Films for All Seasons

Getting the most from your photos throughout the year

Text and photos by Jack and Sue Drafahl

Film choices can often make the difference between a great image, and a so-so one. The problem is that there is no secret formula or rule for what film type and film speed you should use for any specific situation. Film manufacturers try to make recommendations, but they are just that, suggestions based on saturation levels and light intensity. It is common to see a brand of film labeled "stops high action," "use on bright sunny days," or "yields high color saturation." Quite confusing, huh?

The actual process of selecting the proper film is really a matter of analyzing each photo situation and asking yourself a series of questions. What is the light level? Is there subject movement? Do I want depth of field or should I stop the action? Does my subject require muted or saturated colors? This may sound simple enough, but photographers may still have a problem selecting a film that best suits their photographic style. For example, a nature photographer would probably not make the same film choice as a wedding photographer.

In order to help you figure out the best film and photo-situation combination, we are going to a try a new approach with this article and take you through the four seasons, Spring, Summer, Fall and Winter. Before you jump to the conclusion that we are going to recommend a specific film for each season, we need to set you straight. Seasons do provide general trends toward a specific type of film, but there are always exceptions to the rule. That's what makes photography so creative. With our limited space allocation, we can't cover all the possible situations encountered in four seasons, but let's give it a try.

Spring Fever

Spring is the time for the glistening of melting snow, spots of color as new flowers appear in the garden, and indoor sports like basketball. It is usually a mix of weather conditions, so it is also one of the most difficult times for selecting film. One day it can be cold and overcast, the next it can be bright and warm. Even the weather in a single day varies and may progress from pleasant conditions to the very worst and back again.

So, you need to be flexible with your photographic tools. If you have multiple camera bodies, you will need to load several different film speeds and change bodies as weather conditions change. If you are a light shooter and find it difficult getting through a full 36-exposure roll before conditions change, you might consider 24-exposure rolls.

We find that ISO 400 color-print films seem to work the best in the springtime. When photographing sports indoors, the film is usually sensitive enough with the bright gym lights, or you can always use a flash and reach considerable distances.

When moving outdoors, the higher ISO speed allows you to shoot under both low light and sunlight and get great results. The higher speed allows you to shoot the morning dew on the fresh flower buds with plenty of depth of field. If you plan on attending and photographing a spring wedding, there are even several films in the ISO 400 range that are specifically designed for weddings.

Fujicolor 400 NPH and Kodak Portra 400NC and 400VC are great films for natural-light wedding photos.

Sports action in bright summer sun can be captured with fine-grain ISO 100 films. Switch to ISO 400 when using really long lenses.

Summer Sports

The summer sun is higher, warmer, and stays around longer, so you will have several film choices, depending on your subject preference. If you prefer to photograph mother nature's landscapes, flowers, insects, and other colorful subjects, you will want to consider ISO 100 slide or color-print films. These films will have the finest grain, and resolve extremely fine detail.

If you are one of the many outdoor enthusiasts who use very long lenses, you will need a higher-speed film. You can move up to the ISO 400 emulsions to achieve increased shutter speed, with minimal loss of quality compared to the ISO 100 counterparts.

When taking images of sports action in bright sunlight with a medium focal length lens, ISO 100–200 can give you excellent results. Using wide apertures, like f/2.8 and f/4, can yield shutter speeds in the 1/1000–1/2000 range, more than fast enough to stop the action. You may have to jump to ISO 400 if you use longer or slower lenses.

Summer is also the time when temperatures can reach more than 100° in some parts of the world, so care must be taken to keep your film from overheating. Do not leave your film in the car, as prolonged exposure to heat can fog your film.

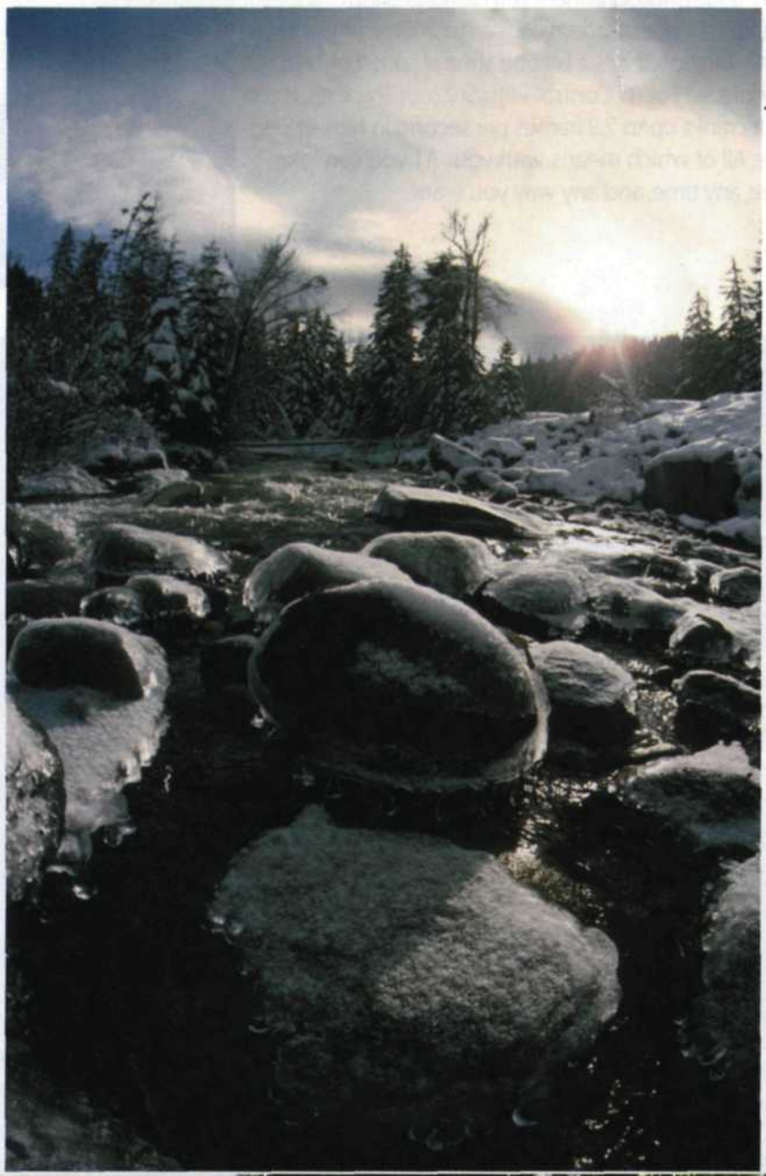
Fall Colors

To capture the beautiful Fall colors, you might want to consider one of the high color-saturation print or slide films that come in ISO 100 and 400 flavors (Fujichrome Velvia, Kodak Ektachrome E100VS and Kodak Elite ExtraColor 100 slide films, and any of the consumer print films—the ones that don't have "professional" in their names—for example). These films take the already vibrant colors to an even higher level to produce some very dramatic images. If you plan on taking individual photos of the leaves, you may want to consider using a flash at a 45° angle with ISO 100 film. The close proximity of the flash will provide adequate exposure for apertures from f/16 to f/32.

Fall is also the time when spiders create their unique web designs. You will find that the sun or a flash using back lighting can highlight some of the very fine detail. The resolving power of the ISO 100 films helps to keep the fine web fibers sharp and clear.

Fall is also the time for football and photos of the action under the bright stadium lights. You will probably need to use ISO 400 or 800 to capture the winning moment.

To get the most out of gorgeous fall colors, use a high-saturation color film—see text above for details.



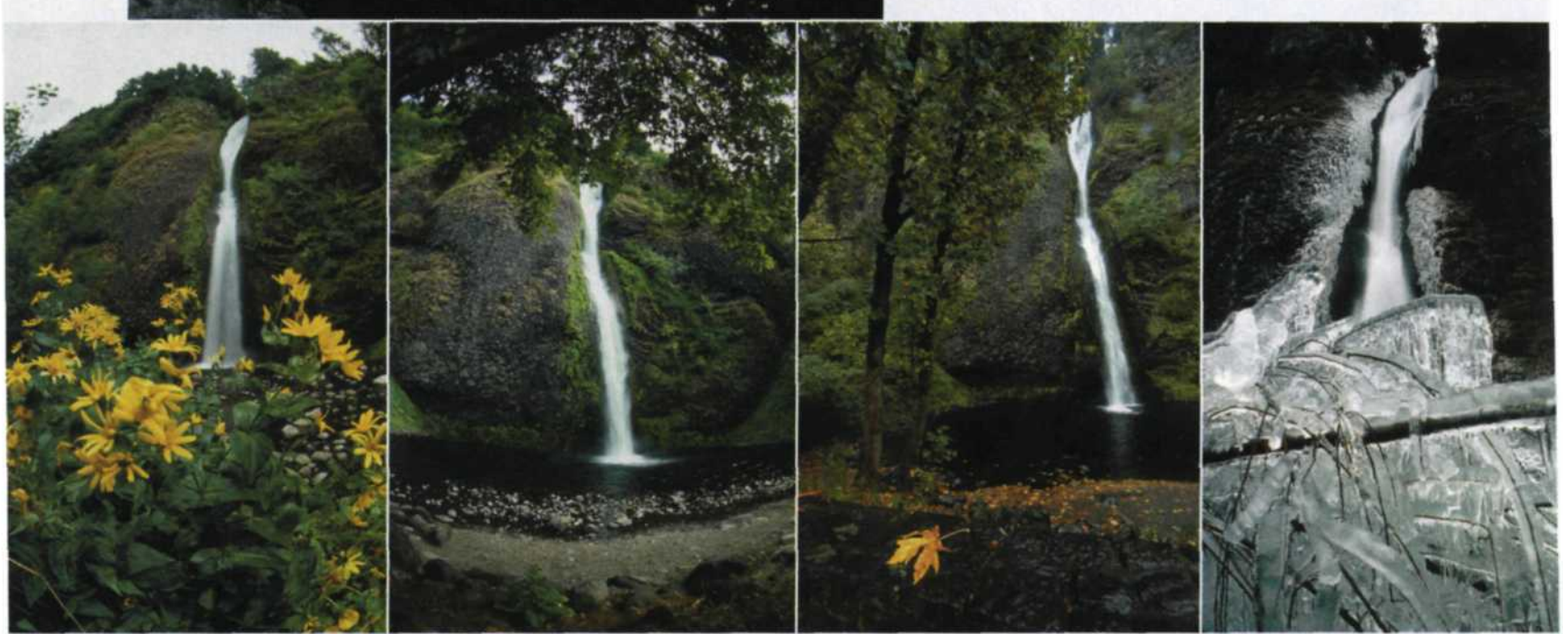
High-contrast winter snow and ice scenes can benefit from the low contrast and clean whites of color-print films designed for portrait and wedding photography.

Winter White

Winter months create a problem in exposure, contrast, and color balance due to the snow. Since snow is white, exposure meters are confused and generally underexpose snow images, so it is difficult to get a good exposure. Color slide film will shift in color with the slightest change in lighting or exposure, so we highly recommend that you shoot color-print film, as color correction can be tweaked after the exposure has been made. If you still want to shoot slide film in the snow, make sure you bracket your images in ⅓-stop increments. You will then have the option of correcting any slight color shift through an internegative, or using your scanner's color balance corrections to achieve snow-white images. We recommend ISO 100 for the slide shooters, as the lower-speed films have less color shifting problems with snow.

If you decide to go with the color-print film, one great solution is to use a portrait film, which is generally lower in contrast (some examples include Agfacolor Portrait 160, Fujicolor Portrait NPS 160 and Kodak Portra 160NC, Portra 400NC and Portra 800). The lower contrast will hold the highlights in the snow and still display shadow detail.

Since most of the sports activities have moved indoors for winter, we highly recommend one of the ISO 400 or higher films with normal or low contrast to stop the action.



One Subject—Four Seasons

One of our favorite pastimes is to photograph a single subject at various times during the year. Since mother nature is not always on a schedule, this allows us to capture the effects of seasonal change. We can then pick out four images that exemplify the four seasons and create a composite image. As you can see, the results can be quite impressive. ■

Try photographing a single subject in each of the seasons for an interesting photo series. This is most easily done with local subjects, but it's worth traveling to a good subject four times in a year to get some great photos.