

Enewsletter

Springtime in Big Sky Country

Rick Sheremeta heads into the Montana wilderness with a few Tamron lenses.

By Jenn Gidman

Images by Rick Sheremeta

Rick Sheremeta lives, works, and plays in Montana, where the sky's the limit when it comes to photo opportunities—and also one of the main attractions. The state is nicknamed "Big Sky Country" thanks to its lack of tall buildings and relatively small population, leaving a lasting impression of wide open spaces and skies that go on forever to residents and visitors alike.

Springtime opens up a whole new landscape for photographers exploring the Treasure State. "It's such a spectacular time of year out here in the spring," Rick says. "Everything has just turned from a drab winter brown to a vibrant green. Everything here is in full bloom, and the snow has melted at lower elevations, so you've got that greenery in the mountains, but the mountains are also still snow-capped, which is really pretty. It's the rebirth of nature."

Later in the summer, Montana skies tend to become incredibly blue, with nary a cloud in sight. "Those types of skies can become overwhelming and boring to photograph, so I'll try to minimize the sky in my photos in those cases," Rick says. "But in the spring, you'll often find big, puffy white clouds, so you want to take advantage of that and make them the focus."

Out near Hot Springs at the beginning of April, just before 5 in the afternoon, Rick discovered just such a scene to epitomize that Big Sky Country motif, with the cloud-filled sky as the star. "I tried to work with the rule of thirds and get the barn down in the lower corner to anchor the image," he says. "I took this photo with the [24-70 \(../../lenses/prod/2470_vcusd_a007.php\)](#), which has become my go-to lens for landscape photography—it's got a versatile range of focal lengths and is a fast lens with its F/2.8 maximum aperture.



For an image like this in which the sky is the focus, Rick will also try to place something of visual interest in the foreground. "This was difficult here, because there wasn't a real compelling element in the foreground," he says. "It's a real arid valley area between some of the mountains, where the ground is usually parched, though you can see some vegetation here. So instead I tried to capture the patterns between the gray and the green and to lead the viewer's eye toward the barn."

There were several challenges in this image that Rick had to work around. "I was almost shooting into the sun, as you can tell from the right-hand side of the image where it's very light, so I was very concerned about lens flare," he says. "Not only that, but this particular scene is situated right off the road and has a barbed wire fence around it and a power pole, as well as some other distracting elements off to the right-hand side. I had to work around all of these things and make sure they didn't make it into the frame."

He achieved this by firing off multiple pictures of the same scene from a variety of perspectives. "I took 18 different shots of this same scene," he says. "I'd move from side to side, try different focal lengths, shoot the scene both vertically and horizontally, and experiment with different placements of the barn in relation to the sky and foreground. Pixels are really cheap, so I try to capture everything I can while I'm there. Once you leave the scene, the moment's gone."

Many Glacier is often considered the heart of Glacier National Park, where Rick takes his workshop students every year, and the area right outside the Many Glacier Hotel almost never disappoints. "On the right in this image that I captured with the 17-35mm (the current ultra wideangle lens for a full frame camera is the [15-30mm \(https://www.zeiss.com/lenses/prod/1530_vcusd.php\)](https://www.zeiss.com/lenses/prod/1530_vcusd.php)) is Grinnell Point, with Mount Gould in the center," Rick says. "The rocky promontory between them is called Angel Wing, because that's what it's shaped like."



In the summer, it doesn't get dark until around 10:30 or 11 at night, and it was around 8 p.m. when he took this photo. "I used a polarizer to help intensify and deepen the sky color, since there was nothing of interest in the sky like in the previous photo," he says. "And I really liked that contrast between the blue sky and the red hulls on the boats. I couldn't really lower the bottom of the image because there were distracting elements there. But I like the fact that the angle of the dock lends some interest and dynamic to the image and leads the viewer's eye into the photo. I also wanted to make sure the horizon at the edge of the lake was a) truly horizontal, and b) didn't cut the image in half. When I shoot lake scenes, I always try to get an interesting element in the foreground to help bring the viewer into the image."

Glacier lilies are among the first flowers to poke their heads through the snow in this part of Montana. Near Rick's home, he'll see them start to appear in mid-April, but in Glacier Park, you may not see them emerging until well into July in the high country. And the window to photograph them, like he did here with the [SP 60mm \(../..../lenses/prod/60mm.php\)](#) Macro lens, is short. "They don't last very long, maybe a week or so before they shrivel up, and the bears also love to eat the bulbs," he says. "You'll see areas where the bears have scarified the ground and pulled out the bulbs to devour like a delicacy."



To blow out the background for this image, Rick used a trick he learned long ago from a photographer who worked for the *Palm Beach Post*. "This was pattern-metered (sometimes called evaluative-metered),

where I used the background control for the metering," he says. "I set the shutter speed so I'd get at least 3 stops faster than the correct exposure for the background, and I used a flash with an off-camera extension cord. I really like the resulting effect, but I use it sparingly so it doesn't get overdone."

A photo in early May at the park's Lake McDonald allowed Rick to put into practice something he always advises his students. "I'll say, 'Now don't forget, you need to take a portrait shot of landscapes, too,'" he says. "You can't hold your camera in a horizontal plane and shoot every picture that way."

For this next image with the 17-35, Rick used incorporated framing courtesy of Mother Nature: the surrounding branches and trees. "These were cedar trees, with a ponderosa pine on the right," he says. "It's an appealing effect, but again, you want to use something like this effect judiciously."



It was around 11 in the morning, with the trees mostly in shadow, but it proved a challenging image because of the exposure. "I spot-metered the background: the sky and the mountains, the snow in the mountains, and the dark gray where there had been a forest fire a few years back," he says. "I checked my spot-meter readings to make sure they were within the parameters that I know work and then captured the photo in manual mode. The exposure was really governed by the background; I took this at F/16 because I wanted that depth-of-field. This was one of those times when the lake was still and looked like a sheet of glass, so the reflections were absolutely gorgeous."

Rick brings his students often to St. Mary Falls in the park, and this photo taken in mid-June last year proved again to be one of his trickier images because of the exposure. "I had extreme shade on the left and a very bright area on the right," he says. "With these kind of photos, I start by spot-metering the sky, then spot-meter the gray rock, and then the white of the water. If all of these readings fall within parameters that I know will work, I'm good to go; if not, I'll adjust accordingly."



Rick will also use filters, including the polarizer and graduated neutral density filter he used for this image. "I'll turn the GND filter vertically so I can equalize the exposure a bit, especially because the left side here is really deep in shadow," he says.

It's this interplay of light and shadow that helps to create a visually alluring image. "Your eye quickly goes from the left side right to the waterfall, then to the sky before popping back," Rick explains. "That sprinkling of light on the rocks on the left also adds more visual interest. And I had a lot of latitude with Lightroom to open those shadows up."

Rick also put into play an approach he often suggests to his students when they're photographing waterfalls or streams with flowing water. "I tell them that, to get that creamy, milky effect in the water, I personally like a shutter speed of $\frac{1}{4}$ of a second," he says. "It gives you that silky effect while still offering enough separation so you can see the strands of water. If you go much slower than that with your shutter speed, you'll often just get a white blob of water. The $\frac{1}{4}$ of a second has been an ideal compromise for me and allows me to take waterfall photos that really show off their beauty."

To see more of Rick and Dody Sheremeta's work and learn about their workshops, go to www.alpenglowproductions.com (<http://www.alpenglowproductions.com>) .

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