond on your right. Morning is best but no need to be there at sunrise since sun needs to clear the trees. Cormorants, herons and egret families are crammed onto the island in the pond and a 500+ lenses helps to isolate.
- c) Merritt Island on the Atlantic Coast near Cape Canaveral and Ding Darling Refuge on the Gulf (Sanibel Island) offer loop nature roads with many birds opts. Check the time Ding opens and which day it is closed (usually Friday)
- d) Wakodahatchee Wetlands (near Delray Beach on the east coast) is a wetlands area created out of the water treatment plant and has a lovely boardwalk that offers many bird opportunities.

SPRING (flowers):

Spring starts in the Southwestern deserts. If there is a lot of rain in the winter (Dec) In an El Nino year, CA has mudslides in winter, and flowers can be good in the spring. Not every year is good. Watch the wildflower hotlines. Deserts are hard to photograph because there is often harsh light and strong winds. Schedule enough time to wait it out.

1) **Arizona** (March):

- a) **Organ Pipe Cactus Nat'l Mon** several hours west of Tucson (south of Ajo—get one of the few motels there)—Mexican poppies mixed with other flowers.
- b) **Picacho Peak** (between Phoenix and Tucson right off the Interstate)—can be good for poppies.

2) **California** (from Feb in the far south to second week of April): watch California Wildflower Hotsheet at calphonto.com

- a) **Anza Borrego, CA** (several hours east of San Diego, south of Palm Springs /palm Desert area) has some of the earliest desert blooms (in Feb through March)
- b) **Antelope Valley** (70 miles north/northeast of LA west of Lancaster/Palmdale) known for its fields of poppies (CA state flower). The Poppy preserve limits you to stay on paths and often better flowers can be found outside the preserve. Drive the ranch roads watch the calphoto website. Often good Joshua trees blooming in the areas near the main road through the valley. Explore the ranch roads if you see color in the distance.
- c) **Carrizzo Plaines** between Bakersfield and St Louis Obispo. Nearest motels tend to be 30-50 miles away. In a good year the valley can have many different areas full of color. A 4 wheel drive/ or at least high clearance is helpful on the dirt roads off of the main road.
- d) **Joshua Tree NP**: southern half tends to have flowers Mar. to early April while the northern half is known for its rounded boulders and Joshua tree which do bloom with huge white clusters.

3) **Texas Hill country** (both East and West of Austin... I prefer the western side).

Fields of lupine and paintbrush often seeded by the ranchers on their acreage near the roads. Drive the roads suggested on websites. Local bluebonnet trail maps can be helpful are not updated annually so there is no guarantee that you will find flowers there that year. Best to watch the reports on the web.

4) **Smoky Mountains TN** (mid April)

Many varieties of spring flowers from trillium to dogwood and magnolias. Few opps for fields of flowers but many individual species for more intimate shots. Chimneys area is good. Road past the Tremont Institute offers river scenes with dogwoods. The one-way Auto Nature loop road which starts and ends on the fringe of Gatlinburg offers the classic green moss covered rocks in the river..

5) **Illinois** (mid April through May)

- a) Lake County Forest Preserve northeast of Daniel Wright woods east of St Mary's road south of Rt 22. Wetlands full of marsh marigolds in April. Wear boots.
- b) Messenger Woods (southeast of Lemont) ravine full of Virginia blue bells late April early May, some masses of trillium, blue eyed marys. Be sure to cross the dry ravine and explore the western side.
- c) Chiwaukee Prairie (one block west of Lake Michigan just north of the WI/ IL border. Acres of shooting stars if the prairie was burned in the late winter.

6) Spring moves north to WI and the U.P of MI late May to early June: Ridges Sanctuary in Bailey's Harbor, Door Co. WI, offers dwarf lake iris, paintbrush, orchids (lady slippers)

SUMMER

1) **Rocky Mountains**: Spring arrives in July in the higher elevations.

- a) Glacier National Park
- b) Yellowstone
- c) Canadian Rockies

July is peak wildflower time in Colorado. Yankee Boy basin outside of Ouray, and Crested Butte are favorites.

2) **Illinois**: The prairies are prime starting in mid July with fields of blazing stars. Try

- a) Gensburg Markham Prairie (take 159th straight west from 294 to Whipple and turn north). Prairie abuts 294.
- b) Chiwaukee Prairie (see above)
- c) Somme Prairie (in Northbrook northwest quadrant of Waukegan Rd and Dundee Rd.)
- d) Wolf prairie

Finding the right place at the right time requires research since each year is different. Fortunately the Internet offers us good information in a multitude of sites.