

A Trip to Maine

Sharpening photographic skills while amassing keepers

by Bruce Barlow

John Bowen, a good friend and workshop student, read an Internet post of mine about photographing in Maine and asked if I'd go with him. I had planned to go to the Bar Harbor area, where several years ago I'd spent a lovely week at Schoodic Point. We booked reservations at the Comfort Inn in Ellsworth for late October, planned to take in the Ansel show in Ogunquit on the way, and I bought lots of film.

Being a workshop instructor, it's hard not to have one's mind work like a teacher. I hadn't made a trip like this one in years, and my large format skills felt a little flabby. What structure could I put around my time in Maine that would trim things up? I thought about mechanical and creative aspects of photographing. What pieces of equipment did I need to know better? What did I need to practice to be quicker, more automatic? What could I do to improve my seeing? My composition? Would these restrictions get in the way of enjoying my time there?

I needed to work with 8x10 and 5x7. I needed to get better at setting up and leveling the tripod. I needed to get more familiar with my longer lenses - 305 and 355 G-Clarons, and the 19" Apo-Artar - with the two larger formats. Figuring that we'd spend a morning at one location, I decided on a regimen of using 8x10 and 5x7 in the morning, choosing only one lens. That way, I'd practice seeing with that lens in the two formats. I'd attempt to work quickly but carefully, trying to use up ten holders of each size each morning (with my way of working, twenty setups), or more if I was lucky. I'd bring my little 4x5 Wista, which might be the camera of choice in the afternoons after hauling the big Sinar Norma all morning. I'd also bring the two 35mm Canon F1 bodies, but with only the 85mm and 35mm lenses.

I filled a plastic bin with full and empty film boxes, and brought 24 8x10, 24 5x7 and 30 4x5 holders, already loaded. I had plenty of LF film. Nine rolls of 36 exposure Tri-X seemed sufficient, so I left the brick in the freezer. Bad decision, as we'll see.

At Schoodic Point, the next peninsula east of Mt. Desert Isle, the adage "just before you click the shutter, look behind you to see if there's anything better" turns out to be true about 80% of the time. Wonderful rocks, a dramatic rocky coastline with crashing surf, Mt. Desert Isle in the distance across the bay, islands offshore, lobster boats pattering nearby, and in late October, close to peak fall colors and virtually no people. We arrived there just after 7:00, as the sun came up. Out of the car, 8x10 camera on the tripod, 355mm lens mounted, one cooler bag of each size holders and the bag with the 5x7 reducing back. I carried it all across the narrow strip of pavement and down onto the rocks. I set up a "base camp" to store holder bags out of the way of any possible compositions and took a few minutes to look around. Finding the first thing that looked inviting, I made an 8x10, for no other reason than to "prime the pump." I turned around. Voila! Something better! I was also following the adage "get small" when immersed in unfamiliar landscape, composing images from small pieces of the scene before backing away to try to push past the postcards all-too-easily made of the larger landscape.

Nearby, there was another picture. And then another. The pump was primed. The morning went quickly.



Norma on the Rocks. Schoodic Point, Maine. Companion John Bowen is in the distance.

The format change to 5x7 required calibrating the viewing filter I use to find compositions. I focused the camera on a tree line, and held the viewer up to my eye. At the distance from my eye that the viewer saw the same view, I calibrated. That the top and bottom were different because 5x7 aspect ratio is different than 4x5 didn't bother me. I was more concerned with the sides. Now I could wander the world camera-free until I had found the right spot, where I'd drop my bright red little notebook, and get the camera and holder bag. Two more hours passed quickly, and it was lunchtime. I felt run over by a truck. Norma is heavy! I muttered about good friend Richard Ritter not having yet produced his 3-pound 8x10 with interchangeable backs. We dosed up on Ibuprophen on the way to Winter Harbor, where the restaurant has some of the best clam rolls in the world.

We decided to tour east in the afternoon, visiting Corea, a small fishing village with a fine harbor, and some other places east of Schoodic. 35mm was convenient, easy, and freeing. Not to mention lightweight. I was drawn to the abstract forms of stacks of lobster traps and coils of rope. The sunny afternoon went quickly, but so did the film. I began to regret not bringing the extra brick.

I spent a lot of time thinking about print size. The LF stuff was easy - I can only contact print the big negatives, so I looked for images that would work in those sizes. My preferred

size for 35mm is also 5x7, so that's what I decided, and correspondingly, I looked for images that would work in that size.

We returned to Schoodic the following cloudy morning, and almost got blown away by 20 to 35 mph winds. Too windy for LF, we spent a few minutes with 35mm before deciding it was too cold. Instead, we toured Mt. Desert Isle and Acadia National Park, snapping 35mm when the spirit moved us, and finding productive use of an otherwise marginal weather day. We saw porpoises at one overlook, and with our 35mm cameras we became magnets for tourists asking us to make digital snaps of them with their cameras. French Fisherman's Stew at Gaylyn's in Bar Harbor topped off a great day, but the 35mm supply had shrunk radically, and worrying about it proved a distraction.

Back to Schoodic on a sunny Wednesday morning. 305mm lens day, beginning with 8x10s. We moved 25 yards west of where we had been the first day, and a whole new set of pictures emerged. What a great lens! A full morning used the hoped-for 8x10 and 5x7 rations, and it was another beloved clam roll for lunch under the influence of Vitamin I. To stretch my seeing, I countered my usual complex compositions by looking for simplicity of shape instead. The afternoon yielded more 35mm in fishing harbors, with emerging themes of lobster traps and ropes. Late in the day, as we watched the fishing boats come into Winter Harbor, a bald eagle buzzed by not fifty feet away in full splendor – the first national bird I had ever seen.



Norma and surf. Schoodic Point, Maine.

Thursday, 7 a.m. at Schoodic again, this time 25 yards east of the first day. Overcast, and glowing, a 19" Apo-Artar day. Years ago, I had made many bad pictures of the surf and foam on the rocks. As a stretch, I worked hard at making better ones. I also tried some larger landscapes with the long lens, pictures that I don't normally make, but I wanted to shake my cage and vary my camera-to-subject distance more than I had been doing. Therefore, I said, do something different but try to do it well. We'll see. The afternoon took us to Stonington at the southernmost tip of Deer Isle. A fishing village where the houses and buildings slope up the

hill from the water, it yielded a number of 8x10 and 5x7 exposures with the Artar and 305mm in the late afternoon light. It also produced a plethora of 35mm images of the harbor at low tide. The 35mm film situation was getting tight, but John offered his extra - he was more prepared than me. We decided that we'd return for our last morning and see what the morning light brought. Dinner at Calypso's in Ellsworth included outstanding garlic mashed potatoes and local beer.



Stonington, Maine on a cloudy afternoon.

Stonington was stunning in the slanting morning sun, buildings sharply defined in the low sunlight. My core exercises over, I permitted myself choices of lenses. Shoreline buildings and fishing boats are not in my usual repertoire. I stretched by remembering the advice I give students: there are pictures everywhere, and it's up to us to find them. The Artar glowed on the ground glass in the cloudless sunshine. What a lens! Chatted with a fisherman who'd caught his legal limit for the season and was painting his boat, preparing to store it for the winter. I tried to make an interesting image of a part of his boat, and took his address to send a print. More 8x10s and 5x7s followed lunch, camera set up outside the restaurant. A long, rambling tour of Deer Isle yielded a few more 35mm exposures, and an assortment of Nervous Nellie's Jams and Jellies - straight from the factory shop. Hearing about rain for our trip back the following day, we packed the car after supper.

Saturday morning brought not just rain, but buckets of it. We scrapped a planned detour to Pemaquid, since we'd be unable to photograph well in the downpour. We stopped at the Ogunquit Museum of American Art to see the Ansel show. Blasphemy that it might be, we felt the prints, printed in 1980, were uniformly too dark. Ansel should glow. Nevertheless, it was still a treat to see his Greatest Hits. A last fish n' chips lunch in Wells, and it was the home stretch back to New Hampshire.

Back at home, the 35mm got developed first, and then I sampled and proofed four 5x7s to confirm development time for my Tri-X in HC110-B. They looked good, both for time and composition. I went to work developing all the big negatives in the trays. 14 5x7s at a time

proved too stressful, I could handle 10 much more comfortably. 12 8x10s were similarly nerve-wracking, 8 felt too lazy, and a slight modification of my procedure made ten at a time comfortable. When I had filled my 40 clothespins with dripping washed negatives, it was time to quit for the day. I need to be fairly fresh when developing negatives, or I find myself making stupid mistakes that could be disastrous – I almost left the exposed film box open when I turned on the lights, for instance. I just can't develop when I'm tired.

Insomniated one night, I tried proofing the 35mm rolls at 2 a.m. What a disaster. Awake doesn't mean sharp, and I wasted several pieces of paper with goofy mistakes. I succeeded in proofing seven of the nine rolls onto some leftover RC. I ordered 250 sheets of inexpensive RC for proofing. It would take a week to arrive from the west coast.

After 35mm proofs dried, I looked hard. Proof sheets should age like wine, where many turn to vinegar and some to Bordeaux. I couldn't wait, however, and in the euphoria of their newness scribbled the edge numbers of those I wanted to enlarge. I usually print 5 out of 100. When I was done scribbling, I counted 80 out of 240 suitable for enlarging. Time to put them away for a while. I chose one from each roll as a must-have, so I could go to work while waiting for the RC to arrive. One roll had 19 out of 36. No way do I hit 50%, if I'm honest.

The LF negatives look great, as negatives always seem to. I'll be interested to see whether I print more of the N development time or the N+1½'s. I make one of each for each setup, giving myself a choice. I'm also interested in how well the N's will print on my stock of grade 3 Azo with amidol, and whether my N+1½'s have enough contrast for my grade 2 Canadian Azo. My next small project is to really learn to print Azo. Just in time to run out of it.

I worked to develop the last of the large negatives to have them done by the time the RC arrived. I'm trying to keep to the discipline of getting them all developed, then all proofed, and then begin printing fine prints. But it's hard. My Forte and Galerie call me, and I have Dektol aplenty. There are four series of images I want to pursue: Stonington and harbors, ropes and traps, rocks, and bird heads. Bird heads? Yeah, I started seeing bird head shapes in rocks, puddles, and clouds. I took it the way it wanted to go and every time I saw one, I had to work it into a decent photograph. I have dozens of bird heads in all formats. My wife says I formed a search image, and so started seeing it everywhere. I guess so. Did you know that there's a bird head in Ansel's "Moonrise"? I may mount a show of my bird heads, just for the humor of it, and call it "Search Image."

Impatience had me proofing on really old paper, left over from my paper/developer tests in 2002. Unfrozen, partial boxes. I used six different papers proofing about 160 negatives. The proofs aren't perfect, because the minimum exposure for maximum black varies by paper. I exposed batches of six at a time, and then developed them. I could make adjustments each batch, but it seemed that as soon as I was spot-on, I ran out of that paper and had to start over. I should have waited for the RC to arrive. Instead, I surfaced from the darkroom, having just proofed the last eight 8x10s on some 20-year-old Zone VI Brilliant, to find the box of RC at the door. Interestingly, a lot of the other papers, while not nearly as old as the Brilliant, are really dead – flat and lifeless. Some are better, some worse. I'll survive with the bad proofs, since I'm confident of the technical quality of the negatives and so am looking mainly for composition. If some of the negatives are in fact soft, that's all the better for using Azo grade 3.

What are the lessons? I can now level my tripod in about five seconds. I am vastly more familiar with my three big lenses in both formats, and am particularly in love my Apo Artar. I can “see” in the lengths of those lenses now. I am much more at ease using Norma, and will certainly use her more often. Next time, bringing two plastic bins will give me a more comfortable height for my film-changing table in the motel bathroom while I sit on the toilet seat. One bin is a little low.

My supposed restrictions were hardly that. Freed of the decisions of lens choice and format, I began to work in a way that had me seeking compositions that fit the equipment I was using at the time. The camera and other stuff never got in the way. I made many experiments in composition, which I have yet to evaluate, but good or bad, I know I’ll learn. I found conscious ways to stretch myself and get myself out of my own comfort zone. “Getting small” at first works. “Priming the pump” works. I never took the Wista out of the bag, which surprised me. The surf and water images are mostly unsuccessful. At slow shutter speeds the water becomes too indistinct for my tastes -- furry and without emotional impact. I may have one or two that deserve a second look somewhere down the line.

Overall, I think it’s strong work – among the best I’ve done, which then certainly means that the restrictions didn’t restrict. Some of the Stonington images are much stronger than I expected, and a couple may be keepers – very surprising for such stretch subject matter. I just might be completely content using only 35mm, useful to know when I repeat the trip with my wife. I ordered some 35mm FP4 just to see if I like it better than Tri-X.

I came home with about 160 LF negatives, and over 300 35mm , using up all nine rolls. Discipline tells me to wait before printing, but the excitement is pretty high. I have the distinct feeling that my hit rate is higher than 5 out of 100. In a month or so, I’ll take stock again and see. One needs to like rock pictures, however. Fortunately, I do.



John Bowen with a Richard Ritter 7x17 on Deer Isle, Maine.

Finally, even though he hasn't played a big role in the story, Mr. Bowen proved to be a wonderful traveling companion. Hard-working, smart, funny, always pleasant, and supportive. He's usually hungry, like me, too. I greatly enjoyed being with him. It was amazing to watch him work his 7x17, and I'm eager to swap prints with him. I hear from him that his results are as satisfying as mine. We're already planning a return trip. I think I need, and deserve, four such trips a year. I'm going to try to do that.

Take a trip. Make it work as a learning experience. Would I have made more keepers had I left out the learning exercises? I don't think so, and I think I might have made fewer. Make yourself uncomfortable. Stretch. A local beer at the end of the day fixes all. And if you're an old guy, bring plenty of Ibuprophen.

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