

Media-Ready Photos

Introduction

“Sometimes you can tell a large story with a tiny subject.” Eliot Porter

High-quality photos play an important role in telling a byway’s story and setting travelers’ expectations. In general, travelers look for engaging photos that are pleasing to the eye and illustrate the character of a byway. As they browse the photos on the National Scenic Byways Program (NSBP) Traveler website (www.byways.org), they download their favorites; save them as background images; add them to their screen savers; and use them for a variety of other purposes. They can even send photos as electronic postcards to friends and family. However, since travelers typically only view photos on a computer monitor, they don’t require extremely large, high-resolution images.

“It’s the picture that gets the people to the destination.” Anonymous travel writer

Travel writers and media professionals, on the other hand, do require high-resolution images. They use photos to illustrate stories, articles, and a variety of other publications. Occasionally, they even need photos for cover stories, book jackets, and posters. In general, travel writers and media professionals require photos that are not only pleasing to look at, but have good composition, exposure, focus and resolution, so they can reproduce those pictures in printed format. The media also need images that are diverse: vertical, horizontal, seasonal and taken at different times of the day. We refer to these kinds of pictures with all their qualities as *media-ready photos*.

With the recent advances in digital photography and Internet speeds, travel writers and the media have come to expect media-ready photos to be available on-line. In most cases, they will use what they can easily find. If they can’t find an appropriate photo for a particular place or activity, then that place may not get mentioned in the publication.

For this reason, the National Scenic Byways Program wants to make sure that its on-line digital image library includes media-ready photos for **all** designated byways. In particular, it needs photos that:

Media-ready Photo = an electronic image with the following qualities:

1. good aesthetics – pleasing to the eye; excellent composition
2. good subject quality; tells some aspect of the byway story
3. clean photo - good exposure, focus, and sharpness
4. immediately usable by travel writers and media professionals, e.g., it is in the public domain or the copyright holder has granted permission for such use
5. reproducible in print; high resolution (at least 2100 pixels in one of its dimensions)

May/June Vistas

Don’t forget to add an accurate caption and clear description identifying the byway!

- Illustrate the intrinsic qualities of the byway and the relationship with the byway's story
- Show people enjoying places, activities, and/or events along the byway
- Depict the different seasons of the byway

This document provides some tips for creating media-ready photos and guidelines for providing the NSBP with electronic images.

Tips for Better Quality Photos

"You don't take a photograph, you make it." Ansel Adams



Creating excellent photographs doesn't happen by accident. It takes skill, patience, and practice. Although the purpose of this document is not to teach you how to become an expert photographer, we want to stimulate your thinking by providing some tips that might help improve the overall quality of your byway pictures. Many of these ideas come from the following popular Websites¹:

<http://www.digitalphotocritique.com>
<http://www.digitalphotocontest.com>
<http://www.betterphoto.com>
http://www.kodak.com/eknec/PageQuerier.jhtml?pq-path=38&pq-locale=en_US
<http://azuswebworks.com/photography/>
<http://photos.msn.com/departments/takingpictures.aspx>
<http://www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/using/digitalphotography/default.mspix>

Since the excellence of a photograph is highly subjective, we encourage you to seek additional materials and talk with professional photographers. Consider the tips included here as a place to start.





¹ These links are offered for your convenience. FHWA cannot attest to the accuracy of information provided by these websites and it does not endorse these websites, their sponsors, or any products that they sell.

General Tips

Tip	Explanation
<p>Always be prepared</p>	<p>Carry your camera whenever you are on the byway so you are ready to capture the perfect shot.</p>  <p>An Intrepid Photographer at Boynton Overlook (UT), Photo by Angel Crane</p>
<p>Wait for the right lighting</p>	<p>The best light is in the early morning shortly after sunrise, or late afternoon when the sun is low in the sky. Noonday sunlight is harsh and less appealing, so if you have the option, take pictures early or late in the day.</p>
<p>Take pictures, even in bad weather</p>	<p>Don't let rainy days discourage you from taking pictures. Polished by the rain, colors seem to glow. On overcast days, try to include a spot of color to brighten your picture.</p>  <p>Buggy on Rainy Road on Amish Country Byway (OH), © August 2004. Luis Herrero</p>
<p>Take lots of pictures</p>	<p>Film is relatively cheap and memory for digital camera is reusable, so take lots of pictures. This will give you options for choosing the best ones for illustrating your byway.</p>

Composition

Tip	Explanation
<p>Look before snapping</p>	<p>Compose the view in your camera viewfinder before you snap the shutter, especially if your camera includes a zoom lens.</p>

Tip	Explanation	
<p>Include a point of interest</p>	<p>Your eye needs a place to rest in the picture, so include something of interest, e.g., a clump of colorful flowers, a person, a mountain, a tree, or a boat.</p>	 <p>Glade Creek Grist Mill on Midland Trail (WV), © August 2004. Angel Crane</p>
<p>Make the horizon level</p>	<p>A landscape photo, especially one with a water horizon, such as an ocean or lake, is far more pleasing with a level horizon, unless the photo is intentionally tilted for a dramatic effect.</p>	 <p>River Sunrise Near Blytheville along the Great River Road (AR), Photo by Dennis Adams</p>
<p>Position subject off-center</p>	<p>A photo is more interesting if the subject is placed off-center because it helps give a sense of the environment in which the subject exists.</p> <p>A common compositional guideline is the "rule of thirds." Imagine a grid, like a simple tic-tac-toe board, drawn across your photo. The horizon line in the photo should be near one of the horizontal lines of the grid, not through the center of the image. Optimum subject placement on the grid is at or near any of the four points where the lines cross. As with all guidelines, excellent images can also be made that break this rule.</p>	 <p>Enjoyable Scenery on the Jémez Mountain Trail (NM), Photo by Dennis Adams</p>
<p>Keep the subject simple</p>	<p>A simple, unambiguous photo is pleasing to the eye because it concentrates on a single subject. To reduce complexity and make a photo more pleasing, try:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Filling more of the frame with the subject, ▪ Composing clearly to emphasize the subject, ▪ Narrowing the depth of field to de-emphasize the background, 	 <p>A Butterfly in the Loess Hills (IA), Photo by Stanley Buman</p>

Tip	Explanation
	<p>or</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Using a plain background <p>If a photo is composed with too many competing elements, the subject can be unclear. From a distance (or as a tiny thumbnail), a complex photo may appear to be cluttered or just a texture rather than presenting the subject.</p>
Avoid distractions	<p>Check everything in the viewfinder and reposition yourself to eliminate distractions. Is there a trashcan in the foreground? A telephone wire overhead?</p>
Include an object in the foreground or background	<p>Include an interesting object in the foreground, such as a branch, a boulder, or a fence. Doing so can add depth to your picture.</p> <p>In addition, engaging pictures often have layers of information, so look for ways to include interesting elements in the distance as well, as long as they don't make the photo too complex or detract from the subject. Puffy clouds, mountains, tree, or buildings in the distance can add interest and depth to your photo.</p>
Use lines to lead the eye	<p>Lines, such as a road, a river, or a fence, direct attention into your picture. Select a spot or an angle where major lines in the scene lead your eye toward the main center of interest.</p> <p>When composing the image in your camera viewfinder, look for framing elements, strong colors or diagonal lines that direct a viewer into your image.</p> <p>Photos with bold, diagonal elements can evoke a sense of motion through the image or sense of dimension.</p>



Marine Wildlife on Alaska's Marine Highway (AK), © 2000. Peter Metcalfe



McHarques Mill on Wilderness Road Heritage Highway (KY), Photo by Dennis Adams

Tip	Explanation
<p>Try different angles, orientations, and zoom settings</p>	<p>Get down on your knees or stand on a ladder, a car bumper or a building to give yourself a different photo angle of the same view. Using a different angle can turn an average image into one with high viewer interest.</p> <p>To create different proportions for your picture, consider using a vertical format for your view. The collection of photos that illustrate your byway should include both vertically and horizontally oriented pictures.</p> <p>If you have a camera with a zoom lens, take several pictures of the same scene while changing the zoom setting. This is an easy way to experiment with difference compositions and ways of presenting the subject.</p> <div data-bbox="997 279 1382 556" data-label="Image"> </div> <div data-bbox="1019 569 1357 667" data-label="Caption"> <p>Spiral staircase in the St. Augustine Lighthouse on A1A Scenic and Coastal Scenic Highway (FL), Photo by Stephen Clyde</p> </div>
<p>Include people, bikes or cars for scale</p>	<p>A cliff may not look all that big in a photo – until you put a person next to it. In some scenes, including a person, bike, car or other common feature adds a sense of awe by showing the sheer size of your subject. Consider these possible viewer questions when composing elements in your images:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How tall is the cliff? ▪ How big is the tree? ▪ How far is the view? ▪ How big is the building? <div data-bbox="997 821 1382 1409" data-label="Image"> </div> <div data-bbox="1029 1423 1344 1472" data-label="Caption"> <p>Visitors at Hawk's Nest Overlook (WV), © August 2004. Angel Crane</p> </div>
<p>Capture a panorama</p>	<p>If your camera has a panoramic format mode, use it to capture the grandeur of a wide vista.</p> <div data-bbox="805 1535 1382 1661" data-label="Image"> </div> <div data-bbox="831 1675 1354 1724" data-label="Caption"> <p>Grand Canyon -- A wonder of nature on the Kaibab Plateau - North Rim (AZ), Photo by Stephen Clyde</p> </div>

Exposure

Tips	Explanation
<p>Use soft lighting</p>	<p>To obtain the softest and best lighting, remember to take pictures in the early morning or later in the evening when shadows are longer.</p> <p>Avoid taking scenic photos when the sun is high in the sky, generally between 11:00AM and 2:00PM.</p> <div data-bbox="997 312 1383 562" data-label="Image"> </div> <div data-bbox="1019 575 1357 651" data-label="Caption"> <p>Driving Off the Third Tee on Grand Rounds Scenic Byway (MN), Photo by Angel Crane</p> </div>
<p>Keep the sun at your back</p>	<p>Try to keep the sun at your back or over your shoulder to assure the best lighting of your subject or view.</p>
<p>Avoid hot spots</p>	<p>Hot spots are glaring overexposed white areas in the scene that detract from the subject. They are often caused by reflective surfaces.</p>
<p>Use exposure bracketing to create choices</p>	<p>If you can, capture several images for each scene either by bracketing your exposures or varying your view and the elements of your exposure slightly so your camera records slightly different images.</p>
<p>Ensure good contrast</p>	<p>A light subject will have more impact if placed against a dark background and vice versa. Contrasting colors may be used for emphasis, but can become distracting if not considered carefully.</p> <div data-bbox="997 995 1383 1549" data-label="Image"> </div> <div data-bbox="1029 1570 1351 1646" data-label="Caption"> <p>Water Lily in Blossom (LA), © 2001. Creole Nature Trail National Scenic Byway District</p> </div>

Tips	Explanation
Turn off your flash	<p>For more effective lighting when you're outside in dim light and your subject isn't within flash range, turn off your flash and capture the scene in the existing light. Use a tripod to make sure the image is sharp.</p> <div data-bbox="997 268 1380 527" data-label="Image"> </div> <p data-bbox="1019 541 1357 615">Sunrise at the Skagit River on Chinook Scenic Byway (WA), © December 2003. Wade B. Clark Jr.</p>

Camera Works

Tips	Explanation
Keep the subject in focus and sharp	<p>Images that are visually sharp and clear provide better information about your byway. Can you read the words on your interpretive sign?</p> <p>It is undesirable if the subject is out of focus and some other minor detail is in perfect focus. Using a tripod and taking your time can make the difference between a mediocre photo and one that grabs you with its sharpness.</p> <p>NOTE: Older digital cameras are generally not capable of good sharpness.</p>
Avoid blurring caused by wobble	When possible, use a shutter speed of 1/125 th or more to compensate for camera wobble when you snap the shutter. Otherwise, use a tripod or secure your camera on a stable surface.
Use a high quality film	Use films with higher film speed ratings (200 or 400 speed) because they let your camera capture more light and allow higher shutter speeds.

Guidelines for Electronic Images

“...words and pictures can work together to communicate more powerfully than either alone.” William Albert Allard

The following guidelines will help you prepare your photos in an electronic format so they can be easily added to the NSBP digital media library.

Image Format and Compression

Tips	Explanation
Use a JPEG	Although the NSBP digital library can accept images in virtually any format

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format	<p>most media professionals prefer JPEG. It is a very common format that every web browser can display and virtually every publication software tool can import. It uses compression so the files are not as bulky as TIFF, BMP, or RAW files, but it can do so at user-selected quality settings. So, unlike other formats that use compression, JPEG files don't necessarily lessen the image quality.</p>
Use a High-Quality Compression Setting	<p>When using a JPEG format, select the highest possible quality setting (lowest compression setting). This will ensure that the picture's quality is not degraded during compression. In Photoshop, this is a compression setting of "12".</p> <p>IMPORTANT: Once an image is compressed with something less than the highest possible quality setting, data is lost and cannot be recovered. The image's sharpness and colors could be permanently damaged, making it useless to media professionals.</p>

Image Size, Sharpness, and Color

Tips	Explanation
Create high-resolution images	<p>The size of the image should be at least 7" in the longest dimension when printed at 300 DPI. In other words, the longest dimension should be about 2100 pixels. If you take a beautiful picture at the low 640x480 resolution, it will only be about 3" x 1.5" when printed at 300 DPI – which is less than half the size of a common snapshot.</p> <p>Resolution: The quality of any digital image, whether printed or displayed on a screen, depends in part on its resolution—the number of dots of color used to create the image. The higher the resolution; the better the detail and the sharper the edges.</p> <p>Dots Per Inch (DPI): DPI is a measurement used to control the printing or display of an electronic image. As the name suggests, it is how many dots are in a linear inch. It is independent of the total number of dots of color used to make of the image and doesn't directly affect the image's quality. Images printed at anything less than 300 DPI can look grainy.</p>
Use a new, high-quality digital camera or scanner	<p>In terms of total pixels, a 5"x7" picture at 300 DPI would be approximately 3.1 million pixels. So, a 3.1 mega-pixel digital camera is capable of taking a 5"x7" picture with significant detail. Anything less, usually can't.</p> <p>In terms of storage space, a typical JPEG image of this size, saved at the highest-quality/lowest-compression setting could easily be 2.5-4.0 MBytes. Note: do not confuse pixels with MBytes. Although the two are related, they don't mean the same thing.</p>
Don't adjust the image.	<p>Most media professionals prefer photos that have not been touched up. Specifically, do not "sharpen" or "color-adjust" the image. Often such alterations degrade the original features of the image and prevent media</p>

Tips	Explanation
	professionals from using the image. Editors will do alterations themselves, if necessary.

Electronic Use

Tips	Explanation
Provide accurate captions and clear descriptions	Make sure that all the photos you submit have accurate captions with simple descriptions. Remember to identify the byway name, state and name of the place, building, event or activity. An editor using your photos can shorten the caption, if necessary, but can't easily add information if it's missing.
Obtain a release form from recognizable people	If pictures include people that are recognizable, have them sign a release form if at all feasible.
Put images in the public domain	<p>The NSBP prefers that the images submitted to the Digital Media Library be in the public domain. Traveler writers and media professionals look for pictures in the public domain for so they can use them readily without a lot of extra work. If you submit copyrighted photographs, please make sure that</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the copyright information is accurate, ▪ you have permission to put the picture on-line, and ▪ the copyright holder is willing to grant permission for use by the traveler writers, media professionals, and the public in general.