

Photography

# A Background in Photography

June 17, 2018 | Charles T. Low, Photographer

## I mean: backgrounds *in* photographs

I've been thinking about backgrounds, which so often, and understandably, seem one detail too many for nascent photographers to consider. So many other things vie for our attention when making an image, such as:

- excellent composition;
- good light;
- rapport with and posing of people.

Any of those could and have occupied entire books of their own.

So it comes as no surprise that thinking about the visual background in a photograph doesn't always rise quite to the surface.

And does it matter? Well, I'm writing a blog about it, people, so I must think it matters!



Most of this image is background, and that background is all *intentionally* out of focus.

And the photographic world agrees. In "critique forums" on the Internet, for example, the theme recurs: "nice photo, watch your background ..." (at its most gentle).

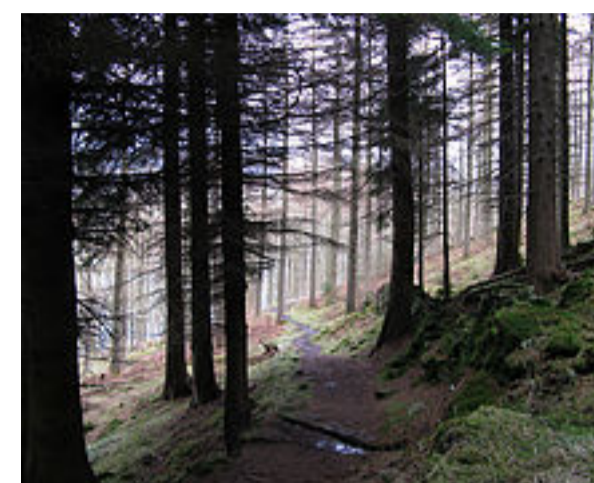
## Foregrounding the Background

The basic premise centres on: *all aspects of a photograph can, and ideally do, contribute to the impact of the final image.* This includes the background.

Beginning photographers will often say, and with some justification, "Well ... that's the background that was there!"

And of course, one contends with what one must. A photo-journalist in a dynamic situation might feel content to have got the shot at all.

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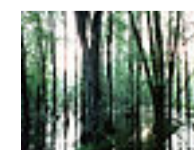
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That roughly describes what happened in the following photo, taken by a fellow photographer, [Joel Miller](#), who has generously allowed use of this image. He describes a joyfully rambunctious child, impossible to hold still, who sat and smiled at the camera for about half a second ... the best the photographer had ever achieved with that subject.



He posted it to an Internet discussion forum, where some of the members ripped into him, because of ... the background.

No one objected to the pose, the lighting, the rapport, the expression, the placement-within-frame. But oh, they cried, how could you have possibly put a fence railing across the back of his head? (It's almost as egregious, to more sanctimonious photographers, as allowing a telephone pole to grow out of the top of a head!) How could you have allowed that distracting foliage for a background? The bokeh (more below) isn't right!

It mattered not to them - and I concede their points on a technical level - that this was not a studio shoot, the level of control was roughly zero, and it was a grab-shot. For a grab, it's really good - significantly better than most of us could ever get! (The photographer did have considerable experience, and was ready and engaged.)

I was glad to be able to provide some assistance, and although not a magazine-cover-quality edit, gave the photographer this, which he loved and planned to print.

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October 2017 (1)

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So, you see what happened. The railing has vanished, and I enlarged a small part of the foliage to cover the entire background. It gives a softer effect, less distracting.

Another option would have been to insert a plain, solid colour background, as in many studio shoots - perfectly acceptable - but we didn't do it that way.

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**Bokeh**, pronounced "bō'kā", "the visual quality of the out-of-focus areas of a photographic image, especially as rendered by a particular lens".

So, that says that bokeh varies from lens to lens. What the dictionary doesn't know, but photographers do, is that it also varies with choice of aperture, with focal length, with distance between subject and background, with the light ... and that the photographer may have some control over it by choosing where to place the subject (one step to the left, or perhaps on a different continent), or the camera (which ... cannot be on a different continent).

Compare this:





f/4 - large aperture, small depth-of-field

with this:



f/11 - small aperture, more depth-of-field

I much prefer the f/4 version, but that's just me, and the point is that I had considerable control over the depth-of-field (and tried it several ways), and it changed the bokeh completely. Depth-of-field and bokeh aren't at all the same thing ... but they are related.

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**Overcast:** one of my five hundred (i.e. not infinite) pet peeves. There is virtually nothing laudable about a plain, grey, overcast sky. It will appear paradoxically too bright against the land, so wreaks havoc on your light-metre, often causing a terrible foreground under-exposure. Photographers have many tools to deal with this (that could be another blog!), but the first one is recognizing the problem. If you just line up a shot which includes a lot of grey sky, and do nothing to mitigate it, you're not likely creating a complimentary background.





This photo was made under an overcast sky at dawn - uninteresting, and so minimized in the composition.



A clear blue sky late in the afternoon - generally pleasing.





And of course, who doesn't love fluffy clouds in a blue sky? Backgrounds matter.

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**OOFI**- this photographic abbreviation means "out of focus", and is generally used negatively, but often an OOF background let's the foreground stand out, which may be exactly what you want.



Or, sometimes, the background is an important part of the image, and you will choose a larger depth-of-field.





f/11 with a short telephoto lens - the ice-locked iceberg was visually isolated quite well without much defocussing of the foreground or background, and in fact I wanted to retain some detail there - it seemed a part of the story



Same here - I felt no need to inject OOF elements into this city-scape



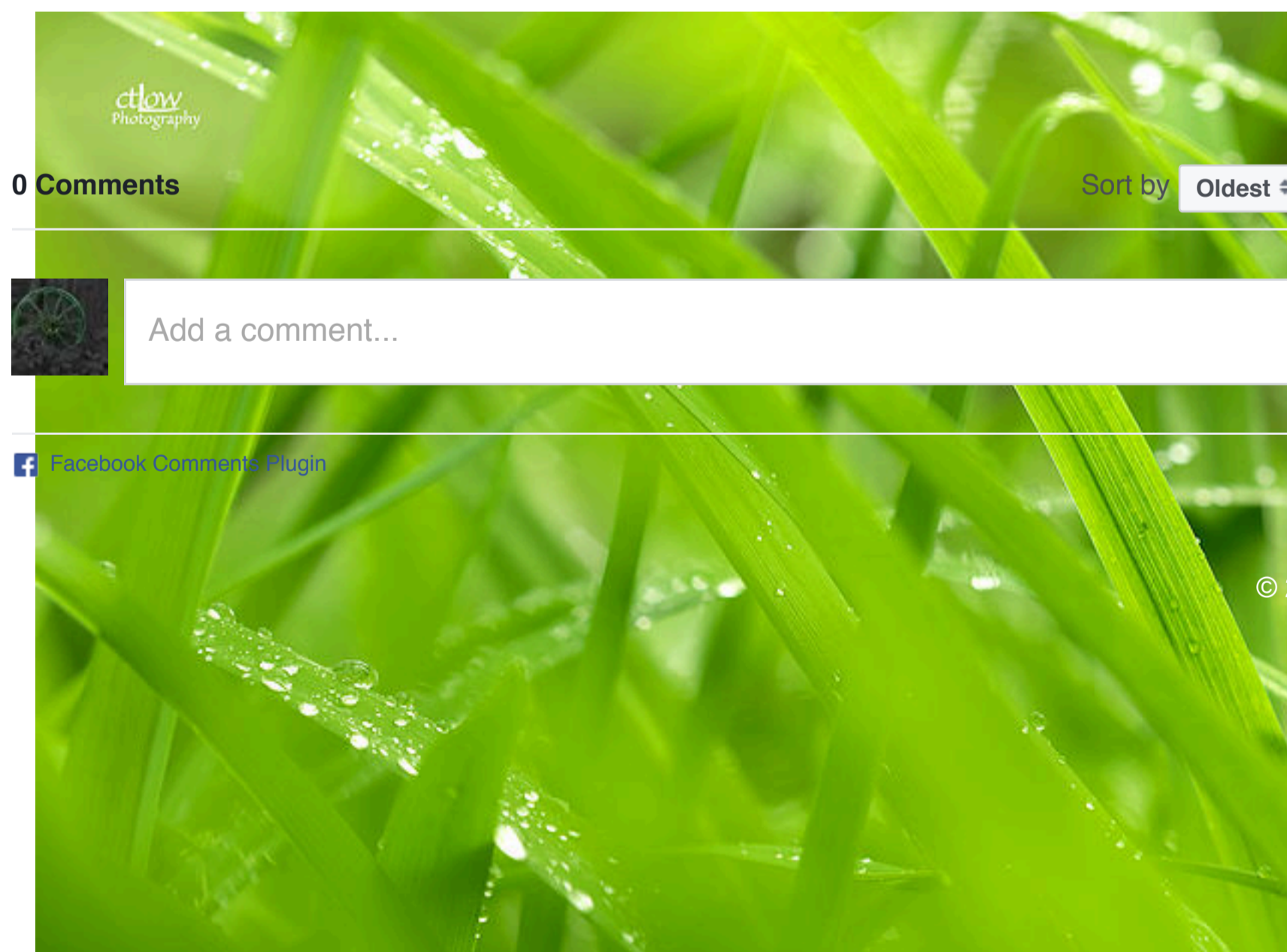
**Background check** - often the best background is one which isn't there. Compositionally, we often hear "isolate your subject" (which is only a guideline, not a rule!).



I could have included lots of the stream and forest around this crumbling wooden bridge, but elected to make a photograph of mainly the bridge. I claim no right or wrong about that - it was simply my choice.

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**Personal preference.** I like having access to different lenses with adjustable apertures, but if I could only have one, with no iris (and I actually do own such a lens, an old 35 mm camera 300mm f/8 mirror lens), it would be a telephoto lens with a wide aperture. I like what they do for the background.



f/4 at 6x telephoto, leaving only a thin plane in focus - everything ahead and behind it OOF! That's the way I like it.

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So, I'm sorry, people, but how can anyone hold all of those things in one's head at once, when on the move in a rapidly-evolving photography session? It isn't as depressing as it sounds if I say, "You can't; no one can." What we all can do however is make all of the elements of composing a scene more reflexive, and that involves practice, reading, teachers/coaches, openness, a willingness to fail, and then more practice. The right amount of practice is a little bit more.



Framing, light, rapport, finding an engrossing subject ... and then we have to worry about the background?!?

Yes, and yet, *don't* worry. Just *recognize* backgrounds as important compositional elements, and it will come. Put backgrounds more into the foreground of your thoughts. Start with static scenes, which give you more time, and the rest will - gradually - follow.

In photography, as in life, what happens in the background often makes a big difference!

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## While you're here:

Remember that I make photographs and that I sell photographs.

Almost everything which you see on this web site is for sale. Prices at the time of writing, for example, for an 11x14" fine-art print with a generous white border would start at about \$50, and you can go up or down from there. Check the [rates](#) page. More importantly, check out my [gallery](#).

Book a portrait-sitting - the right frequency with which to commission formal [portraits](#) is a bit more often.

Remember also to leave a [comment](#), or to [contact](#) me. Note that on the main [blog](#) page you can sign up for new-blog notifications. I am very careful and respectful with your privacy.

Thank you so much for reading.



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