

* 7 Tips for Lightning Photography *

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1. Use manual focus.

Lightning happens way too fast for you to focus on it and shoot. If you have a foreground element focus on that or slightly beyond. Then turn that autofocus off. Use a calculator such as dofmaster.com to calculate your hyperfocal distance. For instance, with a 28mm lens on my Canon 5DMk.III the hyperfocal distance at f/4 is 21.5 feet. If I focus at that distance everything from 10.8 feet to infinity will appear sharp. Just to be sure my lightning is sharp I would focus a tiny bit past 21.5 feet.

2. Use a wide-angle lens.

It can be really difficult to predict where the lightning is going to show. Using a wide lens gives you a larger angle of view and therefore a better chance of capturing the lightshow.

3. Specific settings.

Similar to other types of night photography you are going to want to use a large aperture to gather as much light as possible. I would advise shooting wide open.

For most wide angle lenses that will be somewhere in the f/2.8 to f/4 range. Your shutter speed is going to be 30 seconds to allow for the maximum chance of capturing a strike. The ISO will depend on what kind of exposure you are getting with your shutter speed/aperture combination. I would start at ISO 200 and adjust from there. As soon as you have a capture, review the image and histogram. If your image is too bright you can stop down the aperture, too dark raise the ISO.

White balance can be left on Auto anytime you are shooting in RAW. If not shooting RAW 4000k is about right.

4. Get the right gear.

A camera that performs well in low light situations. A fast wide angle lens. A decent tripod and head or window mount. These are the basics.

Next think about a cable release or even a lightning trigger.

5. Protect that gear.

If there is lightning there is generally rain. Obviously, you don't want your gear out in the rain and rain hinders your visibility of the lightning anyway. However, the rain can strike hard and fast. I keep a plastic garbage bag on hand to throw over my gear as I seek shelter. Using a lens hood will help keep drops off the front element if it's sprinkling.

6. Protect yourself.

Lightning can kill you. It's that serious and that simple. If you hear thunder, you are within range of lightning. A window mount will allow you to shoot from your car (*you're safer there because the vehicle's frame acts like a Faraday cage & directs the charge around its frame and into the ground*). Another option is to use a remote trigger, or lightning trigger, and keep an eye on your gear from the car or nearby building.

7. Composition still matters.

Think about the whole image, not just how striking that lightning is. Like other landscapes, the best shots will have interesting foreground elements. A church, mountain, boulder, etc. accompanying a dramatic zig-zag will create a better image than the most phenomenal lightning bolt ever littered by power lines or other unsightly company in the image.

Award-winning nature & wildlife photographer, Jeff Parker, leads photo tours & workshops for the naturally curious™ throughout North & South America & now parts of Europe, too. Join him!

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