

Exposing for a subject that is small in the frame

Paul Stefan explains how you can use spot metering to get good results from difficult, high-contrast scenes

"I'M LOOKING FOR SOMETHING like a black cat in a snow scene, or a white lamb in coal pit" was my brief for the subject of exposing for a subject whose colour contrasts with the general scene. I do enjoy a challenge, but even that one seemed a little beyond me, as there wasn't a snowflake in sight and the chances of me getting a lamb into a coal pit were about as remote as, well, finding a black cat in a snow scene! Editor Lezano's examples did however make very clear the sort of thing he was after and I'm sure we've all come across something similar when out shooting. In a high-contrast scene, allowing the camera to decide for itself how to expose such a scene will always give you less than perfect results. The answer, therefore, is to take control yourself! Using the suggestion of a black cat in a snow scene as an example, there is clearly a huge tonal variation between each of the elements in that scene. Expose the overall shot for the black cat and all the snow will be completely blown out. Expose the scene for the snow and the black cat becomes a black blob with no detail at all.

Clearly, taking this shot on any auto camera mode is likely to result in the latter, as the majority of the shot will be snow, therefore causing the camera's multi-zone metering system to lean towards the most prominent subject in the scene – in this case the snow – and expose for that. This will leave you with a very sad looking black cat showing very little, if any, detail.

Therefore, the ideal solution for this scenario would be to find a middle-ground in the huge variation between the snow and the cat, and expose for that. Easy! This can only really be done using AE lock or spot metering, as both will allow you to take control of the exposure and then set the scene how you want. I used spot metering for the photographs you'll see on this spread, simply because it's my personal preference. It also enabled me to take more control over how I exposed the shot.

The critical thing here is to find a mid-toned subject that falls between the extremes of contrast, such as a grey rock, from which you can take a spot reading. Set the camera up to expose for the neutral rock and then compose the shot without changing the exposure settings. In my step-by-step guide, I tried to get as close to my brief as I could by dressing one of my daughters up in a lamb-like jacket and putting her in a dark scene that was as close to coal as I could find – some recently burnt heather on Stanton Moor in the Peak District.



3) NOW TAKE FULL CONTROL

I didn't want an underexposed scene surrounding my subject, or an overexposed white jacket. I also didn't like the result that my camera's Full Auto mode had given me, which was weighted towards the dark heather. The solution was for me to take control and look for a mid-tone, allowing me to set the best average exposure I could. Luckily, there was a number of large lumps of Peak District grit stone lying around. These provided an excellent mid-point between the dark heather and the bright white of the jacket – perfect for a spot meter reading. If you face a scene without such a convenience, simply introduce a grey card to spot from.



As with the backlit subject, by selecting aperture-priority, choosing an aperture, making sure I had spot metering set and then pointing the camera's spot metering circle in the viewfinder towards the grit stone, I could then lock my exposure and capture this result.



1) TAKING A SHOT ON AUTO

Once I'd found my location and composed the image, I put the camera into Auto mode to take the shot. This uses the camera's multi-zone metering to set the exposure for the scene. As you can see, it's not a terrible shot, but you will notice that it appears to have weighted more on the side of the dark, burnt heather, which has caused the white, lamb-like jacket, as well as the subject's face, to be grossly overexposed. This is because the dark heather covers the majority of the scene and this is what the multi-zone metering will take into account more than the small area of white. Above are the settings that the camera used in Full Auto mode.



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2) RESULTS OF SPOT METERING

Spot metering allows you to meter from a specific subject in a scene. This works well if the exposure doesn't vary hugely across the shot, but in our example, taking a spot meter reading from the white subject or the dark scene would still not give the desired results. For this shot, I locked a spot reading from the white jacket, which is beautifully exposed, but at the expense of the rest of the scene. The next shot shows what happened when I metered from the heather and exposed for that. The heather is perfectly exposed but the jacket is now completely overexposed, which doesn't look great and obviously shows no detail at all.

