

THE HIDDEN SURPRISE

By Kent DuFault

Do you remember the childhood treat called Cracker Jack? This brand has been famous in the United States for 120 years and counting.

The Cracker Jack brand had a secret to its success, and any kid who grew up in the United States knows what I'm talking about.

Every box of Cracker Jack contained a mystery prize inside the box. You had to eat the

product to find the secret prize. This hidden secret prize was a golden idea as every kid wanted that mystery prize, even though the prizes were trivial!

Critical Thought: Take this knowledge about Cracker Jack history and apply it to creating landscape photography. Convert the mystery prize concept into a mysterious hidden element within your landscape pictures!



Image 001 - Photograph by Kent DuFault



Image 002 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

Like kids with their Cracker Jack mystery prize, photography admirers can have a sense of delight and discovery when the photographer uses the 'Hidden Surprise' technique.



Assignment:

Spend a day creating landscape photography. Bring someone with you to act as your hidden element. In every shot that you compose, place your friend into the landscape in a semi-obscure manner. Don't make them impossible to find, but well hidden. Image 001 is a great example. Imagine this shot blown up large, framed, and hanging on a wall. When someone approaches it to look, they're in for a surprise when they spot a man deep in meditation!



Image 003 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

The hidden element can occur through placement in the composition. Or in this case, the color scheme creates a camouflage effect.

Image 003 is an excellent example of the hidden element being physically larger within the frame but still 'hidden' due to the color scheme. The woman blends in, but not completely.

Critical Point: Once the viewer discovers the hidden element, it should become a massive factor in the final picture's visual weight distribution. It should either be the subject or heavily support the subject. For Image 003, the woman helps the storytelling of the subject, which is a rocky shoreline landscape.



Assignment:

Spend a day creating landscape photography and bring your friend again. In the first assignment, the objective was to create a hidden surprise through your friend's placement in the scenery. In this assignment, I want you to use a color scheme to 'hide' your model. Think of Image 003 as your example.



Image 004 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

Sometimes, you will stumble upon a hidden surprise just waiting for you! That was the case in Image 004. I found this surfer surveying the waves before heading down to the beach.



Key Point:

Designing your composition will play a critical role when using the hidden element landscape photography technique. Make sure it complements the landscape and doesn't overtake it, unless that's your objective.



Image 005 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

Your choice of framing can completely change the perception of your final shot.

Image 005 depicts how a choice of lens can affect the framing, which can, in turn, eliminate the hidden element technique.

The far left picture in Image 005 is the original shot.

The center picture depicts a lens change to make the surfer larger in the frame.

The right picture illustrates how the composition supports the hidden element technique. The surfer stands out as the subject, but the landscape plays such a critical role that it and the surfer are co-subjects. The surfer's sightline leads into the picture so that even though we cannot see the ocean, we know where it is in the scene. Finally, the other surfers on the beach add a second hidden element. They are important because they

establish a sense of scale to the height and distance of the landscape. That sense of scale is what creates the drama because one can't help but wonder, "How is that surfer going to get down that steep landscape with the surfboard, or even more importantly, get back up to the top?"



Assignment:

During your landscape photography adventures, stay aware of surrounding elements. What is already located there that you could incorporate as a hidden element to surprise your viewers?



Image 006 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

Don't be afraid to combine these assignments for even better spectacular results!

I was at the scene and taking landscape pictures of the lighthouse in Image 006.

Two strangers walked up, and they were out for a stroll enjoying the evening. I told them what I was doing, and I asked them if they would mind walking to the pier's end while I take pictures.

They happily agreed.

This shot has become one of my bestselling stock photos. It outsells the photographs that I took without a hidden element by 100 to 1.



Assignment:

This one can be tough for introverts. Move someone or something already located at your scene into a hidden element situation that also increases your landscape picture's story value. Think about Image 006 as you pursue this creativity prompt. A simple request took an average landscape shot and turned it into a winner!



Image 007 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

The hidden element doesn't need to be human to be effective. Image 007 is a beautiful landscape shot taken in northern California. The scenery is dramatic. However, it is the inclusion of the bird that provides the hidden element, which gives drama and story.

Image 007 simply isn't as strong without the inclusion of the bird as a hidden element. The bird anchors a viewer into the moment.

Critical Thought: Take notice of the placement of the bird. That bird is relatively small within the frame. While I want it to be 'hidden,' I don't want it so hidden that no one notices it. Imagine if the bird were sitting on the rocks in the foreground. That would be ineffective. Look at Image 007 again. Did you see that there was a second bird? That bird is too hidden to be effective.

Key Learning Point: Remember this tool of composition: shape! A shape that stands out through tonal contrast or color contrast is an eye magnet. Go back through all of the

sample photos. Shape plays a crucial role in all of them in creating the hidden element concept.



Assignment:

Go through your existing landscape photographs. Have you ever inadvertently included the hidden element without knowing it? Have you ever tried to eliminate a hidden element after thinking it was detrimental to your composition? Could you improve the impact of some of your landscape pictures by emphasizing a hidden feature that is already there?



Image 008 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

Sometimes the hidden element will reveal itself after a change in weather.

I arrived at this cabin for a long weekend. On my first day, I didn't even notice this bridge. That night it snowed, and the bridge became the perfect hidden element with a strong storytelling concept.

Key Thought: The weather can drastically change a scene, even landscape scenery you are very familiar with. Revisit these familiar areas during weather changes and search for picture opportunities with the hidden element. I have stayed at the cabin mentioned above (in Image 008) many times. That bridge never caught my eye as the hidden element until this particular morning after the season's first fresh snowfall.



Assignment:

Pick a landscape location that you particularly like and plan to visit it four times in the next year. Space each visit out three months apart. With each visit, pay particular attention to hidden elements that may be revealed due to weather changes.



Image 009 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

Often, the hidden surprise takes patience!

The above landscape scene was a beautiful day. It was sunrise, and an overnight storm was just breaking up. The lighting was gorgeous. The scenery was stunning. But it still needed something extra.

I stood there, contemplating what to do with this composition. It needed the hidden element.

My wife was with me, and I could have put her there on the beach. However, that just didn't fit the mood in my mind.

I then noticed the massive waves breaking against the shoreline in the distance. It was quite far away from me.

I changed my lens to a 300mm telephoto and waited for the right wave to break in the right spot. It was tricky as the sunshine was going in and out with the clouds' movement. I needed the sunlight to illuminate the wave for it to reach a hidden element status.



Remember:

Remember! You don't want your hidden element to be too hidden and become a non-existent point to viewers who weren't there.

Patience paid off, and I got the perfect wave (hidden element) for my landscape photograph.

Critical Thought: The wave in Image 009 isn't as hidden as some of the previous examples. However, I still consider it a hidden element. I had to wait for it to show up to the party and the shot just isn't as powerful without the wave. My patience paid off; I got one frame, and it was the perfect one.



Image 009a– Photograph by Kent DuFault

Without the wave, this shot loses it. It transforms from extraordinary to ordinary!



Assignment:

Go out and create your landscape photography on the cusp of a storm. Plan to arrive and photograph during the formation of a storm or near the end of a storm; incorporate storm-related features as your hidden element.



Pro Tip:

Pro Tip: Working with the end of a storm is more comfortable to judge the timing as to when things will become dramatic, and the lighting is often more dramatic at the end of a storm.



Image 010 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

Have you ever found yourself saying, “There is absolutely nothing here to photograph!”

Important! Training your creative eye to see the hidden element can save a disastrous day of photography, especially when you have limited time and are unfamiliar with the location that you are photographing. Such was the case with Image 010.

To capture Image 010, I had gotten up very early, around 4 A.M. I drove to a mountainous location near where I was staying in Oregon.

Much to my chagrin, I realized once I was there that I was on the wrong side of the mountain to capture the warm sunrise lighting. My side of the hill was entirely in shadow.

Not to be discouraged, I turned to the hidden element. I waited (remember patience) until the sun had risen high enough to peek through the trees.

Consider This: Image 010 is simplistic in design. However, it has been quite successful for me as a stock photo. I think it combines the hidden element with minimalism and a strong story that can be applied to many different topics. It’s been used multiple times, primarily in medically related printed materials.



Image 011 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

Choose your hidden elements carefully. Weigh the balance of visual weight in your mind while creating the picture. Ask the following questions:

- Should it be included or not?
- If so, is there a particular positioning in the frame that works best?
- Is the hidden element hidden, but not so obscure that no one will see it?
- Does the hidden element make use of shape?

- Can the tonal contrast or color contrast increase the effectiveness of the hidden element?
- Does the element increase the storytelling value of the shot? If not, perhaps reconsider whether it should be there.

For Image 011, did the barn rooftops' inclusion as a hidden element increase the drama and impact of this shot? Most definitely!