

Equipment Tips for Winter Photography

Heading out to photograph winter with your digital SLR? Canadians are good at having layers of clothing to keep themselves warm - Protect your camera from the cold with these 10 essential DSLR tips...

Digital SLRs don't need regular maintenance. A professional camera that takes thousands of shots a week might benefit from annual servicing, but generally speaking, you can expect to use your camera until it drops. The usual cause of failure is not a mechanical fault but a dead battery - and this becomes a real concern in the winter months. Cold temperatures can sap a battery's power fast, particularly if you're placing demands on the camera's autofocus, LCD screen and other energy-hungry features. To ensure it's not your camera that gives up when the temperature plummets...

Take a spare battery

If you can afford one, it's always a good idea to invest in an additional battery - unless you're one of these organised people who always remembers to charge batteries the night before. Keep the spare battery in an internal coat pocket, so your body warmth keeps it in top condition.

Push your camera to the limit

Use the camera until the battery expires, charge it fully, let it run flat again and so on - 'half-charging' can reduce the battery's maximum capacity over time.

Reduce your camera's power consumption

The sensor and processor use a good part of it - there's not much you can do about that - but so does that big, bright LCD on the back. Keep your pixel-peeping to a minimum or, better still, switch off the camera's quick-review feature and only look at photos you're not sure of. By the same token, don't use Live View either, unless you want to see the battery drain even further.

Take larger memory cards

Always take more memory than you think you'll need. The last thing you want to do when you're out in freezing conditions is have to check images on the LCD and delete selected ones to free up more shooting space.

Use the LCD's power-off feature

You can shorten the automatic power-off time, but this can be counter-productive - you end up missing shots because the camera's gone to sleep. Some cameras use the main LCD for status information - make sure this powers off automatically after a few seconds (this isn't the same as the camera powering off).

Switch off the lens's stabilisation

VR and image-stabilisation systems use power, and in bright light you shouldn't really need them - take a tripod with you if you're not confident that your frozen hands will be steady enough. Focusing uses power too, especially if you've got the camera set to continuous autofocus. Use manual focusing, or single-shot AF.

Keep your tripod warm

As well as allowing you to switch off the stabilisation feature of your lens or camera, it will allow you to use small apertures (for maximum depth of field in photos) and slow shutter

speeds (to record falling snow and rain as streaks). But touching an aluminum tripod with bare hands in winter? Ooch - no thanks. Best get some tripod leg pads in. Some tripods have them fitted, but commercial pads are also available.

Get the shot in one take

You don't want to have to head out again the next day because the shots you've taken aren't sharp enough. If there's a strong wind, extend the tripod as little as possible and further stabilise the camera by pressing down on it. On soft ground, stability can be increased by hanging your camera bag under the tripod with a bungee cord.

Wear the right clothes

Dress according to the expected conditions. The cold saps your energy, so it's important to keep warm to stay focused. A hat, gloves and a flask of warm drink can make all the difference when you're waiting for the best light. We'd recommend a pair of shooting mitts (the kind that double up as both mittens and fingerless gloves, so you have no trouble with fiddly camera buttons) and a pair of ski pants so you can get those unique, low-to-the-ground shots of snow and ice.

Don't let a downpour dampen your spirits

One of the most important factors of shooting in severe weather conditions is keeping your digital camera dry. Obviously, you're not going to keep it completely spotless but the use of a rain cover, which you can either buy or make yourself, is wise. A lens hood is also a great accessory to have too. Don't think they're only used to cut out the flare from the sun - they can also keep light rain and snow off the front of the lens.