

Lake Effects!

Photographing Lake Michigan's Winter Lights

By Gary Martin



St. Joseph Winter Sunset (above) by Gary Martin. *G.E. Martin Portrait* (right) by Casey Martin

The eastern shore of Lake Michigan in Southwest Michigan goes through a fascinating transition from the warm sunny days of August, through the crisp days of fall, and then into the storms of November and December. There is no need, however, to avoid the beach or to put your cameras away once winter has blown into town. You can brave the beach and the ravages of the weather to capture spectacular photos of both the stormy season and the frozen lakefront that follows with a little preparation and great care.

If you want to take photos like those in this article, here are some things you can do to protect your camera. When high winds drive huge waves into the piers, to which the lighthouses cling defiant of Mother Nature, plenty of blowing sand and spray can be directed your way. Sand and water are arch enemies of photographers and their cameras. Never open your camera where it will be exposed to blowing sand or spray. If you need to change film, go back to your car. The short walk and a few minutes taking this precaution can save you expensive repairs.

You can also put your camera in a Zip-loc™ bag big enough to hold the camera and whatever lens you have

mounted on it, if you're using an adjustable camera. Put a small slit in the bottom of the bag for the lens to point through and tape or rubber band the bag tightly around the barrel of your lens. The lens cap will protect the front of your lens, which should always have a UV or haze filter screwed on to protect it from the elements. Then you can remove the lens cap and unzip the back of the bag to operate your camera when you're in position and ready to photograph.

If you're photographing with an adjustable camera, you want to have a shutter speed high enough in the buffering winds to get sharp photographs. As a rule of thumb, use a shutter speed of at least one-over-two times the focal length of the lens. If I'm using a 200mm lens, that would give an exposure of 1/400 of a second. Since most cameras don't have that setting, I would round up to 1/500 of a second, with the aperture of the lens adjusted accordingly. Even higher shutter speeds never hurt – I typically photograph during storms using 1/640 to 1/800 of a second.

If your camera isn't fully automatic, it's a good idea to pre-focus your camera on the subject – be it at the lighthouse or the pier – and to set the aper-

ture and shutter speed before the action starts. If you have an adjustable camera with autofocus capability, great. Set it for the "S" or shutter priority mode and set the shutter speed appropriately and then let the camera focus and set the aperture for you. For wave photography, occasionally the billowing clouds of spray will confuse the autofocus mechanism of even the most sophisticated cameras, so you may want to focus on your subject and then turn off the autofocus mechanism.

For film cameras, I would recommend a film speed of either 200 or 400 speed for most storm photography to allow high enough shutter speeds. Print and slide films both work well. If you're photographing with a digital camera, you can start with an SO setting of 200 and increase it as necessary to give you the needed shutter speed. Digital cameras really don't tolerate nasty weather well, so use caution and be careful with your equipment.

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When the weather gets cold and the lake begins to freeze, batteries don't perform as well as when they're warm. If you have to use alkaline, NiCad, or NiMH batteries in your camera, take a spare set with you and keep them in an inside pocket to keep them warm. If those in your camera get cold and your camera seems to be sluggish to autofocus or advance the film, swap the batteries for the warm set inside your pocket. Then, put the ones you remove back in your inner pocket to warm them back up. It's recommended that you change the batteries in your car or in another protected area. If they're available for your camera, Lithium batteries are your best choice – they put out as much energy at -40° F as they do at room temperature. If your camera and lens are cold and you get into a warm car, the lens surface and viewfinder will fog and you may be done doing any photography for the day until the camera warms up completely. Just a few words of advice when photographing on really cold days.

The next question is where to photograph these winter lights? I like to photograph the storms and the big waves that sweep Lake Michigan in either South Haven or St. Joseph. In South Haven, a good elevated vantage point to photograph from is from the top of the bluff near the church overlooking the lake on Monroe Blvd. You can also get good photographs right from the south beach parking lot or from the north beach. In St. Joseph, my favorite place to photograph is from atop the dunes in Tiscornia Park or from the beach. Occasionally I'll photograph from the south pier in St Joe, but not often.

When the lake finally freezes, the piers become an almost magical place with the lighthouse and catwalks sheathed in ice and icicles. They're wonderfully interesting photographic subjects, but are also treacherously slippery. **USE EXTREME CAUTION!** If you have access to soles with steel cleats that strap onto the bottom of your shoes or boots, it's a good idea to wear them. I would caution against venturing out onto the frozen surface of the lake under any circumstance. While it may look solidly frozen, wave action beneath the surface can put cracks in the ice making it dangerous to walk on, and rescue unlikely, should you fall through the ice.



The Big Icicle by Gary Martin.
The outer north pier light at St. Joseph was photographed in January 2004.



(Above) **Big Red Ice Dunes** by Gary Martin. The picturesque Holland lighthouse.



(Left) **Lighthouse at South Haven, Michigan** by Gary Martin. Taken in December, 2000, this photo appeared on the cover of the Lighthouse Depot Catalog in the Winter 2002 issue.

(Above) **55 Below!** by Gary Martin. South Haven lighthouse, the week between Christmas and New Year's Day, 2000.

You'd be hard pressed to find anyone more passionate about photographing lighthouses than Gary Martin of Kalamazoo. He has been engaged in photography, in one form or another, for more than 30 years as a hobby. He got interested in low-light photography and lighthouses about 10 years ago.

Living in North Carolina, home of the famous Cape Hatteras, for a time helped spark that passion. While many lighthouses are photographed on sunny days, Gary has sought to capture them during their darkest hours. As night approached, as morning awoke or as storms blew in, the beacons became the most valuable to mariners. It is during this time, whether it be spring, summer, fall or winter, that Gary seeks to snap an image that will make a lasting impression.

"I especially enjoy photographing lighthouses in low light. I love being at one of the Great Lakes or near the ocean watching the changes in the light as the sun rises or sets. I often photograph until nearly an hour after the sun has dipped beneath the hori-

zon." said Gary. "Photographing lighthouses during stormy weather is another passion of mine," Gary said. "This is the time, as a mariner, that the port of his or her light would have been the most important."

Gary lives in Kalamazoo and has worked for Pfizer for eight years as a Senior Fellow. With the beacon in South Haven just 35 miles to the west, he finds this his most frequent stormy weather subject.

"Seeing a big wave break on the South Haven pier that juts nearly a quarter of a mile out into Lake Michigan, throwing spray 100 feet in the air is always a thrill to see and photograph," Gary said.

You can find Gary's work at a variety of galleries along shoreline communities, including: Waterfront Framing & Fine Art, St Joseph; Artworks, South Haven; Castle Park Gallery, Holland; MarineTech, Grand Haven; and Plaza Gallery, Kalamazoo. An Art Hop exhibit is scheduled for March 3 at Burnham & Flower on the Kalamazoo Mall. **g**

Gary's Equipment List:

Nikon FS SLR Film / Nikon D2H DSLR Digital

Predominantly Nikkor lenses (ranging from an ultrawide angle 14 mm f/2.8 to a 500 mm f/4 AFS telephoto lens)

Fuji slide film exclusively (Fuji's Velvia, Provia-100F and Provia-400F)

Slides are digitized for use on the web and for digital printing using a Nikon Super Coolscan 4000 ED scanner. Print files are scanned at 4000 dots per inch (dpi) and allow the direct preparation of archival prints up to 12 x 18, and with specialized software, archival prints as large as 30 x 50 inches.