

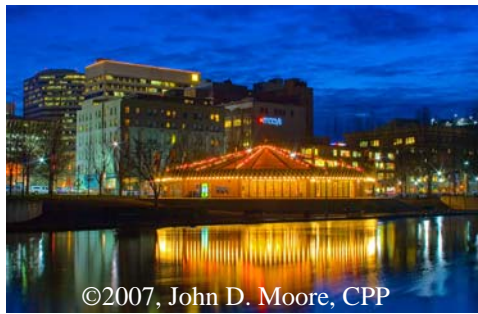


Spokane Night Scenes

An exercise in nighttime digital photography
By John D. Moore, CPP

Updated in September 2008

2008 updates currently appear in italicized text.



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Taking photos after dark in Spokane is a source of immense pleasure. It is really a good time, and my wife deserves all of the quiet time she can get in the evening, when I take a few hours and get out of the home office to take pictures. Gathering up all of my photographic tools is much easier now, and because of the frequency of my night sojourns, all of the tools are kept together in one area of my office.

The first element needed before departing for an after dark photographic experience, is to have somewhere to go. Yes, identify one or more areas that you plan on visiting, and if there are certain conditions that need to be met at the location, prepare for those. In some cases, it is as simple as having some pocket change for parking. In other cases it can be as complicated as arranging with proprietary security managers, to get requisite access to certain areas on private property that you are seeking to visit. So, regardless of the conditions that need to be met for your night photo experience, you should have prepared for each of those BEFORE you walk out the door hauling all of your camera gear.

Private property and public property is something that each photographer needs to understand, as well as to respect each of those. It may be as simple as ethics, and as complicated as legal access. Yet, if you are headed out the door to take night photos, know whether you are intent on going on someone's property to shoot photos, or are you going to be taking photos on public spaces. If you are going on private property, you would be surprised at how many people will say yes to you, if you only take the time to ask permission FIRST. Even if you are turned down, there may be public spaces that will be available for you to get the shots that you need.

If you opt not to request permission to access private property, you may have some explaining to do. By explaining, I mean both to the property owner, his or her security officers, or even your local police who have been called to identify the person walking around a private property area. If this type of situation occurs, you can just imagine what all other future photographers are going to hear when they approach the property owner seeking to shoot photos on their property. Yes, they say that it only takes one fool to ruin it for everyone else, but if you ask for permission FIRST, there will be no fools. What there might actually be is a fun experience for the photographer, and a chance to get photos of things few others will ever get access to.





When you are granted access to private property, it has to be looked as a privileged visit to that person's property. When you are granted access, it isn't exactly the same thing as you and half a dozen other people with cameras, unless that has been specified in advance. One of the issues facing property owners is liability. The more people who are accessing their "turf," means that their liability exposure is increased. This is even more pronounced if you are atop a roof area, for obvious

reasons. Be very respectful of your access privilege, and insure that you bring along a good flashlight so you can avoid any pitfalls that you may encounter in the darkness. A number of night photos were taken from atop the Spokane City Hall building, after being given access by city administrators. The photo next to this paragraph was obtained from the southwest corner of the roof of the City Hall building.

Public spaces at night are many. Sidewalks, parks, and other areas are terrific areas to view some great scenes. As with all things, there are issues related to public spaces, as there are with private property. Although we will talk about tripod use a bit later, you can imagine that your tripod is going to be taking up some fairly significant space at the base of the tripod. Add to that, your body standing next to the camera, or at least close by to the tripod.

The problem here may be an obvious one, but it actually has to do with blocking a sidewalk. Blocking a sidewalk, can actually require a permit to do...and those who are blocking a sidewalk can most certainly draw the ire of passersby. Further, blocking a sidewalk is generally a citable offense, if you decline to move when asked to open up the space that is being blocked. Complicated? No, not really. All of us use sidewalks in an urban area, and they allow us easy access to many night scenes. Generally nighttime will mean that there is much less foot traffic on sidewalks, and it is highly unlikely that you and your tripod will disrupt any world events by setting up and taking some photos. Just keep in mind, that you do not own the space you and your tripod are in. Setup, get your shots, and then move as quickly as you can.

Public streets are also public areas. Yet, using these public spaces also requires permits to block areas of a roadway. Further, putting yourself into a street at night is an obvious safety risk for you. If you are going to be doing some night shooting, and in close proximity to vehicle traffic (bridges, sidewalks), I recommend a reflective vest be worn. If you are hauling around a backpack with your camera gear, I recommend reflective qualities be applied to the backpack. A simple bike reflector or two will help, as will reflective fabric which you can attach with Velcro. *I tend to fold over my reflective vest, so that its reflective qualities are folded underneath the Tamrac backpack cords on the outside of the camera bag. Highly visible from a distance.*

Dealing with street issues was fairly common for me, during my police career. I responded to so many serious injury collisions, there could be no way to count. Auto-pedestrian collisions always turned out worst for the pedestrians, yet people would



always find some way to be in the middle of traffic. When I interviewed them at a local hospital ER, the most common statement was, "I know it was stupid, but I didn't think anything was going to happen." Several of the pedestrians who were injured, were, you guessed it, photographers. I recall speaking to two of them at an ER, and they were worried more about their damaged equipment, than the injuries to themselves. There is a word to describe people who intentionally put themselves at risk in the middle of lanes of traffic, just to get a shot. I'm not sure what you think the word is, but "idiot, is the one that comes to mind." I know there are other words to describe the actions of these photographers, but we better stick with idiot.

As far as the street goes, jumping into the street from between vehicles or alleys can literally make you into a "pedestrian in the roadway." Back in my police patrol days, I don't know how many pedestrians ultimately became casualties after getting onto, or into a roadway. We referred to people in the roadway as a "pedestrian in the roadway," which is most certainly a citable offense. Photographers can become pedestrians in the roadway, or jaywalk, just to get "the shot."

If you have to use the streets in a city, follow the local rules. Don't forget your common sense, either. It just does not make a lot of sense to be in the middle of a roadway or highway at night, just to get "the shot." If you see a shot that might be available from a street, use your head. If there are few vehicles, and few pedestrians, you just might have a chance or two to get "the shot."



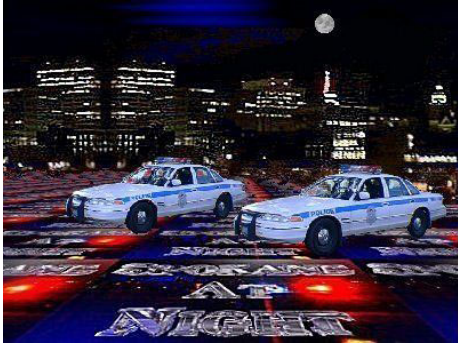
One way to get a rare quick opportunity is possible by using the crosswalks. Further, it involves completely setting up your camera and tripod BEFORE accessing any crosswalk. When the green walk sign is lighted, the photographer may be able to walk to the center of the crosswalk, facing the object you want to shoot down the street. You will only have a few

seconds to get the shots but you should be able to take those photos safely before walking completely across the street. Following that first walk into the crosswalk, you should wait for the green walk sign and then do a return walk into the middle of the crosswalk to try and get a couple quick shots. The only way for you to get shots from the crosswalk, means you need to have your camera and tripod completely setup to avoid waiting more than a very few seconds. If you have to fix your camera settings or adjust the tripod when you are in the middle of a crosswalk at night, you might have a great opportunity to be sitting prominently on the hood of someone's car. Not a good thing to do.

Remember, this can only be done if you are fast, and your shots are setup in advance. You need to get across the street in the crosswalk just like everyone else. Just because you have a tripod or camera does not make you special. You will become special though, if you wind up sitting on the hood of the next car to turn the corner. If you opt to try and get a shot or two while in a crosswalk, your attention will be drawn to the location your camera lens is pointed and not to the rear where traffic may suddenly appear. It would be very helpful to have someone with you who can watch both the traffic and also the time you have to begin to move off of the street. If you shoot within the crosswalk, remember



that just because you have a green light still means you need to be a very safe user of the streets after dark.



There are a number of safety issues to be considered when taking photographs after dark. In discussions with other photographers, I hear quite frequently the word “crime.” Many photographers would like to go out and grab night shots, but at night “it just isn’t safe.” I respect their comments to me, but there is really a different reality at night. I spent most of my adult life specializing in security management issues, and throughout that career, most people in a classroom raised their

hands when asked to do so if more crime happened at night or daytime. Over the years, the vast majority of people in a classroom would vote that more crimes happened at night. The reality is that most crime happens in broad daylight. Why? Well the reality is, that because people are a bit more cautious at night, more incidents occur during daylight when everyone “lets their guard down.” Yep, a sad truth to be sure, but crime in daytime has always been higher than crimes committed after dark. There are no guarantees for any of us who go out to take photos, although I wish there were. I am addressing both daytime and nighttime photography. If there is to be any trouble at all, it can come in daylight even more often than at night.

Yet, we are talking about night photography here, and there are certainly safety and security issues to discuss.



Vehicles

A lot of photographers actually become crime victims before they even get started taking pictures. Yes, they get all of the camera equipment they own, and take it out to their car where they place it on a seat. Then, they take one or two things out that they need, and walk off to get a shot. When they return, the windows of the car are broken out and their other gear has been stolen.



If you have a car with a front and back seat, use the cars trunk to store your gear. It will not be seen from the outside by passersby. It will become a focus of attention however, if you come and go from the trunk of the car to replace lenses, batteries, or any other requisite task. After people see you and your camera equipment, your trunk may soon become the target of someone's criminal opportunistic mind.

The best bet is to set up in advance for your night time photographic sojourn. Since you already know where you are going to shoot, set up the camera in advance. Take the lenses you will need for your shots, and whatever extra batteries, flashlights, memory, you need. Leave everything else at home. Yes, by thinking your evening shoot all the way through, you can determine what goes and what stays. By reducing the equipment being carried in a vehicle, you reduce the risk of theft. The additional equipment you actually need should fit into a small backpack, or even a belt or fanny pack. It makes you much more mobile, and less likely to have someone deprive you of your photographic investment.

Vehicles most certainly have their place when it comes to night photography. Shooting from a vehicle can be done using a variety of tools. One of my favorites is a small GPS stand, with a large suction cup. The GPS stand (GARMIN) can be attached to the driver's window with the suction cup, and the GPS platform can be swiveled so the camera sits atop the small platform. I recommend a remote means of firing the camera's shutter button, so your fingers will not move the camera on the GPS platform. I use a wireless remote for my Canon EOS DSLR (350d), and uniformly I use that wireless unit for virtually all of the tripod night shots that I do.

In 2008, I no longer use the 350D as a part of my photographic inventory. My son's wife is now the user of the 350D, and the quality of her shots is terrific. The Canon 400D (XTI) fits the window suction unit very well, and is also fired remotely with a wireless shutter release. Even with a battery grip for the 350D and the 400D, the weight was not an issue, and perfectly still shots were possible. The winter of 2008-2009 will see the use of the Canon 40D with a battery grip. I'm interested to see if the weight becomes an issue with this larger/heavier camera. Stay tuned.

If you get out with your camera during winter months in sub freezing temperatures, having a vehicle close to your photographic location will be a real asset. Although we might think of batteries being used up faster in bitter cold (they can be), I am thinking of the practical things like frozen toes and fingers. There are times when photography at night is not as fun, if your body is in agony from the bitter cold. Make sure you account for your "warm spots," when you are out in the city taking night photos. Your car or truck can be a lifesaver.





Parks

Parks are terrific places to visit, all year 'round. Spokane's showcase has been Riverfront Park, from the very first day of the Spokane Worlds Fair, in 1974. I spent thirty days helping provide police services at the Worlds Fair, and had the good fortune to complete two complete security management surveys of the entire Riverfront Park campus in my career. Getting to know the security ups and downs of the Riverfront Park area was one of the most fun "jobs," I ever had. To this day in 2007, photographers have opportunities to capture images that really mean, "WOW!"

Shooting images in Spokane parks at night also represent a means to capture the changes that occur over time. In the photos above, the images are of the exact same place, 5 years apart. In 2002 when I was doing a nighttime security survey of Riverfront Park, I captured the image to the right (Nikon CP 990) at the main south entrance into the park. It was a beautiful sight, with all of the floral decorations. In 2007 the same main south entrance is represented by the golden reflections from the fountain which is now there (Canon EOS 350d).

Approaching a night photo shoot in any park has to be approached as you would, any other location. If possible to do a drive by in daylight, you may be able to get an idea of the equipment you will need when you come back after dark. Further, identify interesting objects, as well as areas to take photos from. This will save you a lot of time when you get back there after dark.

Since all visits to parks are approached as you would any other location, there is one thing each photographer should do before approaching the area that they have decided to setup and take photos from. Some have described this as a no brainer, but I can assure you, there will be much less trouble for anyone by following this simple process. Let's address the simplest form of security management, and that is called "the risk assessment."

This process should be routine for any photographer, but since visibility is worse at night, it is particularly important to make a risk assessment. After departing your vehicle, your job is to visually scan the entire area you wish to shoot from. What do you see? Who do you see? Are there activities in progress at or near your location?



A visual scan of the area you wish to approach in a city park is a simple process, but identifying risks is best done BEFORE you are busy shooting the photos that you came to get. If you see people close by the area you wish to go, identify their activities for legitimacy. Parks are fun places for a lot of people, and you should readily be able to identify normal and routine activities that are no threat to your photo shoot. There are also times when animals can be a nuisance, but in most parks the animals are likely to be accompanied by an owner, even if they allow the animal off the leash.

A flashlight in a park is also a requirement at every location that you go to. I have a choice of three that I generally take with me to each photo activity after dark. My favorite is a small fist size flashlight that is useful to light up the camera or lens buttons, or grips or turning clamps at the top of a tripod. The small flashlight can fit in a pocket, or rest on a belt. Next, is a floatable flashlight “torch,” which is about the size of a softball. Although a bit bulky, this “torch,” can throw out a lot of bright light which is useful if you “paint any surfaces” during a timed exposure. Thirdly, I carry a 4 cell Mag light. This light is a carryover from my days of policing, and the mag light provides moderate light distribution. It is fairly heavy compared to my other lights, but it is a useful tool after dark.

Since this article was written in 2007, I have added two additional flashlights to my inventory. One of the lights is an LED headlamp with three light switches to change the light colors. The flashlight that I have had a lot of success with is the Big Max floodlight. That floodlight throws off a tremendous amount of light, and comes with a number of plastic colored filters, which I use constantly for painting things with red, amber, or blue.

One issue about being in a park after dark has to do with the parks opening and closing hours. Not all parks are 24 X 7 operations, and they have closing times which are likely to change from one season to another. Be aware of what the parks operating hours are, and schedule your visits accordingly. If you need to get access to a park after the posted closing times, make contact with the parks management to request permission to be where you want to be. It’s nice to have obtained permission when the park rangers make their requisite inquiry about why you are there when they are closed. It is absolutely amazing how many people will respond affirmatively to your request for either an after hours visit, or to be on private property.

Not many photographers venture out after dark in my experience. It’s really too bad, since there is beauty around almost any corner. Parks are great places to look for photos, and in many cases, to people watch. Inevitably people are going to query you about “what are you taking pictures of?” So be prepared to speak with some interesting people after dark. They might not have a clue as to what you are shooting, but generally a brief description of your project will get them moving along on their merry way.

While I am thinking about it, there is one other issue you should be aware of. For many of you, this might actually be a total surprise. Some parks require photographers to have a permit, if the photos are to be used commercially (or may be used commercially). In my case, I was totally taken aback by the permit requirement in Spokane City Parks.



Here are the requirements for the Parks Permit.

- 3.13 **Commercial Photographer:** Any agent, employee, or owner of a photography business, freelance, or hobby photographer, who uses Parks and Recreation areas or facilities for portrait settings of individuals or groups, commercials, training films, industrial and short subject films, movies, documentaries, or advertisements.
- 3.14 **Hobby Photographer:** Any person pursuing photography as a recreation activity, selling the photographs with less than \$3,000.00 total revenue per year. Hobby photographers shall identify park or park facility on each photograph, card, etc., as well as the words "Spokane, Washington".¹

Completing the permit² is either extremely easy, or extremely complicated, based on how you look at it. I completed the permit process about 4 or 5 months ago, as part of a Community Service project for the Spokane Camera Club. I recruited ten members of the organization for Park Community Service activities, and listed each of them on the permit application (still photography). Spokane Parks waived the fees, and off we went.



Into the core of the City

One evening in November of 2006 I was photographing a bank building at the southeast corner of Riverside and Brown. I had three targets for that particular night, and the bank was my second target. I decided to have some fun with a fisheye lens, at this location. As I began to take my first photo, a man began yelling, and he jumped right in front of the camera (above photo). He began dance, and to sing RAP songs, and at the top of his lungs. Each time I moved the cameras direction; this guy moved in



¹ Spokane Parks Department Filming Still Hobby Photography Policy
www.developingspokane.org/docs/ParksDeptFilmingStillHobbyPhotographyPolicy.doc

² Master Film Permit
www.developingspokane.org/docs/MasterFilmPermit.doc



front and continued his manic songfest. Finally, he took off running east on Riverside. Taking photos after dark can lead to a lot of impromptu conversations with people, and in this case, free entertainment. To appreciate all of this, you just have to get your cameras out and into the core of the city to start having some fun.

The battle to be fought almost non stop has to do with light, and dark. No mysteries here, there are going to be very bright lights, and very dark spaces. If you shoot at street level in a downtown area, you are also going to be pointing the camera directly up into, or directly at, some bright lights. Streetlights are going to be at a lot of places you are going to want to shoot, so dealing with these lighting conditions are constant challenges.

There are other ways of dealing with this issue, albeit a little harder to coordinate. First, see if you can get above the level of the streetlights. There are possibilities in some parking garages, and now on of my favorites, and that is on top of the roof of buildings. Some of the different views and angles are nothing short of outstanding. Further, dealing with the lower level streetlights is a much lesser concern.

Before you get too excited to attempt to access someone's roof area, do not forget the first step in that process. Get permission before you attempt to get onto or up to somebody's roof area. Parking garages are another area of private property that you may need to make arrangements with. If you happen to be parked in that garage, you may be allowed access to take photos. If you do not have permission and access some garages with security staff members, you will likely receive company as they walk you to the exit. It never hurts to ask, and plan ahead for a successful night shoot. Ask, ask, and then ask.... You might even make some friends in the process.



If you are at ground level with your camera and tripod, plan on taking multiple shots at every target you visit. Even when you reach an exposure that you feel is appropriate in the cameras screen, do yourself a favor and take more photos. I would recommend at least half a dozen bracketed shots, starting with the image you feel is most likely the best shot. Take advantage of the time you have by exposing until you get a lighter and clearer view of dark buildings (going lighter). When you have those shots, go the other way, by bracketing down one step at a time, lessening the bright glare that is present in any lights (going darker).





Photographing and editing night shots

When it is time to review and edit your shots, using layering, opacity, cloning, erasing, can help you bring up darker images into the lighter images, and vica versa. There are always dodging and burning tools, and even other ways to use layering tricks to take some difficult night shots into a very respectable state. There are a number of photo editors which are capable of providing excellent tools for editing. My choices for my office computers are Adobe Elements (latest version), Corel Paint Shop Pro (latest version). I have others which are lesser used editors, but in the main that is what I choose to use.

In 2008, some of the software has greatly improved. It is no substitute for proper exposure, but as far as editing there is somewhat more flexibility. I tend to use Adobe Photoshop Elements (latest verion), Adobe Photoshop (CS3), and an HDR/Blending program Photomatix (latest version).

My rule of thumb is this, as I review or edit night scenes images. If I have to spend more than 15 minutes laboring over an image to edit it in an editing program, I'll go back to the Spokane location and reshoot the photo. If the images are from an out of the area location, obviously that won't work quite as well. In the main, however, I would rather spend the time shooting the shots, than at the computer creating something that I never saw when I was at the original location. Many good photographers spend much more time editing photos, and I applaud their efforts. My choice is to shorten the photo editing process, whether it is for my technical security management manuals, or Spokane Night Scenes images.

I normally shoot night images in the lowest ISO the particular camera has. The Canon EOS 350D, stops at 100 ISO, and the backup Nikon CP 8700 stops at 50. I do adjust the times of the exposures based on the ambient lighting conditions. From 2 seconds to a long Bulb exposure, being flexible at the location you are at will dictate how long an exposure you will need.

My inventory in 2008 includes a Canon EOS 40D, and my second camera is a Canon EOS 400D (XTI). The Nikon CP 8700 still functions as a remarkable camera, but it is relegated to a third camera role, and it is small enough to hide in my shoulder bag which goes with me each day for day to day activities around town. I guess I look at is as, "if



you don't have a camera, you'll never get a photograph." Using my PDA camera is a non-starter. The Nikon CP 8700 is an extremely capable little camera (NEF + JPEG).

I tend to uniformly shoot in the RAW + JPEG mode of the Canon camera, or with the RAW mode of the Nikon (NEF). Getting access to the RAW images are very helpful in editing, and having JPEG images available are helpful in layering as well as going through your images on the computer screen to identify your start or stop points for a particular location.

Focus at night can be a challenge. Even after dark, auto focus tends to work well, most of the time. Notice I said, most of the time. The darker it gets in an area, means the more chances for auto focus failure with what you want to shoot. There are ways to deal with this, If possible, focus manually on something that is equidistant to the object you wish to shoot. Keep the shutter release button pressed halfway down when you achieve focus on the equidistant feature, and maintain that level of pressure on the shutter release button. Turn the camera back to the original point and shoot the frame. You will have to use



your finger for this maneuver, so if you have a long exposure setup, any movement that the use of your finger created might not be noticed in the final product. Shooting manually is also a means to getting the best shot. Yet, if it is completely dark out with very little (or no) external light, even knowing if you are in focus can be difficult. There has to be a point at which your eyes can deduce the correct focus to use manual, and in absolute total darkness auto focus might not even become a factor. Trial and

error are the ways to go, after you estimate the focus point. Shoot the photo in JPEG, and review it. If in focus, you can switch back to RAW or continue to set up focus points until you are at the place you need to be for correct exposure. Some of your test shots in total darkness can take several minutes, so knowing how to constantly modify your cameras settings after each exposure is a must. When you go out to shoot at night, not knowing where your cameras bells and whistles are will create some grief for you. You may have to turn on a flashlight to find your way on your camera, but as soon as you turn the camera off, your human eyes will need to readjust to the darkness all over again. So, take your time, and work through the problems. The more you take photos in total darkness, or close to total darkness, the better you will get at calculating the settings your camera needs to be set, and how long your exposures are going to have to be.

The photo above was shot in total darkness, at Riverside State Park. I used a Nikon CP 8700, with a lightweight digital tripod (Belkin). The camera was about a foot off the surface of the wooden bridge floor. There was a three minute exposure, ISO 50, at F 4.0 (Nikon RAW – NEF). This was the 4th shot in a series of tests to determine correct focus, and this shot took about 20 minutes in total to get. There was a lot of crashing in some trees up on the hill behind me, so I decided it was time to call this total darkness photo session over with. The photo session lasted about two hours, and occurred because the



park manager had approved the visit after the park had been closed to the public. Once again, all you have to do is ask, and at least many times you will get an okay.

In 2008, a simple headlamp is the best light for the total darkness I was in over a year ago. Were I to repeat the visit, the headlamp can be switched to red, so that your eyes are not impacted negatively by using brighter LED or Incandescent lights being illuminated.

In dark areas, flashlights can help get some focus points established, as well as painting with light on specific objects that you want to stand out in a timed exposure. Photographing scenes at night in my police career involved using everything from our patrol car headlights, to our overhead alley lights and spot lights. With a timed exposure I was able to direct the movement of our cars at several points to light up more of the area of the fatal collisions, or crime scenes. Regardless, night shooting has its sets of challenges. There were times in my police photography days that we just had to shut everything down and wait for daylight, so we could get what we needed. It inconvenienced people from time to time, but we absolutely had to be successful in getting what we need for courtroom presentations.



I have talked to people who tell me they hate tripods. I have been told that they are so steady handed, that they can do an 8 second exposure with no tripod by just holding the camera in their hands. I happen to think that it is amazing, and a time saver for them, but I just can't do that. I need the steady platform that the tripod gives me for shooting at night. I have a fairly light tripod and one that is more substantial, and the smaller one is better for traveling in a suitcase.

The larger and heavier one is just a better platform.....and it is used most of the time on night shots in Spokane. There are lots of tripods out there, but it is my recommendation to get one. You may be as steady as the people who told me they could do a timed exposure with no tripod. Yet, this is a tool that gives you the best chance at something you, as well as others, can really enjoy.

I use a wireless remote for my Canon EOS camera. This small wireless remote clips directly to the Canon shoulder strap on the side closest to the shutter button, and in the dark it is easy to disconnect it from the strap, and switch it into the on position. Once the camera is adjusted to receive the signal, you are off and running taking photos with your hands free of the camera and the tripod. Modifying the settings on the camera can be done before you depart for the night shoot, since it will save you time, and you already know you will be taking timed shots anyhow. The more you can do with your camera and equipment before you drive to your shoot location, the better it will be for you when you are out in the darkness.





Quiet noise

A lot of discussion takes place about digital noise, and it is a good topic for night shooting. In shooting after dark, you are likely to encounter a variety of types of noise. Many of your photos will take long exposures, in some dark locations. One of the reasons I always shoot at the lowest ISO, is to mitigate some of the features of “digital noise.”

Digital noise is not the only type of noise that you can encounter after dark. For an example of that, you can shoot a variety of photos in downtown Spokane, and the closer you get to the Spokane River, the more moisture (humidity) will be all around you. On some nights you will see no humidity at all, until you get the memory cards out of the camera, and place them on the computer screen. The foggy roadway above the title Quiet noise, is an example of the differences in humidity hanging in the air, within 6 blocks north and south of the Spokane River. Depending on the wind, and the level of humidity, you might interpret some of the humidity as noise. It becomes even more evident if you do an enlargement of the digital pictures you took, since the humidity in the photo will have an appearance to make the shot appear grainy.



Fog can do some really dramatic things to almost all locations, but even when the fog gets dense; it can still appear as noise in a photo that is printed in 11 X 14, or 12 X 18. Yet, what you have actually captured are the exact conditions of a moment in time, at a location where you happen to be. In the years I have been taking night photographs, I have never had the experience of witnessing another photographer out in dense fog. They must be there, since I have seen a few prints done in the fog, taken by some excellent photographers with the Spokane Camera club.

If it is foggy out, get your gear ready, and get out and capture some highlights. All of the usual safety rules apply when you shoot in the fog, including some heightened care to be used as you drive to a location and then back home again. It is a chance to see things a lot differently than a “regular” evening. It is a good deal of fun, so try it.





Before it gets dark



Shooting photos after dark is a great deal of fun alright, but starting before sunset can also be a great time to capture some interesting skies that occur from time to time. I like to be out there at least 30 - 45 minutes before sunset, and remain out at the location for at least another 30-45 minutes after sunset. Different photographers have different terms for this period of the day, but it just seems to me to be “sweet light.” It is certainly not as bright as it was all day long, but the interest in different cloud formations can be quite dramatic from time to time. Even if your intent is to stay out until after dark, it is well advised to pay some visits to your regular photo locations, to get a view during these time periods.

Shooting during periods before and after sunset can do some dramatic things with windows on city buildings. As the sun goes down, its reflection can really jump off all of the windows.

After the sun goes below the horizon the clouds may be reflected in the western windows, for some very interesting scenes.



Weather or not

It’s too cold, it’s too hot, it’s foggy, it’s raining, and I have found myself dealing with each of those issues, season by season. Each of those things are very real factors, and must be a consideration if you are going out to shoot photos after dark. Let’s look at each one of them, and see what the impact of each could be.



When it is bitter cold, it can do a number of things to the human body. Further, it can do a number of things to camera batteries. Along with incidents of condensation on lenses, it is easy to say, why bother going out there. Yet, if we don't, we are going to miss some great opportunities. Preparation can make a big difference in how we approach a photography session after it gets dark, in cold weather.

This might actually sound like a broken record to some of you, but I am assuming that each of us has heard about layering our clothing in cold weather. One reason we hear so much about that, is that layering works very well. Further, losing heat through the apex of the body (the head), is another issue that is addressed in virtually all weather forecasts throughout a winter season. Photographers need to use several layers of clothing, and a good wool hat, as they get out into the cold at their targeted photo locations. Staying warm, is a challenge, but planning ahead and dressing appropriately will allow you to capture some great images after dark, in the middle of winter, whether it is 15 degrees, or 30F. If you add in some wind, your layering of clothing should account for that, and in some cases I found that pulling two hats over the head creates warmth, just like magic. \



Make sure you have an ample supply of fully charged batteries, when you head out for the evening. I use a battery grip for the Canon EOS, and it carries two li-ion batteries inside the grip. In very cold temperatures, the two battery setup will give you a chance to get more shots than a single battery, although you will still have to reload at some point depending on the length of your exposure to the cold temps. If you are shooting in downtown Spokane, my favorite warm spot, is Riverpark Square Mall. Getting inside this location for a few minutes can really warm up your fingers, and also give you a chance to change out your batteries before you head out again. Another warm spot is the skywalk system downtown, with a number ingress points throughout the system.

If you are shooting in areas out of the downtown core, locate your vehicle as close as you can, so you can get access to it and warm up your hands and your feet.

Most of the above suggestions apply, even in hot weather, albeit for opposite situations. Instead of dealing with cold fingers and toes, you are dealing with high ambient temperatures. High temps can impact you if you get dehydrated, and drinking a lot of water can be a real health solution. Further, taking water with you as you make your rounds after dark can help a lot. I carry a bottle of water with me I hot weather, during all of my night shoots, and it fits nicely into my photo backpack. I do have to take off the backpack to get to the water bottle, but it sure is not much of an inconvenience.

Layering clothing is appropriate in warm and hot weather, although you are dealing with much lighter weight clothing items. Carrying a windbreaker, may be all you need as far as an extra layer. Shorts and a loose fitting polypro shirt are staples of mine in hot weather. The windbreaker is light and takes up very little room in a backpack. I recommend light colors when you shoot at night, and NOT dark clothing items. A color that tends to stand out from most surroundings is really helpful, so that people (mostly



automobile drivers) can see you. A lightweight reflective vest can be helpful in cold as well as hot weather.

Rainy nights are not my first choice of times to photograph anything. Yet, rain is a reality of most locations you are going to visit. The varieties of clothing items available to deal with rain are numerous, as well as the types of light jackets, or umbrellas. There are plastic wraps for cameras, and umbrellas.



On one occasion, I was shooting from the roof of the Davenport Hotel. I was standing up there with hotel security, and a gust of wind came through surprising each of us. We decided to stay out there for a while longer, and within minutes along came the rain. It started with a few drops, but increased rapidly. Since my electronic cameras don't do well with water, I decided to shorten the rooftop photo shoot. There is always another opportunity to get back with security down there and do some more photos, when it is a lot drier, and a bit warmer than a winter rooftop shoot in the wind and rain.

In some ways I love nighttime fog, unless I have to do a lot of driving in it. I had many years of doing a lot of driving in the nighttime Spokane fog, and it can really create problems for drivers. On the other hand, if it is foggy at night now, I want to grab the backpack and the camera stuff and head out looking for fog and how it looks through the lens of a camera. I think some amazing things can be seen through the lens of a camera, in the fog. Fog can, at least to a degree, impact the length of some of your time exposures. It will really look great though when you get your shots on your computer. One evening while walking down to the floating stage in Riverfront Park, two amorous river otters made quite an appearance on the surface of the floating stage. Scaring me in the process, I had never expected to see any otters in the area of Riverfront Park, let alone noisily climbing onto the floating stage area. I had the wrong lens attached to the camera at the time of their appearance, but there they were, two otters engaged in...well, a good time. So much for nothing ever happens in the fog.



Lights, camera, action..... (motion)

Shooting digital images after dark isn't quite the same thing as participating in a sporting event. Unless, of course, you count all of the walking that takes place with the



photographer logging miles of quality aerobic exercise, looking for camera shots. Yet, there is so much external motion (and commotion) after dark, and that motion can actually be quite striking.



Vehicle movement is a great deal of fun to capture. Although it certainly isn't rocket science, capturing the headlights and taillights of cars and trucks is a great deal of fun. In the photos above, let's look at each, from left to right.

On the left image, the goal was to set up the camera so that the entire exposure would be long enough for the entire stream of northbound traffic to make it into the exposure, and all the way across the bridge. My idea was to get a complete stream of headlights as the cars were northbound. Secondly, I wanted to get in a position where the reflection of the headlights would bounce off the river surface, below the bridge. The sky was a nice blue color, and the headlights showed up on cue, and did their magic. The lights completely covered the entire visible bridge area, and the river reflected the lights off its surface. I shot a number of images from this spot, waiting for a stream of headlights that were tall enough to get the best reflection on the rivers surface.

The middle image was one of a series of shots of the restaurant across the street, the Blue Fish. I wanted to crop out of the frame, most of the taillights that were visible, since they did not add much to the image. After shooting about 5 images, I heard an ambulance headed northbound on Lincoln. Knowing the path of the ambulance, I set the camera up for a long enough exposure, so the lights of the ambulance would be captured as it passed in front of the cameras lens. The height of the ambulance lights was much higher in profile, so they made a much more dramatic impact than did any of the taillights of cars had done previously. I wish I could have captured the noise of the siren along with the image, as it was rather loud.

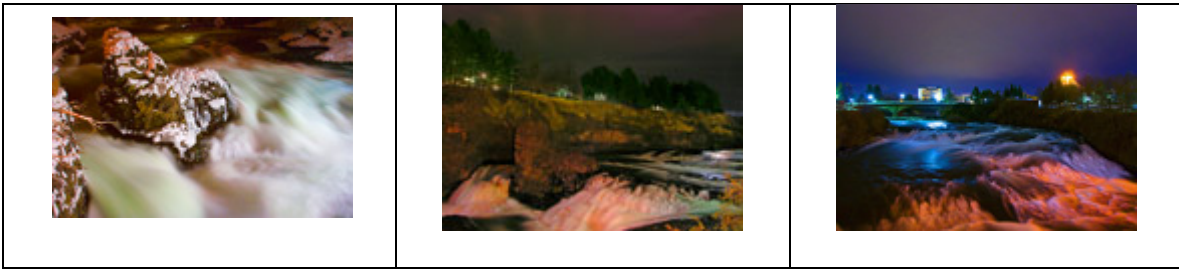
The right image was captured, just west of the Opera House building, directly beside the northbound lanes of the Washington Street couplet. I wanted to catch just taillights of cars, with some recognizable objects in the same frame. The taillights visible in the photo are actually three images taken from the same spot, and combined.



Movement after dark is really a good time, and I recommend that you try to get out there and do some of that. Traffic movement in a photo does not always have to be captured from the street level, and I suggest looking around for some options. Parking garages where you can get above the level of the streetlights are a good example of a place to shoot. The



image to the left was shot from the Parkade (parking garage), looking east onto 400 West Main Street.



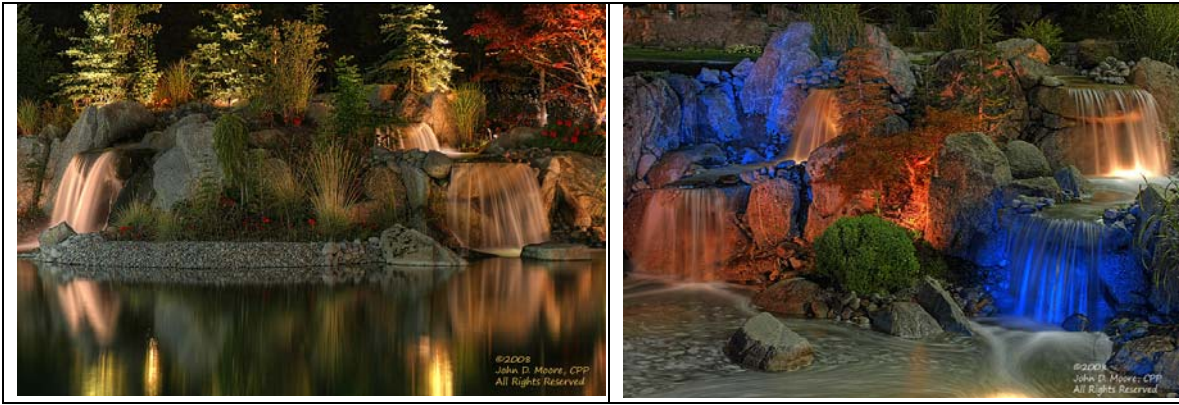
There is other movement at night, such as water. Water in the Spokane River can be horridly fast and also slow at times. The thing about the water in the river is that there are a number of different types of adjacent street and building lights reflecting off the surface of the river.

In the photo to the left, there are almost all Metal Halide light sources adjacent to this Spokane River location. The lights color rendition was just what I wanted, and as this type of light source lives out its life cycle it actually gives off more of the greenish tint. Mercury Vapor will also do the same thing (argon gas). There was one halogen light source which was less as efficient as the Metal Halide, but it added some reddish light to the center of the moving water and also the rock. The exposure was about 8 seconds, although there were other images of this location at varying exposure times. ISO was 100, and it was between F8 and F11 (Canon).

The next two images are also examples of how ambient light can influence the color of a waters reflection in a timed exposure. Oranges, blues, and greens, are all parts of the life cycle of a high intensity discharge (HID) light source. Timed exposures can lend themselves to the silky appearance of fast moving water, and at night you should have some fun taking some moving water images. (Middle photo, Canon EOS 350d, Right photo Nikon CP 8700).

Hardscape waterfalls are a source of moving water and these can't be forgotten after the sun goes down. The architecture of the hardscape waterfalls may be attractive in the daylight, but some of these can blow you away after dark. Illumination may be installed by the designers of these areas, but you may also consider bringing your own lights (but more of that later).





Hardscape waterfalls can be found just about anywhere, and in both public places and on private property. For the hardscape waterfalls on private property, insure that you are legally on the property first, and the simple way to do that is what? “Ask permission, first.” You will have much success with photographing these design elements by asking permission, since the pride of the designers and users is paramount most of the time. Of course, for the hardscaped areas in public places, you may be able to shoot away with no first steps needed.

Your normal photographic tools will be needed for these spaces, including a trustworthy and very stable tripod.

One helpful tip was to bring your own lights in case the landscaped areas were dark and boring. In the two images above, the image on the left was in a private property area north of the City of Spokane. This landscape contained a number of incandescent lights which made a real improvement over the prior darkness and areas of complete shadows. The image on the right was in a different hardscape area, which allowed me to utilize some colored filters on that particular hardscape waterfall. Instead of total darkness, the brief use of some blue and red filters attached to the Big Max handheld flashlight made a total difference with this location. Before the color and light was added, you could hear the waterfall, but it was very difficult to see.

Related tools

When I go out for a night shoot, the equipment varies. The location where I am shooting will at least partially determine the equipment I start with when I am at a certain location.



Fairly tight spaces and large cityscapes may require a wide angle lens to begin with (11-18). If you are shooting from a rooftop in the city, you may opt for a zoom lens starting with a 28-135, or even a 70-300 to get you closer to activities or events below. I rarely use the standard lens which came with the camera (Canon 350d), since shooting at night is really going to push a photographer into having more flexibility in determining shot selections.



I always carry a backup camera (Nikon CP 8700), which is actually quite helpful if the main camera is placed strategically on a tripod for a shot. The Nikon camera provides some zoom capabilities, and the 8MP Nikon camera will readily allow enlargements if you get some good shots with it.

In 2008, the backup camera is a Canon 400D. I tend to load this camera with a wide angle lens (11 x 18).

Flashlights are a MUST. I mentioned earlier that I carry three, but you should always have at least one when you venture out at night.

One of the other avenues for multiple color options includes the use of LumiQuest colored gel filters. I have used them onboard the Canon 580 flash unit, as well as handheld flashlights

I always have at least one tripod with me at night, and in many cases I bring two which allows flexibility and allowing a stable platform for a backup camera. Tripods can offer stable platforms for timed exposures, but they will also add weight to the equipment you carry. I carry a Tamrac photo backpack which allows the tripods to be attached directly to the sides of the backpack, and the weight is fairly well distributed. The backpack stores batteries, flashlights, a bottle of water, and a reflective vest, gloves, wool hat, or windbreaker if needed for a particular shoot.

Shoes have to be included in this discussion. Maybe we do not see them as a tool; but they are an important part of night photography if you are going to be shooting in all seasons, and in all kinds of conditions. Good stable hiking boots are valuable in darkness, in almost any season, but most certainly in winter. Sometimes I refer to hiking boots as “knobby shoes,” but having good structural separation on the sole, can offer stability in icy or even in some wet slick conditions by a river. If you are going to stay on a paved surface, walking shoes which are comfortable will allow some long hikes on hot pavement.

Extra batteries may not be needed in most outdoor shoots, but they should be carried, “just in case.” In extreme cold weather shoots, I have found replacing batteries and battery sets can be frequent. In shooting digital photos for 8 hours at the 2006/2007 First Night celebration in downtown Spokane, I went through 6 Li-ion batteries. That was largely because of the cold outdoor temps I think. Multiple battery sets were used in the external Canon flash unit (Canon 580), and that was also because of the cold outdoor temps. 2007/2008 was about the same although it was a much colder New Years celebration in downtown Spokane.



The photographer



John D. Moore, CPP has been a resident of Spokane, Washington since 1969. He is a veteran of 31 years in law enforcement, and he retired from the Spokane Police Department in 1997 after 27 years at SPD. The last 6 years of his police career included photographing crime scenes, and fatal collisions. He is a security management technical writer and consultant, and has authored 12 technical manuals on topics related to armed robbery safety, policies, procedures, and prevention. He digitally photographs many at risk areas for inclusion in his technical manuals, as well as his online training programs for at risk employee groups. John is the owner of his own business (Armed Robbery Training Associates, LLC, <http://www.armedrobbery.com>), which is located in Spokane, Washington.

John's photographic interests include Spokane Night Scenes photography. The Spokane Night Scenes project is an ongoing documentary process of photographing locations throughout the Spokane regional area after dark.

John is a member of the Spokane Camera Club, and he serves as the Chairman of Community Outreach programs. He is also a member of the Photographic Society of America. His night images appear in a wide variety of places, from local television to the National Geographic Landscape Gallery.

Additional photographer information

Armed Robbery Training Associates, LLC
<http://www.armedrobbery.com/jdmbio3.htm>

Spokane Night Scenes
<http://www.spokanenightscenes.com/details.htm>

