

The Essential Guide To The British Photographic Year

Written by Nina Bailey



PREVIEW
EDITION



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Foreword by the author

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This ebook is all about celebrating the British Isles and the photographic opportunities that they offer us. It is very easy for us that live in the British Isles to forget how unique these islands really are. There is no other place on this earth that has quite the same climate, geology, history and culture that we have. If we look at other countries at the same latitudes they have much colder winters and often warmer summers than we have. We have a relatively high rainfall that keeps the country green and lush all year round, and a surprising amount of plants, animals, birds and insects flourish in our unique climate.

Why is it so unique? It's all to do with the gulf stream that brings warm sea currents and warm airflows up across the Atlantic from the Gulf of Mexico, this keeps our weather up to 30°C warmer in winter than most of the other locations on earth that have a similar latitude. The warm air is also laden with moisture, which releases its rainfall regularly on our western coastline. It is this that gives our islands the unique character they have and has shaped our history for many thousands of years. It is also what controls the seasons that we all know so well.

This ebook sets out to look at all the photographic opportunities that these islands give us, not only in the balmy summer months, but throughout the year. Every season is full of opportunities, you just have to get out there and capture the beautiful country where we live, in all its photogenic glory. We also have some unique events that take place throughout the year, that offer lots of great images and we also have some of the best historic houses, parks and gardens to be found anywhere in the world.

It's very easy to forget the familiar. So occasionally try and be a tourist on your own door step. You may be pleasantly surprised at what might be just around the corner from your front door.

The shots below are all taken within a mile of where I live...

Nina



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Winter - Renewal and rebirth

Winter

Winter - Rebirth and renewal

It's easy to see winter as a season of death, decay and dormancy. Yet it's really the season of renewal, rejuvenation and rebirth.

We start the year off in winter, we see January as the start of the New Year, a chance for a fresh start, hopeful that this will be a great year. We also have passed the shortest day and the nights now draw out by a few minutes each day.

The lengthening days produce small but subtle changes to plants, buds start to swell and the sap in plants start to rise again ready for the new seasons growth.

For the photographer this can be a great time of year. January and February bring the greatest chance of frosts and snow. Rivers can freeze and the sunrise and sunsets can be spectacular.

The bare trees have an architectural form and lend themselves to being captured as subjects against the great sunrise and sunset lighting.

Photographers tend to forget how good the lighting is at this time of year, cold frosty nights bring clear sunny days and the landscape opportunities can be numerous.

Cities also photograph well at this time of year with crisp winter lighting showing up the very best in the architecture. In addition, many public buildings are surrounded by trees, which obscure many of the very best views, which is not a problem at this time of year.

There are some great opportunities for the wildlife photographer with thousands of migratory birds taking up residence here for the winter. A visit to any of the many reserves around the country can provide a wealth of opportunities.

There are also great opportunities for the close up and macro photographers, with subjects as diverse as patterns in ice, frost on leaves through to the winter blooms in our parks and gardens. One of the most spectacular sights can be the snowdrop season at many of the historic properties throughout the country.

It may be cold, but there are some great images to be had, so lets look at some subjects that are just waiting for you to photography them.



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January

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January sees the biggest celebration, the welcoming of the new year itself. It's a sign of a new start and fresh hope, and that's what January is about for the natural world – the very start of everything for the year.

The weather can be very variable ranging from cold, bright, frosty days through to very inclement days with rain or even snow. It's this variability of the conditions that makes January so special.

The days are now beginning to lengthen, but they are still short, producing great lighting on days when the weather is good.

When it snows it gives a fresh new look to the familiar things we see all around us, presenting numerous opportunities for the photographer.

Sadly it's a time of year when photographers often leave the cameras at home missing the opportunities that abound.



Snow



Frost



Bare trees and winter landscapes



City photography

Snow

It was becoming rare to see snow in the winter months except in the far north of the UK. Yet the past few years it seems to be more frequently seen.

This gives us lots of opportunities to get some stunning images. Although getting out and about can be challenging, there are lots of images to be had on our doorsteps. Indeed most of the images that I am showing here are taken within walking distance of where I live and work.

Snow is at its very best just after it has finished falling. Within a day or two the places that are easily accessible are full of foot prints, sledge tracks and are far less photogenic.

Snow photographs best on a sunny day with a blue sky. However, it can also give some great images even if the conditions are overcast, foggy or even still snowing.

You need to have something that gives a good focal point to the image that you are taking.

If shooting in a town or village this could be some of the local buildings, the local church or some of the picturesque thatched cottages in a local village are a favourite of mine.

If shooting in towns and cities it can be difficult to get images with snow in them, unless the snowfall is exceptionally hard. The roads and pavements are cleared as soon as possible and even the residential roads get covered in



This was taken in the village I used to work in. A very heavy fall of snow and no wind had left the tree outlines in snow and the bright red phone box contrasted well to give a great focal point.

Camera settings							
Mode	TV	ISO	400 ISO	Aperture	f13	Shutter	1/80th
Exp. Comp.	+11/3	AWB	Auto	Lens	105mm	Camera	EOS 6D

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Snow

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footprints and look dirty very quickly after the snow has fallen.

Local parks are the best chance of getting some reasonable deep snowfall that looks good. Even then you need to be out early before the snow gets rolled up to make snowmen or sledged down.

Sometimes there are some great detail shots to be had of snow on signs, gates etc.

If out in the countryside you can use some of the natural features in the landscape such as the bare trees, tress stumps and fences to provide the interest in the image.

If the weather is sunny then the wider-angle lenses will normally give the best images. If the lighting is flatter and there is a grey sky then standard and telephoto lenses will often be better, allowing you to frame tighter and lose most of the grey sky.

If it is misty or foggy there can be some great images to be had. It's important to be reasonably close to the subject that will be the main focal point in the shot to get detail in it, the rest of the scene will then blend into the background.

If shooting when it is still snowing or misty, think about the composition carefully, often less is more, when it comes to getting a great image.

Regardless of the weather conditions the main



Even whilst it is snowing you can get some great images, as the image above left shows. I always find that the quicker that you get out the fresher the snow looks and the better the images you get as in the image top right.



It's great to have bright sunny conditions to shoot in though there are drawbacks. The sun appearing normally results in the temperatures rising and the snow can quickly disappear from the tree branched and some of the surfaces.



On a misty day you need some detail up close to get a good foreground. Here I used the reeds by the river to give me the interest that I needed.



Just after it has stopped snowing there are always great detail shots of the snow clinging on to familiar things that just gives us a little bit of extra interest if the lighting is not right for the general views.



This is taken just a couple of hundred meters from where I live of the cattle looking for exposed grass by the river. The trees reflecting on the river gives much needed foreground interest.



0 exposure compensation



+1 exposure compensation



Exposure taken off the snow

problem experienced when shooting snow can be exposure problems. If you are shooting buildings or have a lot of subjects in the frame that are not covered by snow then the camera will generally get the exposure right.

The more snow there is in the image and especially if you need to focus on it, the more likely you are to get exposure problems. This is going to make the image come out underexposed, caused by the camera seeing the snow and trying to make it a mid tone grey, which is how the exposure system is designed to work.

The normal way to correct this is to use exposure compensation, although in theory you can get up to two stops underexposure, it is seldom this much if you are using the camera's default evaluative metering system.

Normally a correction of $+2/3$ or $+1$ is all that is needed to get the right exposure. Simply dial in what you think is needed and then take a shot to check it. If changing the framing a lot then the compensation may need to be changed between shots.

The more white in the image the more compensation will be needed, the more darker tones, then less or none will be needed.

The image to the right above shows what happens if we take an exposure reading for the snow. This has only happened, as at the time the metering was locked, there was only snow in the frame.

The image bottom right has the exposure reading locked onto the grey card that the person is holding. The easiest way to do this would be to use spot metering.



Exposure taken off the grey card

A question that I am often asked is what white balance to use in snow? I find that generally this is one time that the auto white balance does a really good job in keeping the snow crisp, white and looking cold. Be wary of the overrides as these can turn the snow yellow or amber in the

Snow

image. After all, snow is one subject that should look cold, even slightly bluish.

As for the other camera settings such as mode choice, it doesn't really matter. Most of the images I am showing you were shot on program mode, which looks after the handholding requirements for us. I always look for a set up that's easy to use and shoot quickly with. With a wide angle lens fitted the depth of field requirements will generally look after themselves.

Most of the more recent cameras feature a highlight tone priority mode. This allows you to tell the camera that you are shooting a subject with a lot of highlight tones and you want the camera to optimise the image for them. This mode needs to be switched on when needed and turned off when not required. Most commonly, this image processing option will be in the camera's custom function menu. However, on the very latest models it is sometimes found within the camera's shooting menus.

When this is turned on it will not be possible to use the cameras full ISO range. The lowest setting will be 200 ISO on all cameras and the highest will be one stop below the normal non-expanded range.

They key thing with snow is to make the effort to get out there and you will be rewarded with some great images.



Regardless of the subject that we shoot, there is no doubt that a little snow makes it look very picturesque. They key thing is to grab the opportunities when you can.

Remember that it is going to be cold and the cameras battery life gets a lot shorter in the cold, so always keep at least 1 spare battery with you. Of course the colder it is, the longer the snow will last. The image above right shows the Great Ouse in Huntington frozen solid with snow laying on top of it. It was about -10°C when I took the shot.



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Frost

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Although we can get frosts throughout the winter months, we see some of the harshest ones in January. Plus with the temperatures staying below freezing for most of the day we get more chance to get out and take advantage of the opportunities that frosty days offer.

Generally, we get a frost on a clear night, so first thing in the morning we generally get a great sunrise with frost on all the plants and trees. Occasionally it will be below freezing and misty which gives us a hoar frost, making the trees a spectacular sight.

With hoar frosts, we are normally going to be shooting landscape shots with wide lenses to make the most of the lighting and scenes. Even with a normal frost there will be great landscapes to be had. I normally head to the riverside where we have the added bonus of the water being practically frozen and the reflection of the light in the river to add to the images.

Whatever the type of frost, it's going to be at its very best just after daybreak before the temperatures start to rise and the frost melts. So the main thing is that you have to be out as early as possible to get the very best shots. This also means that the light levels are going to be very low so you need to watch the camera settings to make sure that camera shake does not occur. The ISO will need to be high to enable this.



This was taken on a cold morning when the frost was still on the ground on a walk alongside the river. It's important to be out as early as possible when shooting a frost as most days it will melt very soon after the sun gets above the horizon.

Camera settings							
Mode	AV	ISO	100 ISO	Aperture	f11	Shutter	1/40th
Exp. Comp.	-1/3	WB	AWB	Lens	32mm	Camera	EOS 5D Mark II

Frost

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On a day where the temperatures stay below zero all day, the light will be better once the sun is up and often better images can be achieved. It is also important to watch the light levels and as the light goes up, drop the ISO settings accordingly.

There are also some great close up images to be taken when it is frosty. A macro lens can be great, but at the times that we are shooting, the light levels can be very low and flash might be needed to get the depth of field required.

I more commonly use a telephoto lens to shoot the detail shots. This allows me to get a good clean background and still get the subject sharp without the need to set very small aperture settings.

For some shots the even lighting provided by front or side lighting will work. There are other shots where shooting backlit will show up the form in the subject a lot more. Shooting at sunrise with the addition of the warm lighting can also add to the images that you shoot.

The more general shots are fairly obvious, but the detail shots can take a lot of looking for. The frost is turning everyday subjects into miniature works of art, but you need to look for the details that are there and think about how you are going to shoot to make the most of the opportunity.



This was taken at sunrise along the riverbank in Huntingdon. I am lucky to live this close to the riverside park where there are lots of opportunities along the riverside path for early morning frost photography.

Camera settings							
Mode	AV	ISO	1250 ISO	Aperture	f10	Shutter	1/100th
Exp. Comp.	-2/3	WB	AWB	Lens	105mm	Camera	EOS 5D Mark II

Frost

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Using a telephoto lens has made it easier to get the teasel sharp whilst getting the background out of focus enough, to not be distracting in the image.



Many of the opportunities will come from getting in close and shooting close up shots. It shows the frost up better, however light levels can be very low this early in the morning so the higher ISO values may need to be used to get enough light to shoot.



In very low light levels it may be necessary to use flash to light the subject. This can give us the choice of either a black background or to expose, to let some of the ambient light show up.

Frost

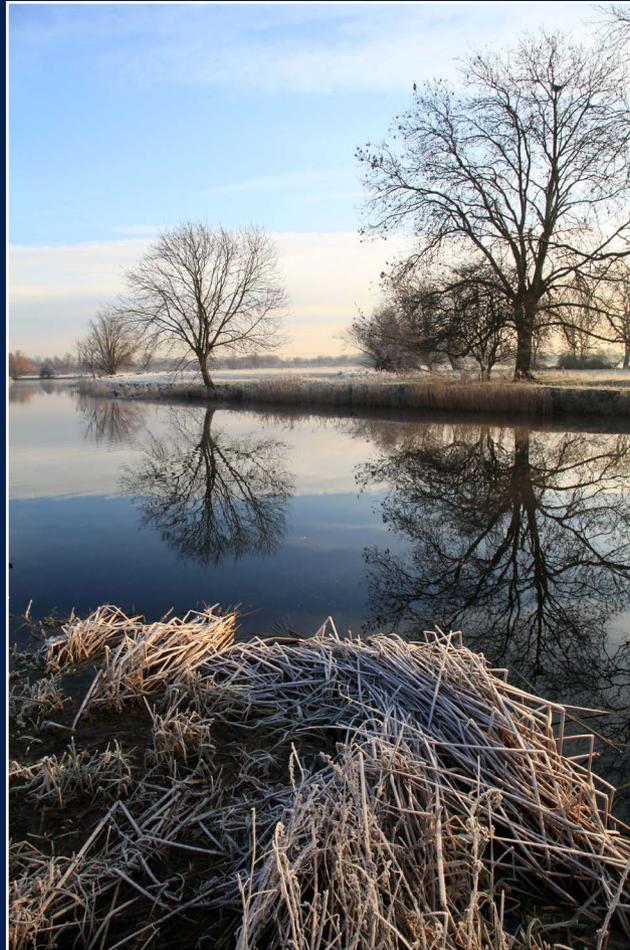
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Just like with snow scenes we can get exposure problems, but generally less than with snow. Expect to need exposure compensation on some shots. With the low lighting angles early in the morning, there may be times where the background may be in shade and go very dark. This will make the subject stand out, but may also require the exposure to be brought down by a minus compensation as the background is causing the image to go too light, rather than the traditional problems of underexposure. Highlight tone priority can also be a help if there is a really heavy hoar frost.

The mode choice can be dictated by the lens that you are shooting with and the depth of field requirements. For more general scenes I would use P or TV mode, but as I go closer AV mode often has an advantage.

As with snow, the white balance generally looks after itself. Once again be aware that the overrides can make the frost amber or yellow in colour.

The most striking feature in the landscape in winter are the bare trees. They provide a striking outline to form a key focal point in the landscapes that you shoot. January is a great time of year to shoot tree silhouettes. The trees are now totally bare of leaves and we get some great skies and light to act as a background for them.



If shooting more general scenes you need to think about how you are going to get the frost to show up clearly in the image. In the left hand image I was shooting with a wide angle lens and getting down close to the foreground, which has allowed it to be more noticeable in the image. At the same time the lens has pushed the background away making it into a good background to the image.

In the right hand image a longer lens has been used to concentrate the eye on the frost on the reeds in the foreground and the background interest is provided by the tree reflections in the river. Generally when there is a frost it is very still and so you generally get very good reflections on the water.

Bare trees and winter landscapes

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I like to shoot the trees by a river or lake. This allows me to get the light and often the tree reflected in the water, which gives a more interesting foreground. It's also possible to just use the sky to frame the trees against.

We often think that winter landscape can be drab, yet there is lots of colour especially on a bright colourful day. One thing that can help is the use of a polarising filter. This will darken the sky and can enhance colours in the rest of the scene.

As the days are so short in January we have the opportunity to shoot by the golden light that we get just after sunrise or before sunset for a large part of the day and this gives us great lighting to work with, that can make even the most mundane scene look great.

If just shooting the trees, think about the angles that you shoot at. Ultra wide lenses can be used to very good effect to make the trees appear to tower upwards. Some of the trees have spectacular bark, which is often at its very best in winter. Closer shots of just the bark also can provide some great images.

If shooting the trees as silhouettes, then it's important to ensure that the exposure is going to be for the sky in the image rather than the tree itself. This may well require the use of the AE Lock button to ensure that the exposure is locked onto the sky and then just lock the focusing onto the tree itself.

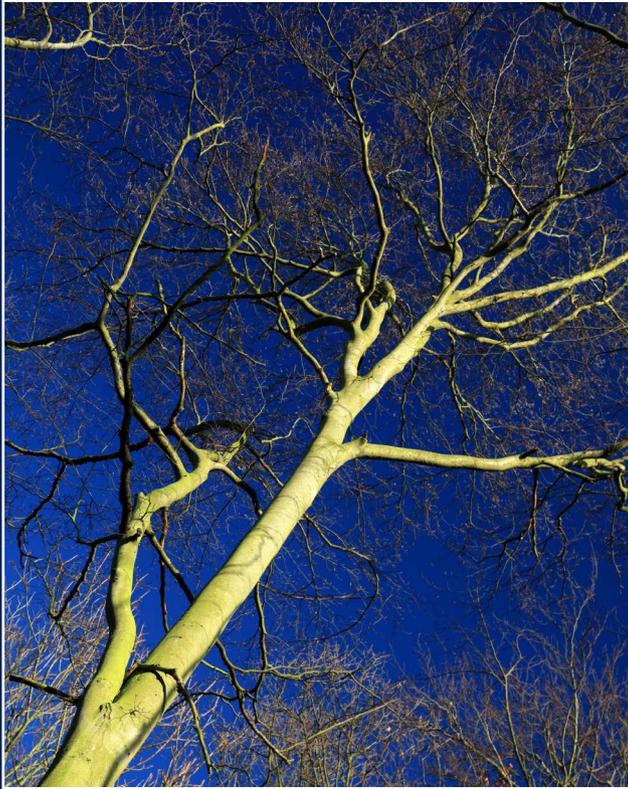


A shot at sunrise by the river, taken in January at about 8.20am in the morning. The great thing about the winter months is that it is not necessary to get up really early to catch the beautiful morning colours.

Camera settings							
Mode	AV	ISO	100 ISO	Aperture	f9	Shutter	1/125th
Exp. Comp.	-1/3	WB	AWB	Lens	24mm	Camera	EOS 5D Mark II

Bare trees and winter landscapes

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Bare trees and winter landscapes

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Much of the time the auto white balance will work very well. At other times the use of the daylight or even the cloudy settings will help to warm the image up. The cloudy setting is especially useful if shooting the bare trees against an uninspiring sunset, where it will help to add more colour to the scene.

Any of the camera's exposure modes will work. I tend to use the Program mode, though TV or AV will both work well. If using a wide-angle lens then the lens will provide the depth of field and a moderate aperture can be used and everything in the image will normally be at the infinity focus position.

If shooting with telephoto lenses think about what depth of field is needed. Often it will be preferable to get some of the key features sharp against a blurred background. In this instance the use of the longest practical focal length and wide apertures will give the best results.

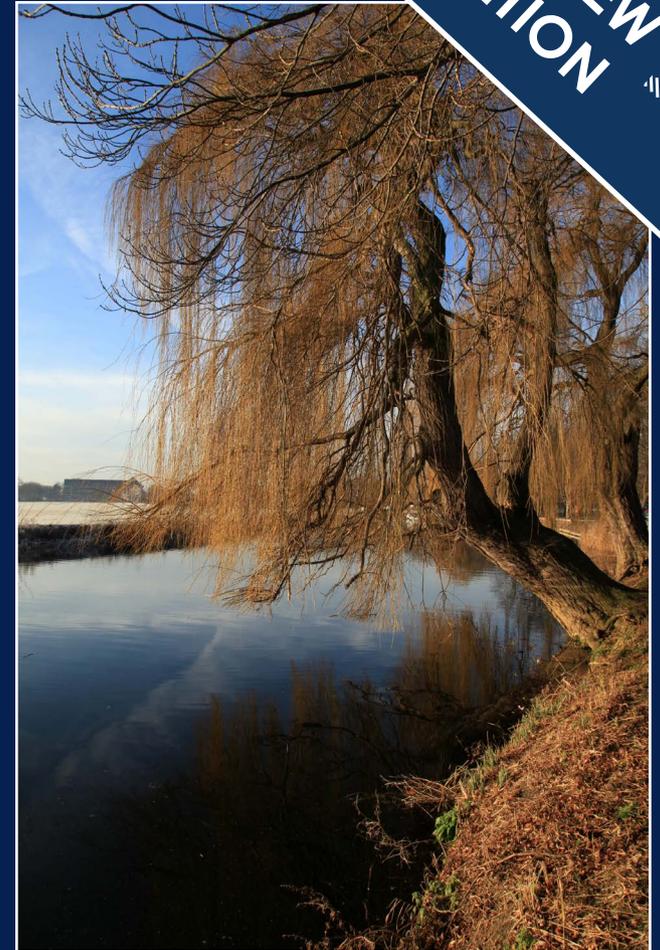
With the added appeal of frosts or sometimes snow and some great lighting, January is the ideal time to go out and get some great landscape shots.

Remember that all trees have different shapes and so it's worth travelling around your area a little to see what different shapes the trees offer.



The image above left was taken in a garden of a stately home and is of a tree that has been pollarded giving it a very different shape and profile to what it would normally have. Although the sky is very deep in colour there is not a polarising filter used on the shot as it simply did not need it as the sky was very blue when shooting straight up and was helped by the use of the landscape picture style.

The image to the right was also taken on the landscape picture style and this has enhanced the rich colours of these bare willow trees in the riverside park in Huntingdon. The tree in the image actually no longer exists as last winter (2013) large parts of it fell off into the river and so has been cut down.



City photography

January is a great time of year to photograph cities. If you get a day when the weather is good, the lighting can be really stunning, resulting in great images.

Although the days are short, the low angle of the sun gives very clear, crisp lighting on the buildings. Also the lack of leaves on many of the trees will give better views to many of the frequently photographed buildings.

As the days are short it is important to make the best of the daylight hours and plan the day carefully, as most buildings only have the main facade lit ideally for photography for an hour or two each day. So we need to plan to be at the sights when the lighting is right – this is easy using the satellite view options on some of the web map sites.

If we work out if the things that we want to photograph faces north, south, east or west it is easy to work out the time of day that we need to be there to get the very best lighting.

Shooting with the light in the right direction is important to be able to get all parts of the exposure correct. If we shoot a subject that faces east in the afternoon, we will have the sun behind it and this will make it impossible to expose the whole image correctly. If we get the building correct the sky will burn out and if we expose the sky correctly the building will become a silhouette.

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A morning shot of the houses of parliament in winter. When you get a good day in winter the lighting can be exceptional and this is one of the best images I have ever taken of the houses of parliament due to the clarity of the light.

Camera settings

Mode	Program	ISO	400 ISO	Aperture	f11	Shutter	1/500th
Exp. Comp.	0	WB	AWB	Lens	17mm	Camera	EOS 40D

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