

Gill Moon Photography Photo Club



February 2023 Challenge 2

Using foregrounds in landscapes

Hello

and welcome to my new monthly photo club challenges.

Each month I will be setting a new challenge for club members to work with. The challenges are not designed to be competitive but they are designed to be fun and inspiring and help you grow as a photographer.

Every other month we will be looking at the work of different photographers who are 'masters' in their chosen field of photography. We will examine how they make their images and discuss how you can use their techniques in your own work. I hope these will be inspiring sessions.

Every monthly challenge will be followed by a 1.5 hour Zoom session (which is entirely optional) on the last Wednesday of every month where we will discuss some of the submitted images and talk about what worked and what didn't. I hope this feedback will be useful.

Thank you very much for being part of the Photo Club and I hope you will find it a fun and rewarding challenge.

Gill.

What is a foreground & why is it important?

We have all stood in front of an awesome landscape at some time or another and taken a photograph only to find that it looks distinctly underwhelming when we get it home. This is likely to be because there is no clear foreground or middle ground, only background. The least interesting photos are those that contain only background.

When we stand in front of a landscape and look around us we see our surroundings as a 3 dimensional view. Our brain processes the scene and identifies the foreground, middle distance and background. We are capable of judging the distance between the three layers and hence the depth within the view. Unfortunately the camera cannot do this on its own - it cannot see in 3 dimensions. Therefore it is our job as photographers to translate this 3 dimensional scene into a 2 dimensional medium ie. a photograph. In other words we are responsible for adding the depth to an image. We do this by using an interesting foreground.

A foreground is something placed in the lower third of an image. It is the part of the scene that is closest to the camera. It can consist of anything but it needs to be interesting. I read once that if a foreground doesn't make an interesting image in its own right then it doesn't deserve to be your foreground.

The following two images were taken on Luskentyre beach on the isle of Harris. They were taken on the same morning although the second shot was taken about an hour after the first.

The first shot shows the view across the beach towards the Harris mountains. It is a simple image where all the interest is in the distance. While I quite like this image because it conveys the tranquility of the morning it doesn't really give a good sense of depth

and it is hard to judge the scale of the distant mountains.



Luskentyre Beach - camera settings: F16 at 13 seconds, ISO 50, focal length 26mm, 24-70mm lens on full frame camera.



Luskentyre Beach - camera settings: F16 at 30 seconds, ISO 31, focal length 32mm, 24-70mm lens on full frame camera.

The second image makes use of some sand patterns that I found on the beach. These create a prominent foreground and help lead the eye towards the distant mountains. The relationship between the foreground and the background is what creates depth in the image.

The following two images make a similar distinction. The first image doesn't really have a foreground although you could argue that the reflections act as interest in the front of the image. There is, however, nothing that really adds depth to the shot. Whilst the colour adds impact the scene is still a little flat.



Bawdsey - camera settings: F14 at 0.8 seconds, ISO 80, focal length 32mm, 24-70mm lens on full frame camera.

The second image makes use of the grasses in the water as a foreground. These have been arranged so that they lead the viewers eye around the edge of the image towards the background.

The focal point of this image was always going to be the gun tower on the opposite side of the pond. The reflections in the water add some interest in the middle of the shot and the grasses have been included to grab the viewers attention and lead the eye into the image.

The second image has depth and there is a definite relationship between the foreground and the background.

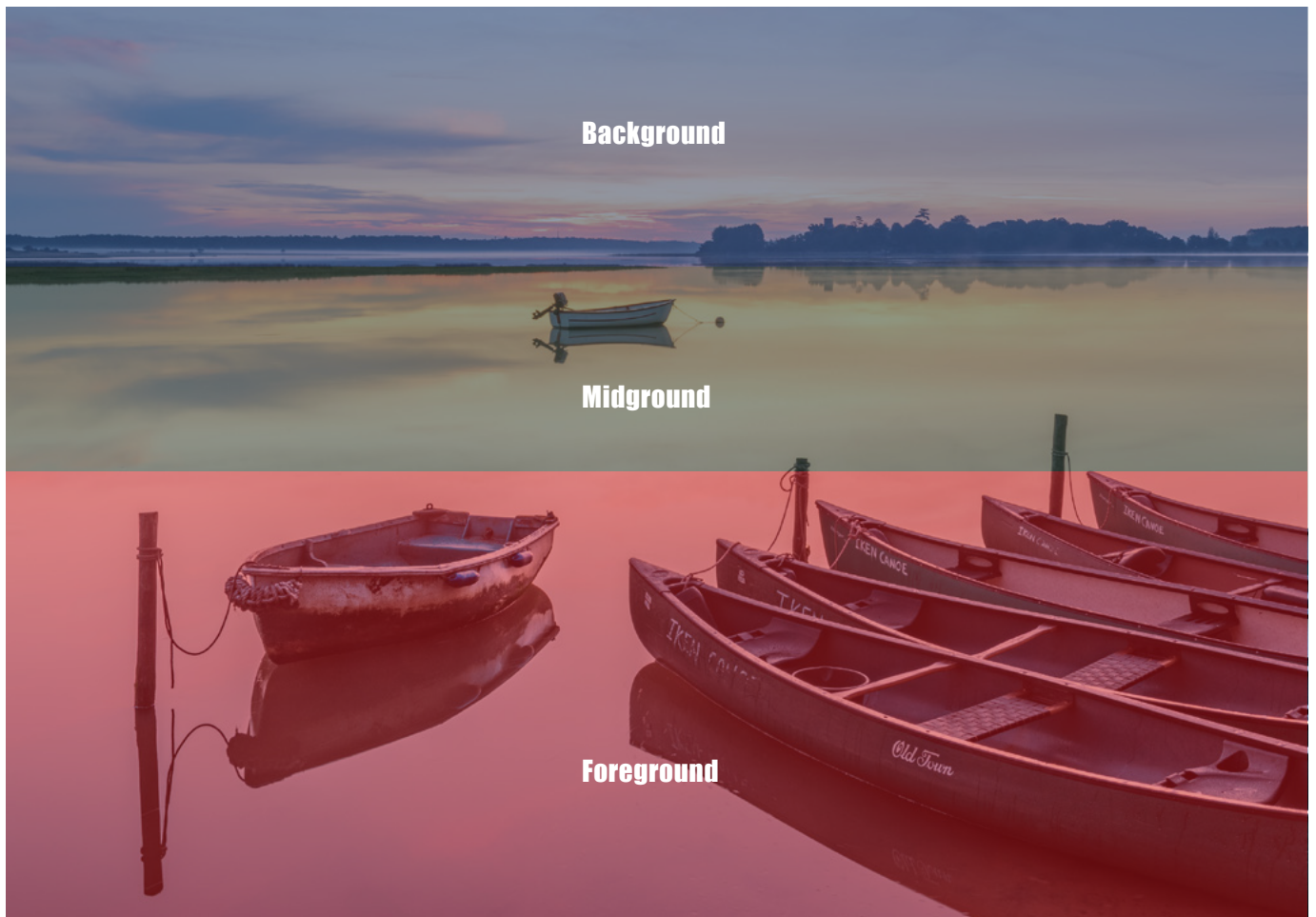


Bawdsey - camera settings: F14 at 4 seconds, ISO 80, focal length 24mm, 24-70mm lens on full frame camera.

To capture the two portrait images I spent time looking around the landscape to find elements that I could use for my foreground. In both cases I knew what my background was going to be so my main focus became what to use for the foreground.

Start with the foreground. Compositions tend to fail when the foreground is treated as an afterthought.

The structure of a photograph



A landscape photograph could generally be considered to comprise the following structure:

Foreground
Mid ground
Background

These are the three components that will allow you to convey depth within your image.

Foreground. In my opinion this is the most important part of your image. It is the first part of a photograph that the viewer will notice. It's principle function is to grab the viewers attention so it should be impactful. It should add interest to a photo by means of colour, texture, shape or detail. It is there to draw the eye into the image.

Mid ground. This exists to bridge the gap between your foreground and your background. The amount of mid ground in

your image can be controlled by your lens choice and your viewpoint. If you are shooting with a wide angle lens and a high viewpoint you are likely to have lots of mid ground present in your image. If you are shooting with a telephoto and a low viewpoint then your mid ground will be significantly compressed.

Background. This is often the part of the scene that caught your eye in the first place and it is usually the subject of your image. Depending upon your lens choice and viewpoint it can appear dominant in the frame or more distant.

How much foreground, mid ground and background you have in your image comes down to your compositional choices. The key thing to consider is balance. All parts of the image have to interact within the frame to form a balanced composition.



Iken, River Alde - camera settings: F16 at 1.6 seconds, ISO 100, focal length 24mm, 24-70mm lens on full frame camera.

Foregrounds should always compliment your subject. Your foreground can lead the eye with leading lines or it can frame your subject focusing the eye to a smaller portion of the frame.

In the image above the boats point into the midground leading the viewers eye towards the smaller boat in the middle of the image. This in turn points to the trees and the church on the horizon. These three levels of interest give the image its depth.

The next image shows the same section of river but this time the composition uses a different foreground.

For this shot I have used the sea aster flowers as a frame around the bottom of the image. This acts to stop the viewers eye from straying out of the image instead it forces the viewer to look further into the shot. The sense of depth is retained with an obvious foreground, mid ground and background. The viewpoint in this shot was lower than that chosen for the first shot. This, combined with the longer focal length, makes the mid ground feel more compressed.

In general your foreground should be an interesting addition to the scene and its inclusion should add to the story you are trying to tell.



Iken, River Alde - camera settings: F14 at 1/8 second, ISO 100, focal length 65mm, 24-70mm lens on full frame camera.

In the second image above the white flowers in the foreground act as an anchor at the bottom of the image. They frame the mid ground where the focal point is situated and prevent the eye from wandering out of the frame.

Balance is key - all parts of the image have to interact within the frame to form a balanced composition.

When I am out looking for a composition in the landscape I am always looking for elements that I can use in my foreground. This search becomes the primary factor that usually dictates whether my image succeeds or fails.

'To me, photography is an art of observation. It's about finding something interesting in an ordinary place... I've found it has little to do with the things you see and everything to do with the way you see them.'

Elliott Erwitt

How to find interesting foreground.

Your foreground can comprise anything that compliments your scene. Look for:

Colour

Texture

Leading lines

Shapes and patterns

Below are a few images that illustrate these elements.

1. Colour



This little red pool on a rocky beach in Assynt became the reason I took this image. It seemed so out of context with the rest of its surroundings. Closer observation revealed it was the algae on the rocks that were making the pool appear red.

This image was shot with a 24-70mm lens at 32mm, F16, ISO 100, 1/5 second. I placed my focus point on the rocks in the water just beyond the puddle.

2. Texture and Patterns



This image was taken at blue hour on the Suffolk Coast. It is an area of mudstone that has been work by the sea creating pools and rills interspersed with sandy areas. It is a great place for seascape photography. It is a good example of the foreground becoming the image, as in this case it leads to nothing except the sea, horizon and dawn colours.

This image was shot at 26mm, F13, ISO 31, with a shutter speed of 13 seconds to smooth out the water. When you are using texture and patterns as your foreground, especially in seascape images, it is a good idea to use a longer exposure to smooth the moving water. This has the effect of removing the texture from the water which also removes the problem of competing textures - where the patterns in the water and the rocks compete for attention in the frame. Competing textures often result in overly complex and messy images.

3. Texture and leading lines



In this image I have chosen a viewpoint in the sea and used the motion of the waves to create texture and leading lines to guide the eye towards the beach. This technique can work just as well standing on the beach using the motion of the waves to lead the eye out towards the horizon.

When taking shots like this I have found a shutter speed of around a second works best for maximum streakiness. If your shutter speed is too long the water will have no texture and the lines will become blurred. How to use foreground successfully.

This image was shot at 28mm, F14, ISO100 with a 1 second shutter speed.

How to use foreground successfully.

Choose a low viewpoint

This works really well when you are working with rocks or smaller natural details. A low view point has the effect of exaggerating the size of your foreground in relation to the



In this shot above I used a really low viewpoint to get close to the boulders in the foreground. This has exaggerated their size within the frame in relation to the background and has given them a greater visual weight, catching your attention and pulling your eye into the frame.

This image was shot at 24mm, with a low viewpoint and the camera angled downwards. F13 at 6 seconds, ISO 100.

Use a wide angle lens

Wide angle lenses have a similar effect in that they will distort the scene in front of you. They allow you to get up close to your foreground elements and will make them appear larger within the frame. They have the opposite effect on the background making this appear smaller. As such they are a useful tool for balancing smaller foreground elements with larger more dominating backgrounds. When using wide angle lenses it is important to make sure that you retain a good balance between your foreground and background



For this image I have used a wide angle lens to get close to the fallen tree branch and the grass and cow parsley surrounding it. I wanted the branch to appear more prominent in the frame compared to the tree.

This image was taken at 15mm focal length, F11, 1/160 second, ISO 100.

Shoot in portrait orientation

Shooting in portrait orientation especially with a wide angle lens will allow you to really get up close and focus on your foreground. When shooting like this pay attention to your aperture and how much of your scene is in focus. Think about how close you are to your foreground and whether it is possible to get the whole scene in focus, if not you may need to focus stack your image. To do this shoot at least 3 images, one for the foreground, one for the middle distance and one for the background then combine them together using Photoshop.



This image above is a three shot focus stack, each shot taken at 24mm at F16. For the first shot I focused on the foreground pebbles, the second shot on the far side of the water and the third on the bungalow. I used a polariser to remove the surface glare and allow me to see below the surface of the water.

I opened all three images as layers in Photoshop. made sure all 3 layers were selected and then went to edit>auto-align layers. Once I had done this and with all 3 layers selected I went to edit>auto-blend layers>as a stack. This will give you a focus stacked image that you can then crop and edit.

Post processing

Although post processing is not part of your initial composition in the field it is definitely something that you should think about while you are shooting your image. A good way to enhance the layering effect (foreground, middle distance, background) is to use some



dodging and burning to help focus the viewers attention where you most want it. In the image above I have used the darker parts of the water as a frame around the bottom edge of the image. I burned the shadows in these areas in Photoshop and lightened the midground to draw the eye towards the boat and then beyond it.

Creativity

Using an interesting foreground doesn't necessarily mean that the foreground has to be pin sharp or in focus.

In the following shot, which I took in Assynt in the highlands, I wanted to create a frame around the small bothy. The bothy sat in the middle of a vast coastal moorland which, at the time, was covered in cotton grass. I wanted to create a dreamy feel to my image using the cotton grass but I didn't want the whole scene to be in focus. My idea was to convey a hint of the cotton grass and create a feeling that the scene was covered in cotton wool (which is what the plant makes me think



up really close to my foreground and 'shooting through' the cotton grass to give this really abstract blurred effect.

I used a macro lens for the shot and focused on the bothy. My settings were F5.6 at 1/2500 second with a 105mm focal length, ISO 200. 'Shooting through' the cotton grass meant lying on the ground and placing the front of the lens really close to my foreground, almost touching the cotton grass.

If you would like some more inspiration then take a look at some of the work from the two photographers listed below.

Erin Babnik

Erin has some beautiful photographs which are all about her foreground. She often uses flowers or textures and patterns to create the foreground in her images. These are all shot with a really low viewpoint.

Images that really illustrate a good use of foreground include:

Arrow Dynamic

Sundial
Moondial
Flowers for Miles
erinbabnik.com/portfolio/dreaming

Ted Gore

Ted has some really striking images in his by the sea gallery which illustrate the creative use of foreground really well. He uses longer exposures to create patterns in the water but he also uses foliage to create compelling foregrounds.

Good examples can be found in the following images:

The forlorn gate

Abandoned

Oceanside swirl

Brother

Naupaka's journey

www.tedgorecreative.com/bythesea

The final image in these notes was taken at East Lane Bawdsey on a really low tide. My reason for taking this shot was to capture the patterns and colours in the mudstone. My shooting info was F16, 30 seconds, ISO 100, focal length 24mm.

February's Photo Challenge

This month's challenge is to produce an image with a prominent foreground in a portrait orientation. Your foreground should be eye catching and relate in some way to your focal point.

When composing your image think about the following:

how do your foreground and focus point relate to each other?

Is your image balanced? This is particularly important if you are using a wide angle lens.

Is the focus sharp from front to back or do you need to focus stack?

The Zoom session for this challenge will take place on Wednesday 22nd February between 7pm and 8.30pm.

