



Mountain camp below Mount Tyndall at sunrise in the Eastern Sierra, CA

Images Made in the Mountains

Chuck Graham

I left my truck at 1:00 am at the top of the Whitney Portal Road, headlamp burning bright on the North Fork Trail leading up the Mountaineer Route, to photograph Mount Whitney in the Eastern Sierra, CA. I wanted to shoot that glorious early morning alpine glow on the Mount Whitney massif. I was allowing myself plenty of time to hike up the gorge, rock hop over Lower Boy Scout Lake, and scramble across moraine fields and talus slabs up to that breathtaking mountain landscape. As the sun crept above the Inyo Mountains to the east, the east face and buttress of Mount Whitney warmed in brilliant hues of pink, orange then gold.

Beginning at just over 8,600 feet, the steep hike up the Mountaineer Route to Iceberg Lake at around 13,000 feet is strenuous. With 25 pounds of camera gear, food

and water on my back, my fitness level enabled me to position myself to photograph from the many granite slabs at the base of the tallest peak in the Lower 48 states.

After scaling and photographing close to 20 mountains above 14,000 feet, I've learned by trial and error what camera gear to bring and what to leave at home. I discovered natural elements I could utilize as substitutes for tripods. I also learned that a grand mountain landscape needs some perspective, and that the natural wonders of the mountains can provide the elements needed to create awesome compositions in these rugged, breathtaking environments.

Peak Performance

I also had to learn how to physically prepare for the



Sunrise on Mount Whitney, the tallest peak in the Lower 48 states



Granite arch in the Alabama Hills framing from left to right Lone Pine Peak and Mount Whitney, Eastern Sierra, CA

mountains, and after scaling a peak I would come away with new tools on how to train my body for high altitude demands the next time around. Mountains are some of the most dramatic landscapes in the world, and they demand more from a photographer. You can be the most technically sound photographer there is in the field, but if mountain landscapes above tree-line is what you're after, then your fitness level will come into play way before seeking out those stunning mountainscapes.

You'll need to spend ample time in the outdoors hiking, backpacking, trail running or mountain biking to achieve a level of fitness to reach any of the many lofty 14,000 foot peaks in California and especially Colorado. If you aspire for higher elevations abroad, then North America's 14ers will be your training ground for thinner air and new photographic heights.

Gearing Up

I use an array of lenses in the mountains. At lower elevations, say 6,000 to 8,000 feet, I'll utilize at least two of my lenses to get different perspectives of a specific peak.

My wide angle 20mm–35mm lens is my workhorse and captures the entire scope of a specific mountain and the natural elements surrounding it. For example, below Mount Whitney is the gritty Alabama Hills, an impressive high desert landscape of granite clusters and arches, some framing the highest mountain in the contiguous United States. So majestic is this landscape that over the years it's been the site for hundreds of commercials and Hollywood movies, mainly westerns from *Joe Kidd* to the most recent, *Django Unchained*.

I also enjoy using my 70mm–200mm lens for narrowing the scope of my images emphasizing climbing routes or bringing in dark clouds hovering over the tallest peaks. I may even use my 300mm IS (image stabilization) lens to catch a climber on a sheer mountain face, or a backpacker on a remote mountain pass.

I'll use a tripod at this elevation, but weight becomes an issue ascending further up. If the situation is right I'll opt for one of the miniature tripods such as Kenko or Gorillapod. There can be high winds in the mountains and these little tripods work well standing



Tattered rescue basket beneath Mount SiII and the Palisade Glacier in the Eastern Sierra, CA

on a flat talus slab or attached to a granite-shaped dorsal fin. Another alternative are monopods that can also double as a useful trekking pole.

When ascending above 19,000 feet, I'll lighten my load and keep my gear to one camera and one lens, my 20mm–35mm lens and no tripod. I'll focus on other climbers making their ascent with the summit in the background. To compensate for camera shake, I'll use anything I can find to stabilize my equipment. That could mean bracing myself against a granite wall, stabilizing my camera on a granite slab, or at lower elevations, a fallen tree.

Filters are also useful in the mountains. Alpine glow doesn't last long in the early morning, so I keep a circular polarizer in my camera pack. However, my first choice is always natural light as shadows retreat to the deepest parts of distant canyons shaped like huge open books and beneath towering craggy spires.

Seeking Perspective

To accentuate the mountain landscape there are lots of subjects to choose from. It could be a fellow hiker or climber on a summit bid. It might be a mirrorlike alpine lake in the foreground, a tent at the base of a majestic spire or a mountain goat, Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, a golden-mantled squirrel or a marmot foraging above treeline.

The best time to shoot in the mountains is early in the morning and late in the afternoon. The higher up you're photographing, the earlier the light will glow on your subject, so make sure the night before you're aware what time sunrise is and plan accordingly. The higher up you're photographing, the harsher the light gets towards midday. In my opinion fall and winter offers the best light. The annual time change in the fall keeps the sun lower on the horizon and the alpine glow lasts longer on the subject and the colors are more vibrant.

Clouds, first snowfall and wildflowers are excellent aspects to add to your mountain imagery. They create various moods, and as much as I like blue sky in the mountains, these elements put a different stamp on mountain landscapes. Ominous storm clouds moving in or clearing out are some of my favorite natural elements to add to the mountain landscape. There's also nothing like a light dusting of snow on the high peaks as those warming hues come into play at sunrise and sunset. Spring wildflowers, delicate but hardy, offer a nice contrast to the rugged elements of the mountains. They represent rejuvenation, beautiful colors of fragility in a sometimes foreboding environment.

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Two climbers in a moraine beneath Thunderbolt Peak in the Eastern Sierra, CA

When I'm photographing mountain landscapes I'll take my time and shoot at a series of slower shutter speeds from 30th of a second to a 4th of a second, while f-stops range from f/10 to f/22. While camped atop Sheperd Pass near Mount Tyndall in the Eastern Sierra, I moved around camp as the sun was rising and a full moon was still hovering over the horizon. Patchy snow still clung to Mount Tyndall, and the sky fluctuated between purple and deep blue. Fortunately I had two tents pitched in the foreground enhancing the landscape. As the light changed on the mountains I made sure to switch shutter speeds and f-stops while shadows retreated for the day.

While ascending a mountain with other hikers or climbers, I'll shoot at a faster shutter speed beginning at 125th of a second up to 250th of a second and f-stops ranging from f/5.6 to f/16. I'll have my camera out most of the time, turned on and ready to shoot. When I'm at higher elevations it's an effort to continually stop and pull camera gear out of my pack, so my camera is constantly slung over my shoulder.

There's going to be downtime in the mountains too. If you're camped at a certain elevation use the middle of the day to rest, eat, hydrate and scour the region for potential compositions for sunrise and sunset.

In any case, the mountains are some of the most unpredictable and challenging landscapes for photographers to conquer. Being prepared physically will make the difference in your mountain landscapes, and remember to breathe deep before pressing the shutter.



Chuck Graham is a freelance writer and photographer living in Carpinteria, CA. His work has appeared in Outdoor Photographer, Shutterbug, Nature Photographer, Men's Journal, Backpacker, Canoe & Kayak and The Surfer's Journal. See more of his photographs at chuckgrahamphoto.com

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