



Trail runner stepping over perfectly groomed wind lines across the Guadalupe-Nipomo Sand Dunes National Wildlife Refuge

CHASING SHADOWS

The Art of Photographing Sand Dunes

Chuck Graham

Northwest winds finally relented after midnight, so I was anticipating natural works of art the following morning, 90 minutes west of where I live in Santa Barbara, CA. By the time I arrived at my destination it was still dark but I could hear the surf crashing on the windswept deserted beach at the Guadalupe–Nipomo Sand Dunes National Wildlife Refuge.

The largest intact coastal dune ecosystem on the West Coast of the U.S., the refuge is one of my favorite places to photograph because of its 500-foot-tall dunes that ascend straight out of the Pacific Ocean. Stabilized by consistent northwest winds and native

flora like coreopsis, sand verbena and silver lupine, over time these dunes have become sort of my own unique outdoor photography studio. They've afforded me the luxury to work on my dunescape photography with virtually little no distractions except for Mother Nature's unpredictability.

Landscape photographers create some of the most artistic images by photographing sand dunes. There's something special about photographing long shadows creeping across a majestic dunescape as the sun sinks in the west. Established dune ecosystems are constantly evolving beginning with tiny granules of



Jack Rabbit prints leading to nowhere on the Guadalupe-Nipomo Sand Dunes National Wildlife Refuge, Northern Santa Barbara County, CA

sand grounded up by pounding surf, then over time transported by wind and water. At this particular dune complex, the back dunes are stabilized by coastal sage. It's the foredunes that constantly shift due to persistent northwest winds. Where one image

is made, it's probably a safe bet it won't be there in a day or two because of consistent wind events.

Here are some helpful hints for those looking to expand their landscape photography to majestic sand dunes bordering along the Pacific Ocean and beyond.

1. Mind the wind. It can come up at any time and wreak havoc on camera gear. Keep zip lock bags and a blower handy. On the flipside of that, winds are the creator of perfectly groomed sand dunes especially the crests of dunes. After a big wind event, search for fish hook-shaped crests that can dominate a sand dune landscape. There are also many websites devoted to the weather. One I watch is iwindsurf.com.

2. Another sculpted feature to search for following a big wind event is wind lines. They're not on every dune, so you'll have to comb potential dunescapes for evenly manicured wind lines. Sometimes they appear so perfect they look as if they were manmade with a ruler, but natural wonders like wind lines add incredible elements to dunescape photography. So mind the wind by keeping tabs on the weather patterns.

3. An opportunistic time to shoot sand dunes is following the tail end of a storm as it's clearing out. Dark, moody clouds can really add to sand dune photography creating potentially dramatic images.

4. Like most other landscapes, sunrise and sunset are the optimal times to photograph sand dunes. Shadows are either receding or creeping in and add nice elements to the landscape. However, take advantage of the sun when it is overhead. That's the best time to

U.S. Sand Dune Locations

Arizona

Sand dunes are surprisingly rare in Arizona, but they can be found in certain wind-swept regions of the high desert in the northeastern corner of the state. On the Navajo Reservation, for example, sand dunes are a predominant surface feature, covering approximately one-third of the Navajo reservation, equivalent to thousands of square miles. sand.xboltz.net/navajo

California

Eureka Dunes - Closed to vehicles. The Eureka Dunes lie in the remote Eureka Valley, northwest of Death Valley. The dunes cover an area only 3 miles long and 1 mile wide, yet they are the tallest sand dunes in California, possibly the tallest in all of North America. nps.gov/deva/planyourvisit/eureka-dunes

Guadalupe - Closed to vehicles. Nipomo Sand Dunes National Wildlife Refuge. Featuring towering 550 ft. high dunes - the tallest on the west coast. dunescenter.org

Kelso Dunes - Closed to vehicles. Amidst one of the least hospitable and least visited places in California, the Mojave

National Preserve. roadtripamerica.com/places/mojavepreserve

North Algodones - Closed to vehicles. 25,811 acres protect part of one of the largest dune complexes in North America. publiclands.org/explore/site.php?id=6396

Colorado

Great Sand Dunes National Park & Preserve (closed) - Some of the tallest sand dunes in North America. nps.gov/grsa.

Idaho

Bruneau Dunes State Park - Closed to vehicles. Boasting the tallest single-structured sand dune in North America. visitidaho.org/attraction/parks/bruneau-dunes-state-park

Nebraska

Sand Hills - The Nebraska Sand Hills is one of the most unique areas in the world. Spanning almost 20,000 square miles, it is the largest sand dune formation in the Western Hemisphere. thenebraskasandhills.com



The expanse of the Guadalupe-Nipomo Sand Dunes National Wildlife Refuge

seek out potential landscapes that you can return to later in the day or first thing in the morning when the light is glowing.

5. Use native vegetation and detailed animal tracks for strong, impactful compositions. Endemic flora like sand verbena, morning glory and silver lupine have

adapted to a harsh life in the Guadalupe–Nipomo Sand Dunes surviving on moist, salty air. However, they help stabilize sand dunes. As for animal tracks, most critters come out after sunset because there's little cover from predators during the day, so early mornings are good for working fresh, detailed animal spoor into your compositions. Where I photograph

Nevada

Winnemucca Dunes - The largest dune field in Nevada. duneguide.com/sand_dune_guide_winnemucca_dunes

New Mexico

White Sands National Monument - Closed to OHVs. Rising from the heart of the Tularosa Basin is one of the world's great natural wonders - the glistening white sands of New Mexico. Here, dunes have engulfed 275 square miles of desert creating the world's largest gypsum dunefield. nps.gov/whsa

Oregon

Oregon Dunes National Recreation Area - For nearly fifty miles, from the mouth of the Siuslaw, to Cape Blanco at Coos Bay, the largest area of dunes in the country lies between the Pacific Ocean and the Coast Mountains. duneguide.com/sand_dune_guide_oregon_dunes

Utah

Coral Pink Sand Dunes State Park - This is the only major sand

dune field on the Colorado Plateau, near Zion National Park. utah.com/stateparks/coral_pink

Wisconsin

Whitefish Dunes State Park - This day-use park preserves the most substantial sand dunes on the western shore of Lake Michigan. dnr.wi.gov/Org/land/parks/specific/whitefish

Wyoming

Killpecker Dunes is the second largest active sand dune field in the world. wy.blm.gov/rsfo/rec/dunes

Canada

Athabasca Sand Dunes Provincial Wilderness Park - The largest active sand surface in Canada and one of the most northern sets of major dune fields in the world. saskparks.net

Sable Sand Dunes - These dunes are formed from postglacial lake deposits, which preceded the present Lake Huron shoreline. lakehuron.ca



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Wind lines on the Nipomo Dunes of the Guadalupe-Nipomo Sand Dunes National Wildlife Refuge

most of my dunes that list consists of dune beetles and black bears' to western snowy plovers and bobcats.

6. Tripods. You're everyday tripod will suffice, but get real low and steady the camera with one of the small tripods with flexible Gumby-like legs, especially for those fine textures of rippling wind lines.

7. A wide angle lens will be your workhorse. There are a wide variety of lenses to choose from. My Canon 20-35mm lens has been a vital piece of gear in the majority of my sand dune photography. I always have it affixed to a camera and mounted to a tripod, and always at the ready as long shadows retreat or creep in across the dunes.

There's not a lot of time in a day for great light, so you want to stay ready at all times when that fantastic

landscape stops you in your tracks. I use slow shutter speeds and large f-stops for my sand dune photography.

One of the best experiences I have photographing sand dunes is watching dunes transform from those dull, bland, beige colors to those soft orange and gold hues at sunrise and sunset, signifying another good day as a landscape photographer, while capturing the natural moment as it unfolds.

Photo © Lori Ann Graham



Chuck Graham is a professional outdoor photographer and writer who travels worldwide to capture his images. His work is widely published in the U.S., Canada and the U.K. His work has appeared in Wildlife Conservation, BBC Wildlife, Wild Bird, Nature Photographer, Outdoor Photographer, Outdoor California, Santa Barbara Magazine and many more. See more of his images at chuckgrahamphoto.com.