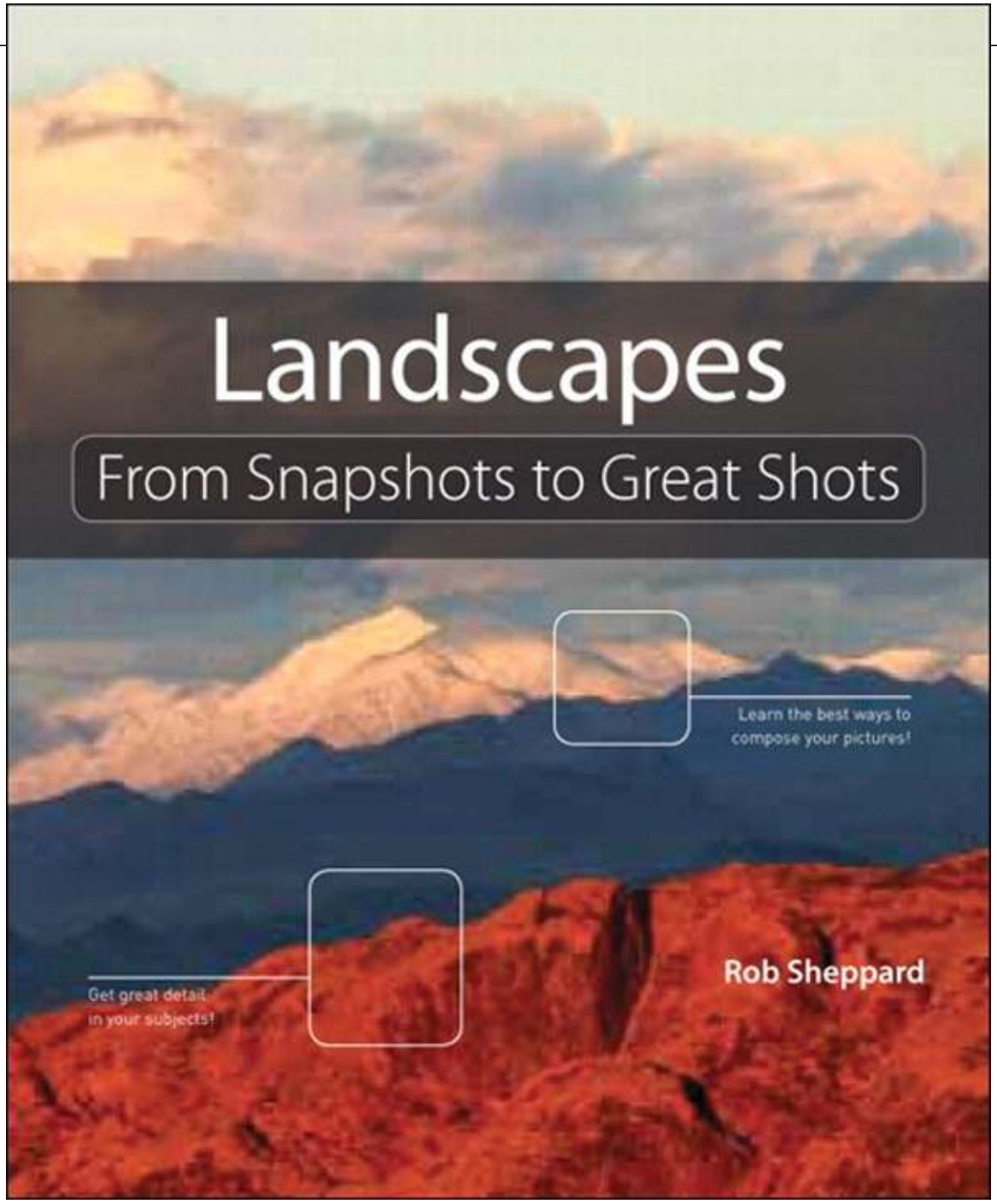
Landscapes
From Snapshots to Great Shots
Learn the best ways to compose your pictures!
Get great detail in your subjects!
Rob Sheppard

Landscape Photography

From Snapshots to Great Shots

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Dedication

To all of the beautiful and amazing natural landscapes of our world. They deserve the best from all o us as photographers and lovers of beauty. And of course, I also dedicate this book to another beauty, my wife of many years, Vicky.

Acknowledgments

I suppose my love of nature started with my dad being transferred to Minnesota when I was a child; h took us camping and fishing into the beautiful places of Minnesota, so I thank him for that. I have no idea where my interest in photography came from—it started when I was very young (I built a darkroom when I was 13) and no one else in my family or friends were photographers.

This book would not exist without the encouragement and wonderful support of all the folks I've worked with at Peachpit: Ted Waitt, Susan Rimerman, Elizabeth Kuball, Lisa Brazieal, and others wh have worked on the book but whom I haven't met. This has been such a great group of folks who hav made this book a true pleasure to put together.

I also thank all my students in my classes and workshops, such as those at BetterPhoto.com and Ligh Photographic Workshops. They're such a wonderful resource of questions and photographic ideas. I'm always learning new things from the way they photograph and approach the world. From beginners to expert photographers, they're all amazing.

I also want to thank Steve Werner and Chris Robinson with Outdoor Photographer magazine. They've long been friends and supporters of my work, and they both have always made me think. I've learned so much from both of them.

Even though I never met them and they've long passed from the scene, I really do appreciate all that I learned from Ansel Adams, Eliot Porter, Ernst Haas, and Andreas Feininger, photographers who inspired me as I "grew up" as a photographer.

Finally, I have to acknowledge my wife who always supports me. It is such a joy to have a life partne who acknowledges and accepts me as I am. I also thank my professor son, Adam, who makes me thin about how we communicate to others, and my sports-information daughter, Sammi, who keeps me thinking about photography and how it affects others.

Contents

Introduction

Chapter 1: Equipment

Understanding Your Gear to Take Better Photographs

- Poring Over the Picture
- Poring Over the Picture
- Cameras
- Choosing Gear
- The Tripod
- What's in My Bag

Chapter 2: Seeing as Your Camera Sees

Thinking about Light and Shadow

- Poring Over the Picture
- How the Camera Sees Differently from Our Eyes
- Focusing on the Photograph, Not Just the Subject

Chapter 3: Light

Learning to See the Light for Better Landscape Photos

- Poring Over the Picture
- Poring Over the Picture
- See the Light
- Directional Light
- The Color of Light
- Light and Exposure

Chapter 4: Composition

Structuring Your Image to Communicate about a Landscape

- Poring Over the Picture
- Poring Over the Picture
- Getting Out of the Middle
- Paying Attention to Relationships
- Valuing Your Point of View

Chapter 5: Perspective, Space, and Depth of Field

Gaining Control by Changing Lenses, Positions, and Apertures

- Poring Over the Picture
- Poring Over the Picture
- Perspective

Depth of Field
Going for a Deep Depth of Field

Chapter 6: Sky

Working to Bring Out the Best in the Sky

Poring Over the Picture
Poring Over the Picture
Deciding Whether the Sky Is Worth the Effort
Using Sky Effectively in a Composition
Tackling Exposure Challenges Found in the Sky
Bringing Out the Clouds

Chapter 7: Connecting with a Landscape

Finding Depth in a Location

Poring Over the Picture
Poring Over the Picture
Understanding What's Important
Working the Landscape
Going Beyond the Common Landscape
Finding Out About Locations

Chapter 8: Black-and-White Images

Examining the Rich Tradition and Today's Potential of Black-and-White Landscapes

Poring Over the Picture
Poring Over the Picture
The Early History of Landscape Photography
Black-and-White Photography Is More Than the Absence of Color
Composing in Black-and-White Mode
Variations in Light
Looking at Color for Black-and-White Shooting
Translating Color to Shades of Gray in the Computer

Chapter 9: HDR

Capturing More of Your Landscape

Poring Over the Picture
Poring Over the Picture
Poring Over the Picture
HDR Basics
HDR for Natural Effects
Wild Effects and HDR

Chapter 10: Traditional Darkroom work on the Computer

Seeing How Ansel Adams's Ideas Still Resonate in the Digital Age

Poring Over the Picture

Poring Over the Picture

Poring Over the Picture

Refine Your Photos with Traditional Darkroom Techniques

Basic Photo Needs: A Workflow

Case Studies

Index

Introduction

One of the earliest photographs that I remember taking was of Gooseberry Falls in Minnesota as a teenager. I have gone back to that location again and again over the years, even after leaving Minnesota for California. Early impressions can definitely affect a lifetime of work. You'll even find Gooseberry Falls State Park images in this book.

Growing up in Minnesota was challenging at times as I was learning to become a nature and landscape photographer. Minnesota has no towering mountains, no roaring rivers, no geysers, no skyscraping redwoods, and no dramatic deserts. Yet, I think that this gave me an education in working with the landscape that forced me to find good pictures, not simply make snapshots of spectacular locations.

Throughout this book, you'll find all sorts of landscapes. I've tried to include images of landscapes from throughout the country, not just from the dramatic West. Certainly, there is a long tradition of Western landscape photography starting with William Henry Jackson in the 1870s. That was also promoted by the wonderful photography of Ansel Adams.

My growing up in Minnesota really encouraged me to go beyond simply pointing my camera at the obviously dramatic landscapes. Good landscape photography goes beyond such subjects. It requires a sensitivity to light, perspective, composition, and more. If you learn to work with these aspects of landscape photography on any landscape, all your pictures will improve. Your photography will definitely go from landscape snapshots to landscape great shots.

Sure, a bold, dramatic landscape is nice, but sometimes that great subject can distract you from getting your best images. We've all been distracted by beautiful scenes that so overwhelm us that we forget that we can't cram that beautiful scene into our camera. We can only create a photograph that represents it. We have to interpret that scene because the three-dimensional, wild scene itself cannot be forced into the small, two-dimensional image that is a photograph. Only an interpretation can bring something of that landscape into a photograph.

I really want you to feel successful when photographing landscapes. I want you to be able to get excited about any landscape, not just a landscape you see once every few years on vacation. Our world is filled with wonderful places all around us that deserve to be photographed every bit as much as the icons that we've seen so many times.

That isn't to say that photographing iconic landscapes can't be a lot of fun and a wonderful way of using your photography. But these landscapes are simply not available to most of us most of the time. The techniques in this book are designed to help you bring the most out of landscapes wherever you are, whether that's an iconic national park visited rarely or a nature center near where you live.

The landscapes in your area are important, no matter where you live. They provide a sense of place. You honor that sense of place by getting great photographs of those locations nearby. You also feel more connected to your landscape when you go out and explore it photographically.

No matter what you do, take a lot of pictures. A great thing about digital photography is that once you own the camera and memory cards, you can take as many pictures as you want without any film or processing costs. Those costs used to be a lot and could restrict how many shots professionals took. Now you don't have to have those restrictions. Experiment with the ideas in this book. I've included assignments at the end of each chapter and I would like you to try them out! Make sure to join the book's Flickr group and share your results with other readers: www.flickr.com/groups/landscapesfromsnapshotstogreatshots.

Don't be afraid to experiment with new ways of taking pictures and expect some failures. I think

that’s how we learn. I can’t tell you how many pictures I’ve tossed out over the years because I tried something new. But I learned from every one. And I still do.

Most of all, have fun. Enjoy your time outdoors in this beautiful world around us. Discover the possibilities of landscape photography wherever you are.

1. Equipment

Understanding Your Gear to Take Better Photographs

Bring up the subject of camera gear if you're around any group of photographers, and you're sure to stir up all sorts of discussions. You have some sort of camera and lens in order to take a photo, but exactly what type of gear you need depends on a lot of factors. This isn't a simple discussion at all.

Or maybe it is. Truthfully, you can take fine landscapes with any camera on the market today. Ansel Adams was one of the finest of landscape photographers, and he often said that what's in your head and how you use the gear are more important than the gear itself. Professional landscape

photographers will pick and use specific types of camera gear because of certain features that work f the way that they take pictures. Whether that can work for *your* way of taking pictures is a different story. In this chapter, I examine some of the things that are important to consider about your gear and landscape photography.

Poring Over the Picture

This scene in Utah's Zion National Park was changing fast as a front moved through, bringing cold weather in May and snow in the higher elevations. You have to know your gear so that you can set up quickly and be prepared for conditions like this. I shot continuously for quite a while as the clouds shifted and moved through the scene. You can't just shoot one photo in these conditions and think you've captured the landscape. Having my camera on a tripod let me concentrate on the changes in th scene instead of having to constantly recompose the shot.

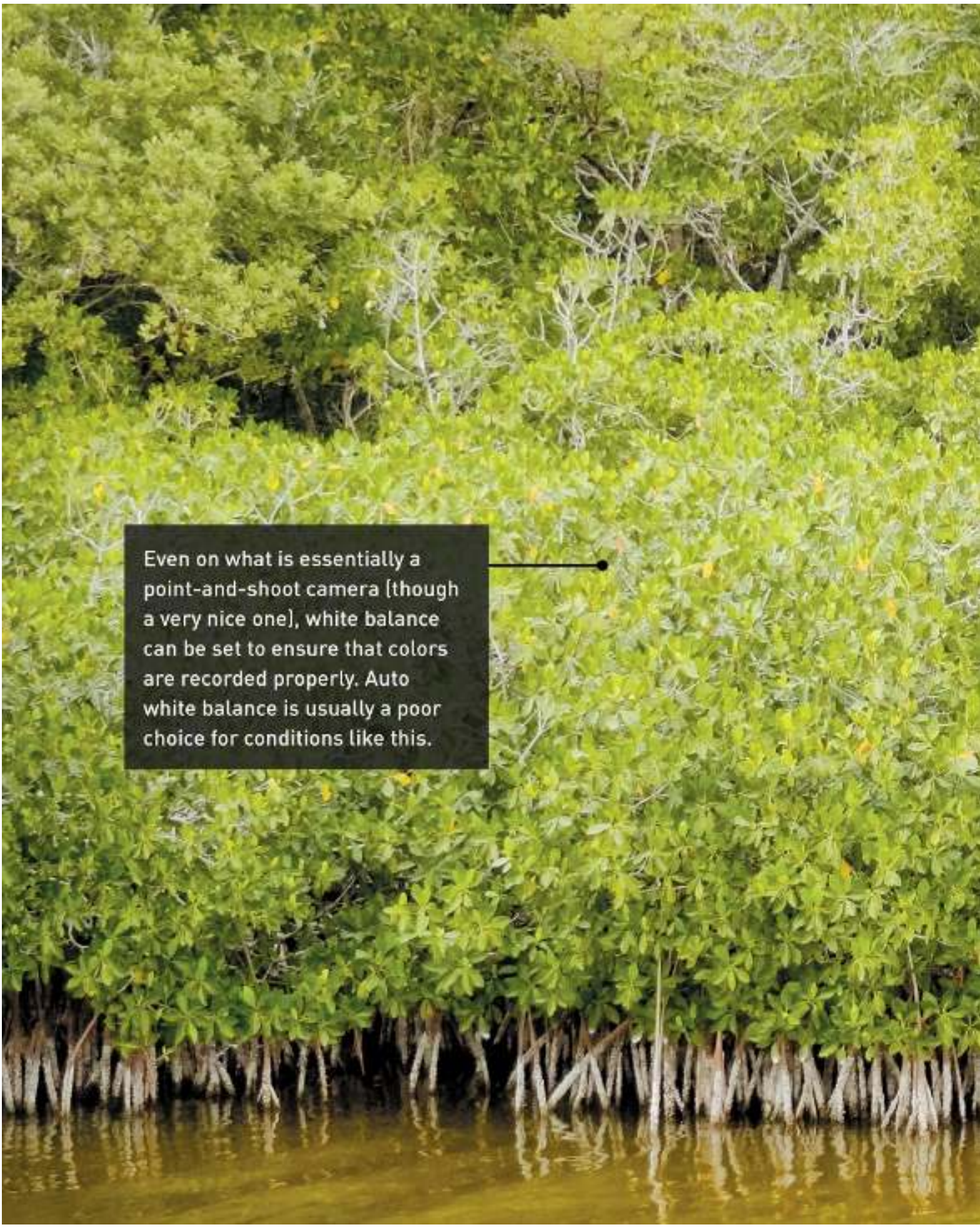
The scene between the rocky cliffs of the mountains of Kolob Canyon kept giving different views because of the shifting clouds. This made for exciting landscape photography!

The camera's white balance can be very important for conditions like this so that colors are rendered well.

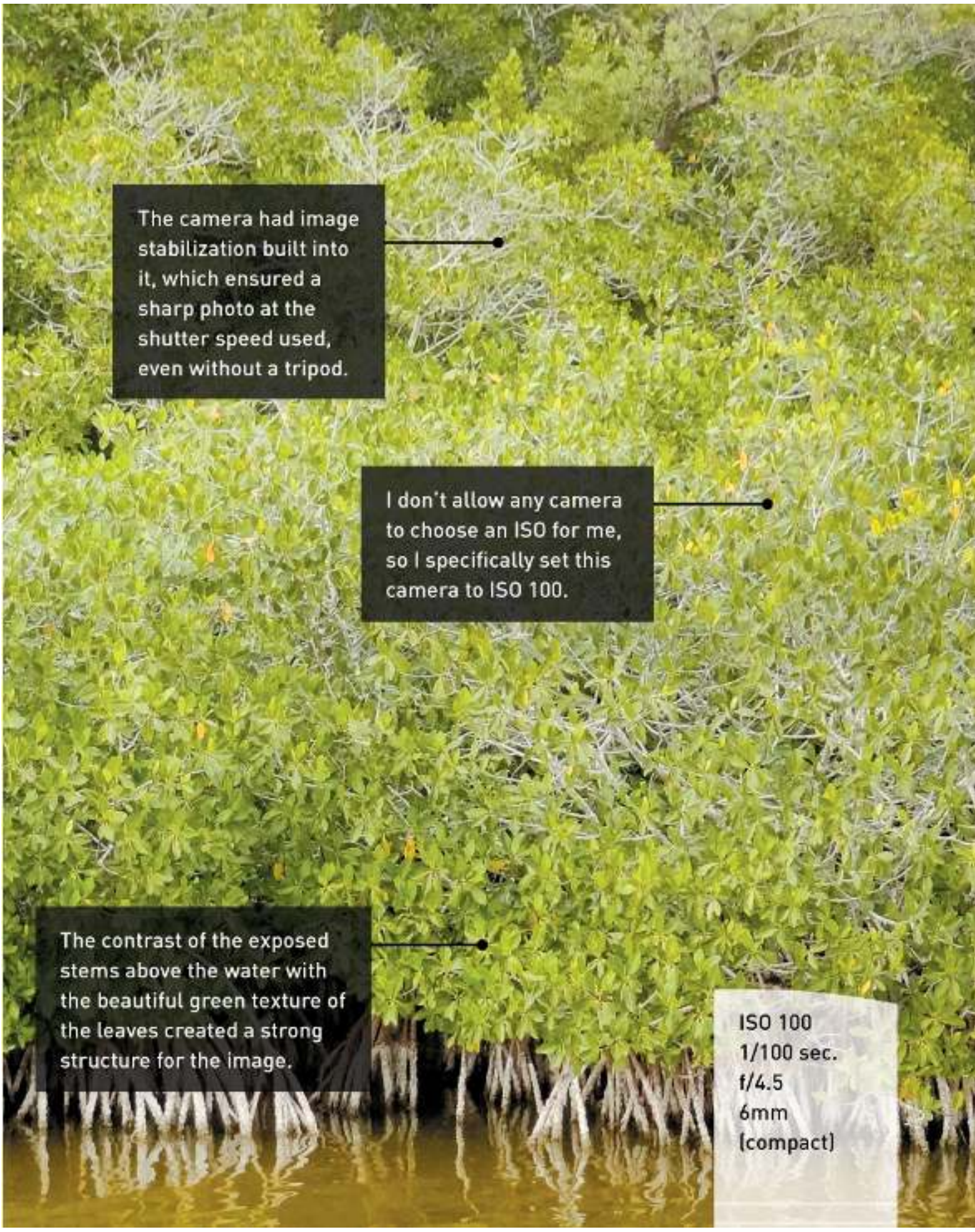

A large area of sky can fool the camera into thinking the scene is too bright, so I gave the scene more exposure than the meter suggested.
I used a telephoto zoom during this shoot so that I could constantly change my composition.
ISO 200
1/45 sec.
f/13
200mm
(APS-C)

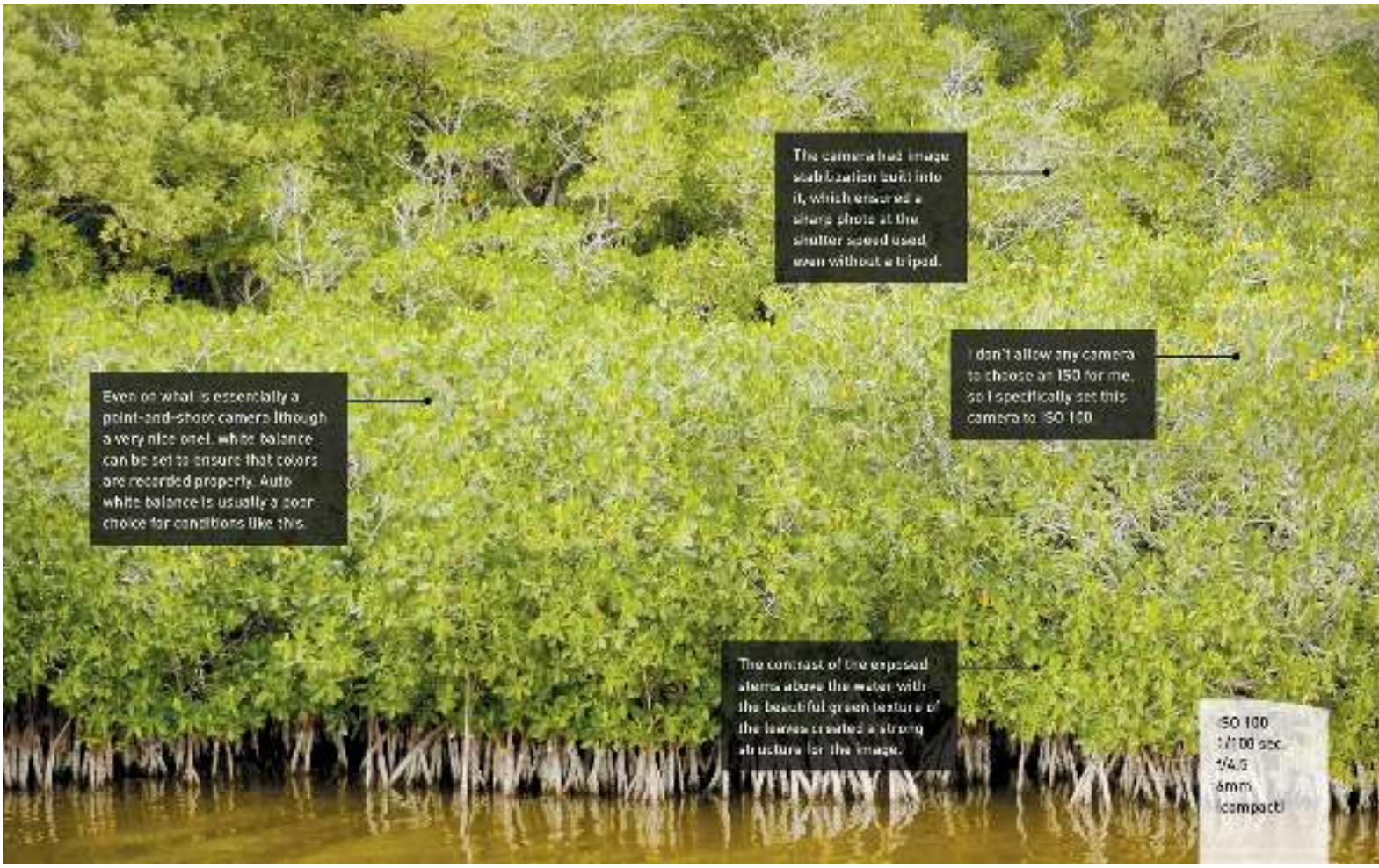
Poring Over the Picture

How you look at a scene is as important as the gear you use. For this scene, I was in Everglades National Park in Florida. I was looking for some interesting landscapes, but the light wasn't quite right when I got to this location at West Lake. So, I left my main camera, lenses, and tripods in the ca as I took a short trail to check on the lake. Out on a short boardwalk, I saw these amazing mangrove trees, and the light was perfect for their color and texture. I had my small Sony HX9V compact digita camera in my pocket, so I quickly got it out. I treated that little camera the same as my big cameras i how I looked at this landscape as a photograph. This is no snapshot, but an image carefully considere for its composition and how I responded to the scene.



Even on what is essentially a point-and-shoot camera (though a very nice one), white balance can be set to ensure that colors are recorded properly. Auto white balance is usually a poor choice for conditions like this.


The camera had image stabilization built into it, which ensured a sharp photo at the shutter speed used, even without a tripod.
I don't allow any camera to choose an ISO for me, so I specifically set this camera to ISO 100.
The contrast of the exposed stems above the water with the beautiful green texture of the leaves created a strong structure for the image.
ISO 100
1/100 sec.
f/4.5
6mm
(compact)



Cameras

Cameras come in all shapes and sizes. It's certainly still possible to shoot excellent landscape images with film, but film cameras have basically disappeared as a major way of taking pictures. Digital cameras simply offer too many advantages over film, from being able to immediately see what your photograph looks like on the LCD to gaining very high-quality images with a large range of ISO settings.

Brand

Go to any camera club and ask what the best camera is, and you're sure to start a big argument about which brand is doing the best for photography today. And you know something very interesting about that discussion? All the photographers advocating for specific brands of cameras are right, and they're all wrong, too! The right camera for one person may be the wrong camera for someone else.

I've owned and shot with Canon, Nikon, Olympus, and Sony. I've created excellent landscape photographs with all of them, and I've had my share of duds with all of them as well. In addition, when I worked as an editor of *Outdoor Photographer* magazine, I had the chance to shoot with every brand of camera, and I found that I could get excellent landscape photographs with any of them.

So, it doesn't matter what brand of camera you have, right? Not exactly. One important thing about using a camera is being comfortable with it. You need to have a camera that you like using (**Figure 1.1**). You need a camera that has the right controls for you and that's organized in a way that makes sense. Some of it comes with experience, so when you have a particular camera brand, you're usually best staying with that brand because it makes photography easier.

Figure 1.1. When you're comfortable with your camera, you'll like using it and enjoy the photography more.

But there are some things to think about when choosing a camera or when changing a camera brand that will affect how you take pictures. This usually is not about ultimate picture quality (because cameras are so good that image quality is extremely good from camera to camera). One thing that a brand will affect is the options you have for lens choice and other accessories (**Figure 1.2**). When yo buy a camera, you're not simply buying a camera. You're also buying into a system of lenses, flashes and more. It can be important to look at that system to see that it has what you need and want for you type of photography.

Figure 1.2. When you buy a camera body, you also gain access to a certain set of lenses and othe accessories.

Megapixels

I saw firsthand the beginnings of the megapixel race among camera manufacturers. I worked at

Outdoor Photographer magazine through the entire transition to digital, starting before the average photographer even considered digital as a way of shooting until it became the main way that photographers took pictures outdoors.

When digital cameras first came out, sensors had less than 1 megapixel. Pixels are the smallest pictu element and the smallest points that capture light on the sensor. More pixels allow you to capture more detail up to a point. With the first low-cost sensors, there weren't enough pixels to fully capture the detail of any scene. So, the megapixel race began.

At first, megapixels really did make a difference. Then at 3 megapixels there was a significant chang Images had enough detail to match 35mm film at an 8-x-10-inch print size (**Figure 1.3**). At 4 to 5 megapixels, there was enough detail to easily print 11-x-14-inch images that matched 35mm. A lot o careful workers were even finding they could go much bigger. And once 6 megapixels was reached, many photographers were creating excellent 16-x-20-inch images.

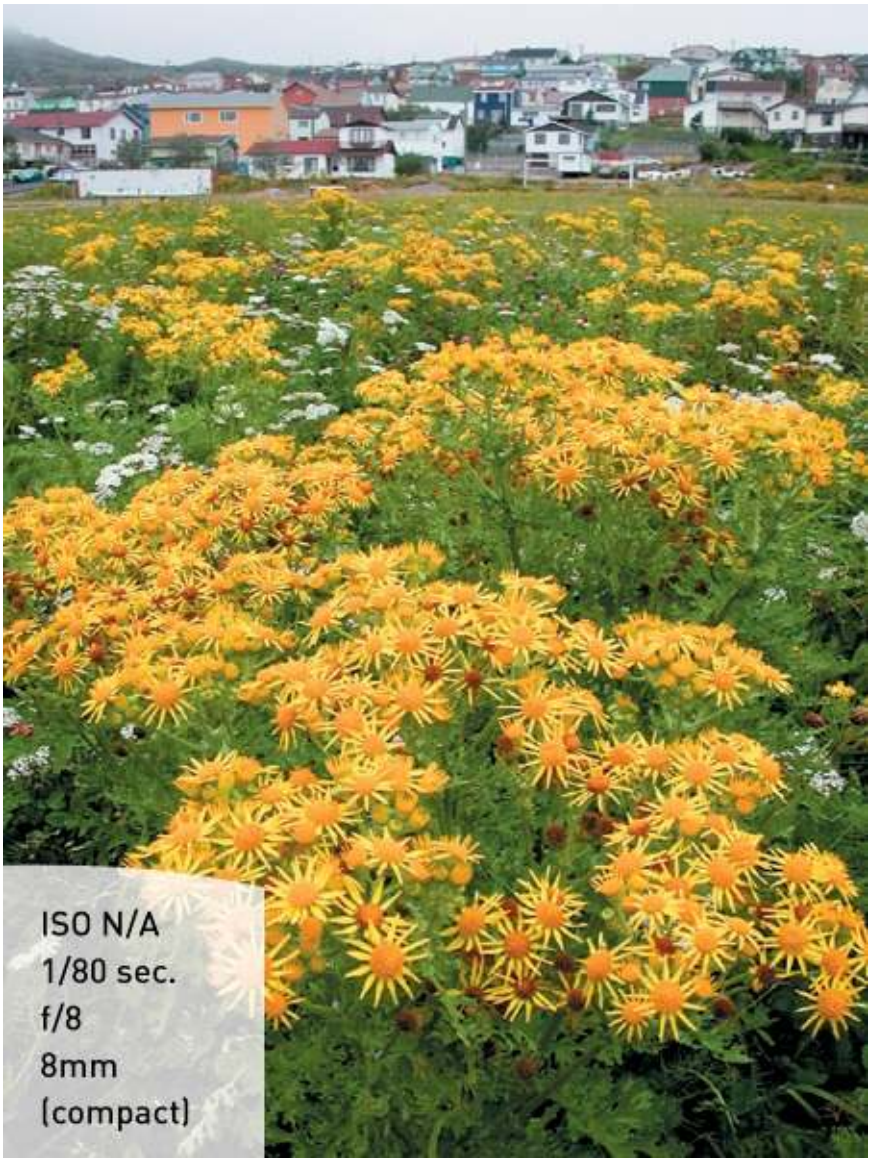


Figure 1.3. I shot this Newfoundland landscape early on in the digital transition. I used a 3-megapixel Nikon 880.

By 10 megapixels, you could essentially match 35mm imagery at any print size. By 16 megapixels, most photographers were finding they could match medium-format film. Except now there started to become a problem that the megapixel wars didn't address: As pixels are more densely packed into a sensor, some problems occur:

- Noise increases.

- Sensors have a harder time dealing with tone and color capture.

Simply adding pixels can mean that you'll have a decrease in image quality even though you have more megapixels in the camera. A high-quality 10-megapixel sensor can outperform a high-megapix sensor that simply has too many pixels crammed into its surface.

As technology gets better, camera manufacturers are able to increase the density of pixels and maintain image quality (**Figure 1.4**). However, there is no question that manufacturers often push thi to the limits and introduce cameras that have more pixels than they really should have for the technology available at the time.

Figure 1.4. A modern-day digital camera sensor holding millions of sensing elements or pixels.

Sensor Size

One of the most misleading aspects of digital photography is the physical size of the sensor (this is a area size and is not part of megapixels). I hear people all the time say that they have to have a full-frame sensor in order to get the best images, especially of landscapes. And, of course, there are all those crude jokes about whether size matters. This is, to put it bluntly, nonsense. Sensor size does affect certain things, and it can be worth considering, but there is no arbitrary good or bad about sensor size simply based on the size.

You'll sometimes hear people refer to the APS-C size format as a cropped sensor. This is one of the worst names for that format because it's totally misleading. If you really think about it, you'll see tha either there is no such thing as a cropped sensor or every sensor is a cropped sensor. You see, there is always a bigger or smaller sensor than any sensor that is in a camera (obviously at some point there i an ultimate huge sensor size, but that is not something that's going to be in a camera), so all sensors can be considered "cropped," but that is pretty silly.

Sensor size is a format size, just like 35mm, APS, medium format, 4 x 5, and so forth are film forma sizes. And just like film sizes, sensor size or format affects how lens focal lengths perform and certa aspects of image quality such as noise.

The common digital formats are, from largest physical size to smallest, full frame (which is technically full 35mm frame), APS-C, Four Thirds, and variations of compact digital camera sensor sizes (compact digital cameras do have some common sensor sizes but they don't have specific names), as shown in **Figure 1.5**.

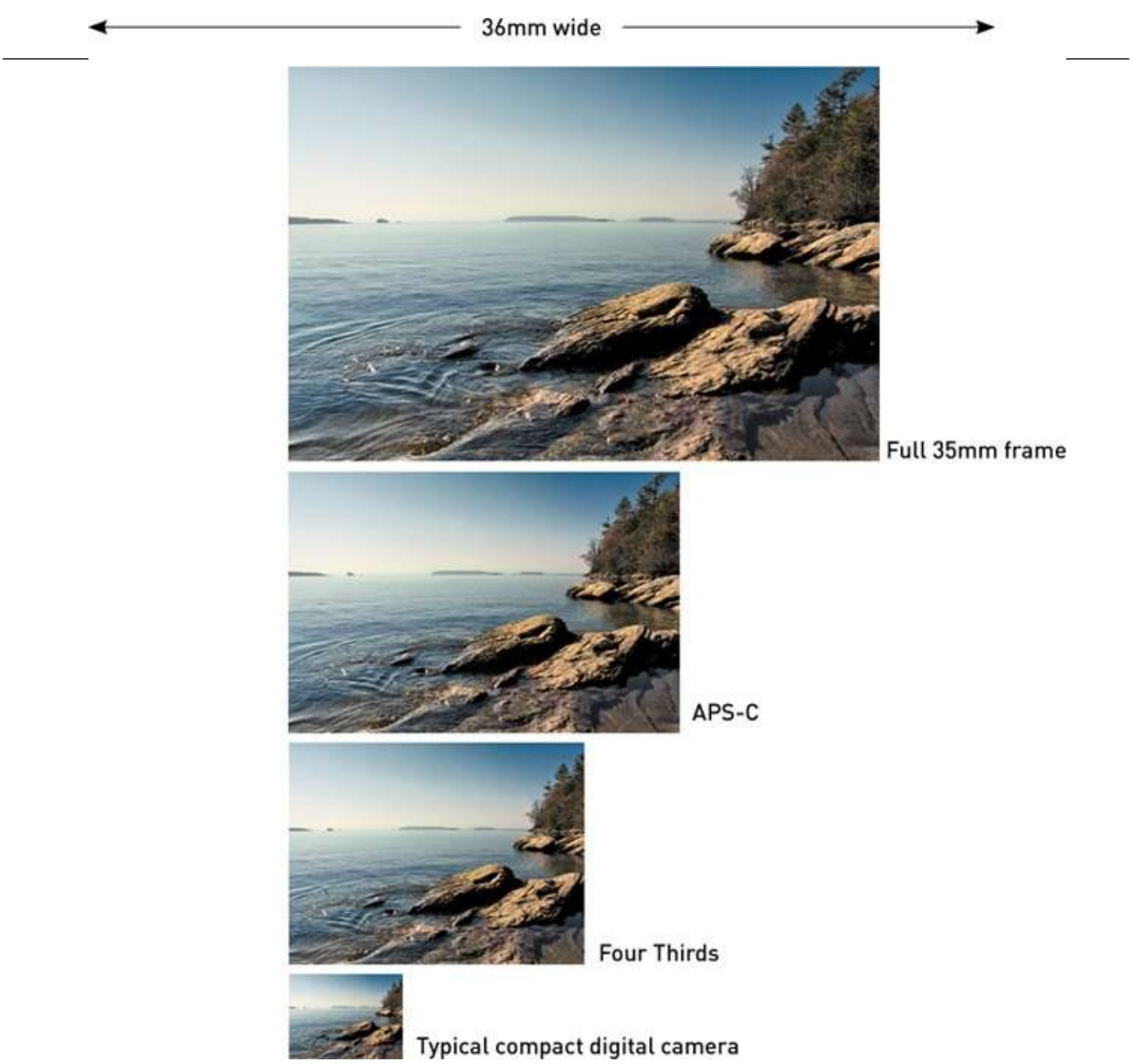


Figure 1.5. These images give you a feel for the relative sizes of the common digital camera formats.

Here’s what sensor sizes do:

- Larger sensors require physically larger lenses and longer focal lengths for the same equivalent angle of view of the landscape. Conversely, smaller sensors use physically smaller lenses and shorter focal lengths for that angle of view.
- Larger sensors require bigger camera bodies and mean that you have heavier and larger lenses t carry with you. Smaller sensors can be put in smaller camera bodies and result in lighter and smaller gear to carry.
- Larger sensors of the same technology as smaller sensors will have less noise at higher ISO settings. This usually means that you can use larger sensors at much higher ISO settings than smaller sensors.
- Larger sensors of the same technology may offer more finely separated tones and colors, but a newer small sensor will often match an older large sensor.
- Larger sensors need longer focal lengths for a given angle of view, which results in less depth o

field at any given aperture. Smaller sensors need shorter focal lengths for a given angle of view which results in more depth of field at any given aperture.

Sensor Size and Equivalent Focal Length

Because sensor size acts like a film format, the same focal length acts differently on cameras with different sensor sizes. We need to have some way of talking about this when we're looking at focal lengths and landscape photography because the same focal length doesn't act the same with different sensor sizes (**Figure 1.6**). Because 35mm photography was such an established and familiar format, focal lengths often are given equivalent focal lengths as compared to 35mm. This is simply a way of comparing how a given focal length sees the world in front of the camera. The focal length itself doesn't change—the only thing that changes is the way the sensor uses that focal length.