

11 (not 50) Shades of Gray

by JOSHUA HARDIN

ONCE UPON A time, processing a photograph was a complicated but pleasurable affair in a darkroom.

Those of us who are lucky enough to have witnessed the transition of darkroom to digital imaging are amazed at how much things changed in a few short years. Today we have cameras that fit inside our pocket, connected to phones that allow us to share our photos with millions of people in a matter of seconds.

While we might appreciate the instant gratification of seeing how our photos came out on an LCD screen and tapping an Instagram filter to create a vintage appearance for them spontaneously, instead of waiting even one anxious hour at a photo lab, some of us retain fond memories of a much more sensuous relationship with our photos.

We used to load film onto a reel by touch in total darkness, then soaked and shook it with chemicals in a cylindrical tank every few minutes. Under the red glow of safelights, we placed the developed negatives in enlargers to expose our prints, carefully dodging and burning by hand to brighten and darken selected sections of the images.

We dropped prints in Dektol to watch the images seem to mystically materialize from the blank paper, then we preserved them for the ages in a swirl of stop bath and fixer solutions. We had to wait some more for the prints to dry before we could hang them on a wall.

Taking all these steps to develop a single photo may seem like cruel and unusual punishment to anyone used to the convenience of digital technology, but thinking of this process actually makes me nostalgic for the midwinter days when I practiced photography in high school and developed black-and-white film in



a darkroom. That darkroom wasn't only useful as a secluded spot in which to make out with girls, as high schoolers will do, it became a place to train my eyes to notice how the striking textures of icy rivers, frosty windswept grasses and bare hibernating trees could be interpreted artistically in an image.

Photographers are taught to seek the colorful light of the "magic" or "golden" hours, one hour before sunset or after sunrise, when scenes glow in warm shades of pink, maroon or orange. It's easy to take photos in these conditions if you get up early or stay up late enough.

However, midday light, with the sun directly overhead, is usually harsh and cold. This is the time when most people take pictures, and because of the sun's high angle, these photos often have a large contrast between very bright and dark subjects. This can be detrimental for color photography, washing out the vividness of hues, but beneficial for black and white.

Photographer Ansel Adams not only saw the deep contrast of highlight and shadow but suggested there were shades of gray hidden in between. He called this the Zone System, identifying 11 distinct

shades from pure white through a scale of grays to pure black. For modern digital photographers, it's useful to think about the way subtle tones of a particular color can translate into a wide range of grays.

This type of previsualization helped me envision the photo to the right. I captured curling tufts of windblown snow around the summit of Longs Peak in Rocky Mountain National Park at 11:30 a.m. on a blustery February day. I took the original photograph in color but saw it was dominated by an unflattering bright blue cast.

By converting the image to grayscale with a computer program like Adobe Photoshop, I knew I could divert a viewer's attention away from the nearly-noon monochromatic look and direct it toward the attractive shapes of the billowing clouds, the rocky faces of the mountain and the checkered patterns of snow fields, which all possessed specific zones of gray.

The legacy of the darkroom lives on. Some enthusiasts still develop photos in physical darkrooms, but most of us now work in more practical digital versions despite our sentimental yearnings for the good old days.

Whether we develop with chemicals or on a computer monitor, looking back at black-and-white techniques can help us savor the unique tones and textures available in what might otherwise seem like the bleakest of seasons. 🌲

THE ORIGINAL version of this photo of Longs Peak was in color, but the harsh midday sun created an unflattering bright blue cast. Converting the image to black and white brought out interesting patterns and many shades of gray.



A Peek into the Plains

by JOSHUA HARDIN

AT *COLORADO LIFE* we're often asked by prospective photographers how they can contribute to the magazine. Many approach us with impressive portfolios of iconic mountain vistas, and we're always happy to see new takes on our beloved Rockies. It's tempting, though, to concentrate on the peaks while forgetting roughly one third of our state's landmass is plains.

From the beginning, we sought to represent the entire state in every issue. That includes places that don't receive as much photographic attention, from the remote northwest canyons to the vast southeast prairies. Our mountains are a bit like the popular girls everyone paid attention to in school. They're deserving – after all there's no denying that they're easy on the eyes and are great cheerleaders for state tourism. The plains maybe are like the quiet, shy girls who sat in the back corner during class and didn't get noticed as much. If you took the effort to talk to them, likely these girls were as interesting as their boisterous counterparts.

I admit I've stood shoulder-to-shoulder with other shutterbugs on the shores of Maroon Lake and other prominent landmarks to photograph the mountain scenes we expect to see on Colorado postcards. While visiting these places is undoubtedly fun, some of my more enjoyable experiences unexpectedly came from photographing alone on the expansive plains instead.

Perhaps 19th century pioneers traversing the Overland or Santa Fe trails on Conestoga wagons perpetuated a misconception that the plains are a dangerous, treeless Great American Desert. Those who've traveled the region widely by automobile or aircraft in this century know the contrary is true. Modern communities along the South Platte and Arkansas River



oases are far from dried up, as our stories about cities like Sterling and Rocky Ford revealed. Tributaries like the Arikaree, Republican and Purgatoire are the sites of historic battlefields, dinosaur tracks and wildlife viewing areas. The shortgrass hides swift foxes, pronghorn and prairie chickens, waiting to be discovered by persistent photographers who forsake easy snapshots of more well-known locales.

One such subject is the Pawnee Buttes of Weld County. As a northern Colorado native, the location has always been one of my favorites to visit. These two towering monuments rise 300 feet above the rolling hills, seemingly out of nowhere. When viewed from the hiking trails below, they are accented by carpets of spring wildflowers. The buttes' ledges are a beacon to hawks, falcons and eagles, providing an ideal perch to feast on a banquet of prey. Some trails near the base of the bluffs are closed at this time of year so hikers don't disturb nesting raptors, but a telephoto lens can easily bring birds into view.

When seen from above, as in the aerial photo to the right, the buttes take on an even more unusual character. They are outlined in earthly folds swirling around their feet are not apparent from ground level. The topography is

interestingly tangled and not flat at all.

Pawnee, like counterpart Comanche National Grassland in Colorado's southeastern corner, was created to reclaim prairie meadow from failed Dust Bowl farms. Exploring it produces opportunities to uncover photogenic, long-forgotten farmsteads on the gravel roads crisscrossing the countryside. But the plains aren't locked in the past. Lonely windmills have turned into fields of wind turbines. Friendly inhabitants of fertile farms now grow a cornucopia of crops from tuberous sugar beets to colorful chile peppers.

I appreciate living in such a geographically diverse state. We can bike on Western Slope slickrock arches as awe-inspiring as those in Utah, sample San Luis Valley food as savory as the culinary delights of New Mexico and attend Denver festivals as vibrant as any in other urban areas. The plains are a big part of Colorado's wonderful heritage, and they're right on our doorstep, just waiting for our cameras.

My advice to photographers is this: Why jockey for position around a crowded mountain lake when you can have an entire grassland to yourself? To be published, seek places other photographers have overlooked. Ignore the shy girl sitting at the back of your class at your own peril. She's the one who'll knock your socks off when she shows up at a reunion more stunning than you ever remembered. 🍷

PAWNEE NATIONAL Grassland in Weld County is just one of the many surprising landscapes that await photographers who travel to the Colorado plains.

Share your plains photos with Josh at jhardin@ColoradoLifeMagazine.com.



Rams on the roadside

by JOSHUA HARDIN

THE 30-MILE STRETCH of Highway 34 between Loveland and Estes Park has been my daily commute for nearly five years.

Of course, there's an exception. I didn't drive it for 10 weeks after the 2013 floods. The raging Big Thompson River heavily damaged the road, even completely gouging it out in some sections. Many nearby homes teetered on the edge of cliffs that suddenly split in the earth as riverbanks eroded. Emergency workers rescued residents over rushing waters by zip line and performed more than 100 airlift evacuations.

Astoundingly, construction crews completed repairs to reopen the road on a snowy November morning three years ago, 10 days before Gov. John Hickenlooper's deadline. The mayors of long-cut-off communities hugged as they were reunited, canyon residents returned home and traffic resumed temporarily.

That winter I watched through my windshield as homeowners hustled to restore property and bulldozers bustled to push displaced boulders from the riverbed. After the reopening, I hoped I'd see one more thing amid these encouraging signs of recovery: Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep.

It was weeks before I noticed the bighorn reappear, but when they did it was the biggest reassurance that life was getting back to normal. Wildlife studies show sheep don't easily move to new habitats, even in places adjacent to where they currently live. Like many people, they're tightly connected to their home.

Bighorn are Colorado natives that once ranged far and wide from the high mountains to the prairie. Today, development has limited their habitat to remote foothills, steep canyons and harsh tundra



rarely visited by people. Yet we marvel in their stalwart determination and dexterity when we are lucky enough to spot them effortlessly bounding along rugged slopes. We've branded bighorn as our state animal, and they're the mascot of my alma mater, Colorado State University. The Big Thompson Canyon is one of the best places to view these creatures with a camera.

I often pulled over to photograph bachelor bands of rams with a 300 mm telephoto lens from across the highway. Their early winter rut is the perfect time for practicing action shots of frisky head-butting battles that are part of a courtship ritual to prove the right to mate with ewes. I pointed my camera at rams competing for dominance as soon as I saw them rear up on their hind legs, commencing a charge toward their opponent. I pressed the shutter button to release bursts of continuous exposures hoping to capture at least one decisive moment in the collision of curled football-helmet-like horns. The biggest challenge was keeping the rams in focus during the forceful impacts. I had a lot of blurry misfires.

Many of my most successful bighorn photos came from less concussive situations. One of these is the photo on the right of a stately ram that took a break

from rutting contests to stare curiously at my lens from a rock ledge. I watched the ram step along the steepest chasm of the canyon narrows then stop for a minute to consider whether to tightrope walk across the water pipe spanning between the cliffs above the highway or continue strutting vertically down the mountainside. I think he had the skill to scale the pipe, but he chose the more sure-footed route.

Highway 34 will be closed again this winter for a nine-month project to build permanent safety improvements protecting roads, bridges and dams against future floods. As residents who lived through the 1976 and 2013 floods know, there will certainly be another one someday.

Commuters like me will admit the closure is frustrating but understand rehabilitation of the canyon's infrastructure is needed. Inconveniences are nothing new to us. I've witnessed tourists park their cars on hairpin curves in the middle of the highway, stopping traffic so they can take snapshots of bighorn. Despite such nuisances, I'll miss photographing the animals (from a safe distance) especially in November during the rut.

In 2017, I look forward to driving on a revamped roadway, and I know the bighorn will be back again balancing on the overhangs above, ready for their next close-up. Bighorn are resilient like the human inhabitants of the canyon who endure despite devastating floods. Coloradans couldn't have picked a better symbol for our state animal. 🐐

JOSH PHOTOGRAPHED this stately ram near the narrows of the Big Thompson Canyon.

