

# How to photograph shapes in the landscape

Landscape photographer **James Osmond** shows you how to seek out and capture shape and form within a scene, to help you achieve dynamic compositions

Shape is one of the key elements in any work of art. When depicting an object in a drawing or a photograph, defining its shape helps communicate what that object is to the viewer. That may sound obvious and straightforward, but in landscape photography there is so much chaos it can be difficult to isolate the shape of your subject from the clutter all around it.

Composition in landscape photography is often described as 'the

arrangement of parts'. Recognising the shape of individual parts and how they interact with one another is an integral part of creating order from a chaotic landscape. Finding the right viewpoint and the right lighting conditions are key skills here, but there are several other factors to consider, including the emotions conveyed by the use of certain shapes in your photographs.

## SEEING SHAPES

When I was studying zoology, I remember learning how the human visual system works. To tell you the truth, I was a bit overwhelmed by how complicated it is; much of it is still not entirely understood. There is one fact in particular that has stuck with me. It is that what we see is not just what our eyes pick up, it is also what our minds perceive. Our eyes focus an image onto our retina, but this retinal image is flat and ambiguous and could represent an infinite variety of possible objects. For example, a trapezoid can be interpreted simply as a trapezoid lying on a plane parallel to our retinas, or as a square on a plane tilted away from us.



above Rural road, France. The triangular shape of the road describes a rectangular shape receding into the distance.  
Canon EOS 5D with 24-105mm lens at 90mm, ISO 200, 1/6sec at f/18, tripod

▶ In two-dimensional images such as photographs, shapes play a key part in describing the form of a three-dimensional landscape, but we cannot rely on shape alone. A triangle shape helps describe a road disappearing into the distance, but in order to determine that it is a road and not just a triangle, we rely on other visual clues and learned assumptions, such as diminishing texture and tonal variation. In this picture, taken in rural France, the road is broadly triangular in shape but we know that it describes a rectangular shape receding into the distance. How do we know this? Because we have learned from experience to assume that the road has a uniform texture, and we can see that the texture diminishes towards the top of the triangle, as the dotted line gradually loses definition and merges into one continuous line. The trees help reinforce this description because we assume they are all the same size and yet we can

see they diminish in size (and lose textural detail) towards the centre of the frame, so we interpret them as becoming more distant. Incidentally, the road in this picture is not a perfect triangle, but wobbles towards the top and flattens off before reaching a point. Based on the learned assumption that the road has a uniform width, we interpret this to mean that there is a dip in the road followed by a hill.

Our visual system has evolved to interpret a complex three-dimensional world by using retinal images from our eyes, and assumptions based on learned experiences in our own lifetime (and possibly experiences inherited through our genes from our distant ancestors, too). This is why our perception is three-dimensional, even if what we are looking at is a two-dimensional image on a flat surface, such as a photograph.

## FINDING SHAPES IN THE LANDSCAPE

Landscape is such a broad subject that it is easy to become lost and confused when photographing it. The problem is it is full of so much 'stuff' and works on so many different scales that it can be hard to translate it all effectively into a relatively small two-dimensional photograph. Creating order and simplicity is the key to successful landscape photography, and being aware of the shape of your subject is a crucial part of this. If your subject has a strong shape and you can capture that, then your photograph will make more sense to its viewers.



above Neuron-shaped trees, France. I chose a low angle viewpoint to isolate these trees so that they would stand out against the sky.  
Canon EOS 5D MkII with 24-105mm lens at 105mm, ISO 100, 1/320sec at f/11

How you go about finding subjects with a strong sense of shape really depends on the scale you're working at. If you are one of the million followers of Commander Chris Hadfield on Twitter (@Cmdr\_Hadfield), you will have noticed that many of his photos of Earth, taken from the International Space Station, focus on large geographical features such as whole river systems, or the entire coastline of a country. At this scale, mountain ranges are reduced to mere texture, whereas from the surface of Earth the shape of a mountain is likely to be a dominant feature in our composition – unless you are photographing intimate details within the landscape. The point is that no matter what scale you are working at, you need to be clear in your mind what your subject is, and to be aware that your viewer is most likely to recognise that subject from its shape.

Every object has a shape, defined by its external boundary, so if the aim of your photograph is to describe an object to your viewer, your first thought should be to try and capture at least some of its outline. This can get a little complicated when trying to photograph larger and less obvious shapes such as mountain ridges, coastline, hills and undulations in the landscape. This requires a little more planning and good map reading skills to try and visualise how a scene will look from a certain viewpoint. Tryfan, for example, is one of the most distinctive mountains in Britain. When viewed face-on, it has a curved and craggy profile, a little like the back of a stegosaurus. I could tell from the map, however, that from the shoulder of nearby Glyder Fach you could view the mountain side-on, a much rarer view with a strong triangular profile showing off its steep sides.



above Tryfan from Glyder Fach, Snowdonia. From the map, I could see that the view from Glyder Fach was of the steep, triangular profile of Tryfan.  
Canon EOS 5D with 17-40mm lens at 19mm, ISO 100, 1/125sec at f/16, tripod

## SEA SHAPES

» The more detailed your map, the better. Ordnance Survey 1:25,000 scale maps are exceptionally good, with incredible detail – including mean high water and low water marks. This is very useful when planning to photograph estuaries and coastline, as the feature you want to capture may not be there at the wrong tide.

When I was planning to photograph the meandering shape of the river Otter in Devon, I could see from the map that the estuary completely fills at high tide, which from my ground-level perspective would look like a shapeless watery lake. By visiting at low tide, I found several smaller channels of water trickling in sinuous curves through the estuary, which was the shape I had envisaged.



Canon EOS 5D with 17-40mm lens at 29mm, ISO 50, 1.6sec at f/16, polariser, tripod

Three-dimensional mapping and aerial photography are extremely useful when trying to work out the shape of a landscape from certain viewpoints.  
Try Bing Maps ([bing.com](http://bing.com)).

# REVEALING SHAPES

The shape of an object can only be seen if its edges contrast in some way with its surroundings. Some subjects have a fixed shape, but it is not always obvious what that shape is and it often has to be coaxed from the scene. Other subjects change shape, such as clouds or the seashore. It is also worth noting that shapes can be created by things other than the physical outline of your subject. Any variation in tone, texture or colour (or all three) can create a shape that can be used to improve the composition of a photograph.

The stronger the contrast, the more obvious the resulting shape. In order to make the most of that contrast and reveal the shape of your subject more clearly, it is worth considering the following factors:

## 1 Lighting

This is probably the most important variable. Side lighting reveals light and shade and thus the three-dimensionality of features in the landscape. Backlighting reveals a subject's profile either as a silhouette or a more subtle contrast between the edge of the subject and paler, hazier, more distant subjects. Selective or differential lighting can bring out the shape of a subject if it is illuminated and its surroundings remain in shadow. Frontal, 'over the shoulder' lighting is not usually desirable as it tends to illuminate everything evenly, making it hard to see the shadows that reveal the true shape of the landscape.



above **Quantock Hills, Somerset.** Backlighting brings out the shape of the trees and each of the ridges as a silhouette against the paler, more distant landscape. *Canon EOS 5D MkII with 70-200mm lens and 2x converter (400mm), ISO 100, f/14, tripod; three exposures merged*



above **Cribyn, Brecon Beacons.** Side lighting illuminates one side of the ridge while the other side remains in shadow. The contrast brings out the shape of this sharp, glacial landscape. *Canon EOS 5D MkII with 17-40mm lens at 17mm, ISO 100, f/13, tripod; three multiple exposure frames stitched together*



above **Mynydd Troed, Brecon Beacons.** The shape of this spur protruding from the mountain is brought out by the fact that it is in sunlight and the surrounding landscape is in shadow. *Canon EOS 5D MkII with 17-40mm lens at 17mm, ISO 100, f/13, tripod; three multiple exposure frames stitched together*

## 2 Tide

Different states of the tide can reveal different shapes in a scene, as I've already mentioned in the river Otter example. Also, the state of the tide can help accentuate the shape of intertidal features. The salt marshes at the Skern, in Devon, feature fantastically shaped islets in the mud at low tide, which are completely submerged at high tide. By visiting when the tide was just starting to ebb, I could capture the shape of the islets at their best, with water running through the channels between them. The water gives the scene more contrast in terms of texture and tone, making the islets stand out more.

right **Saltmarsh at Skern, Devon.** The tide needed to be at just the right height for this shot. Too high and the islets would have been submerged, too low and there would have been no water in the channels, just mud. *Canon EOS 5D with 17-40mm lens at 19mm, ISO 100, 1/13sec at f/13, tripod*



## 3 Exposure length

Anything that moves has the potential to 'paint' a shape during a long exposure that is hidden from viewers of the scene in real time. For example: moving clouds, flowing water or traffic.

above **Cheddar Gorge, Somerset.** Shooting at dusk meant I could use a long exposure, during which the head and tail lights of passing cars 'painted' the curved shape of the road, making it a more prominent feature of the composition by providing contrast of tone and colour. *Canon EOS 5D with 17-40mm lens at 17mm, ISO 200, 30sec at f/13, tripod*

## 4 Seasons

Trees and hedges have different shapes in winter and summer due to the absence or presence of foliage. Winter reveals sharper structural shapes, while summer hides this with softer, rounder foliage.

left **Prior's Wood, Somerset.** *Canon EOS 5D MkII with 17-40mm lens at 17mm, ISO 100, 1/8sec at f/13, tripod*

## PRO TIP

» For accurate information on the state of the tide at any given location, try using the Admiralty EasyTide website ([ukho.gov.uk/easytide](http://ukho.gov.uk/easytide)). It is free for predictions up to seven days in advance, and the information is easier to read than traditional tide tables.

# HOW TO USE SHAPES

## Leading lines

As well as being crucial in describing the content of landscape photographs, such as meandering rivers or steep mountains, shapes can also have secondary effects on our compositions. Take, for example, the tried and tested habit of using curvy lines, in the form of roads, paths or streams, to lead the viewer through the picture towards a point of interest. Or the earlier example of the triangular shape of the road giving depth to the picture.

*right* St Audries Bay, Somerset. The curved shape not only describes the meandering stream but also leads the eye to the lightning strike in the distance.  
 Canon EOS 5D MkII with 17-40mm lens at 19mm, ISO 100, 3.2sec at f/13, tripod



## Setting the mood

Certain shapes also have certain emotional connotations. Vertically aligned geometric shapes suggest strength, stability and order while horizontally aligned, more organic shapes are associated with a state of rest and calm. Curves have the effect of softening a composition, whereas diagonals create tension and instability; they are neither strong and upright nor level and at rest, but seemingly falling from one state to the other.

## PRO TIP

» Think about the shape of the photograph itself, as well as what is in it. I find that compositions based on strong geometric shapes work best in a square format (itself a strong geometric shape), while horizontally aligned restful compositions work best in landscape, or even in panoramic format.

## Abstract compositions

It is also true that while I have mostly been talking about using shapes to help describe your subject more clearly, you can of course work in the opposite direction, towards abstraction. By removing all the other visual clues that describe a landscape more literally, you can reduce a photograph to the point where the shape of the subject is at least as important, if not more important, than what the subject actually is.



above Beer beach, Devon.  
 Canon EOS 5D with 17-40mm lens at 22mm, ISO 50, 1sec at f/16, polariser, tripod



top right Seaton Bay, Devon.  
 Canon EOS 5D with 17-40mm lens at 17mm, ISO 100, 30sec at f/16, 3-stop ND filter, tripod



bottom right Cribyn, Brecon Beacons.  
 Canon EOS 5D with 24-105mm lens at 65mm, ISO 100, 1/40sec at f/16, tripod

**Fog, mist and haze** can be very useful conditions when trying to isolate a subject from its background to accentuate its shape. The distinctive, tree-topped profile of Colmer's Hill would have been lost among the similarly toned fields in the distance were it not for the layer of pale mist. Shooting slightly, or even directly into the light helps the effect by silhouetting the subject against the paler background.



Colmer's Hill, Dorset. The mist is crucial in isolating the shape of the hill from the background.  
 Canon EOS 5D MkII with 17-40mm lens at 26mm, ISO 100, f/13, tripod; three exposures merged

**Extremely high or low spring tides** can reveal particularly rarely seen shapes in the landscape. The narrow line of dunes in this shot is called The Neck and it joins Crow Point to the rest of Branton Burrows. It only lives up to its name during high spring tides, however. At other states of the tide, there are vast, flat beaches either side of the dunes and the message of the precariousness of this strip of land is lost.



Branton Burrows, Devon. The thin strip of dunes only looks this precarious at high spring tide.  
 Canon EOS 5D with 17-40mm lens at 19mm, ISO 100, f/16, polariser, tripod; three exposures merged

## 10 STEPS TO SUCCESS

- 1 Use as much mapping information as you can to visualise how a scene might look from a particular viewpoint.
- 2 Work out the angle of light at various times of the day and try to visualise where the shadows might fall and what shapes they might make.
- 3 If there is movement in the scene, experiment with longer exposures and see what shapes might be made by the moving elements.
- 4 Use a neutral density filter to slow down the shutter speed if you are trying to capture shapes created by movement.
- 5 Visit coastal locations at different states of the tide – you never know what interestingly shaped features the water might be concealing.
- 6 Try visiting places in different weather conditions. A dry spell might cause an otherwise unremarkable muddy riverbank to crack into a mosaic of fabulous photogenic shapes.
- 7 Also, try revisiting places in different seasons or even different years. Summer foliage can change the shape of a tree, while farmers rotate field use year on year – perhaps that beautifully shaped field that was disappointingly brown this year will be full of bright yellow oilseed rape next year.
- 8 Use the shape of meandering paths or streams to lead viewers through the scene.
- 9 Exclude all unnecessary or distracting elements to make the shape of your subject the star of the show.
- 10 Match the shape of the frame to the style of your chosen composition.

## TAKE PART!

Enter our 'shapes in the landscape' photography competition – turn to page 119