Shooting Snowdrops

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If you go down to the woods today (Covid restrictions permitting), you're in for a big surprise. In early March, while the weather may be iffy and the days often gloomy, under the shade of the trees the snowdrops are out in all their glory. Although they're not native to these isles, they've long become naturalised and are a familiar sight in the dark months of late winter and early spring. Their Latin name, Galanthus nivalis, means "milk flower of the snow" and when they're in full bloom, their sheer profusion can indeed look like a blanket of snowflakes.



When To Shoot

You'll typically see snowdrops from January to March, although they sometimes pop up as early as Christmas in a mild winter. Snowdrops glistening in early morning frost look spectacular, and graphically illustrate how hardy these frail-looking plants actually are.

Catch them early enough, and you'll be able to record the nodding heads opening up into the golden glow of sunrise. At the start of the day the air is more likely to be still, too, which is key if you want to take macro images with pin-sharp accuracy, for which you need as little movement in those graceful white petals as possible. If you would rather go out later in the day, overcast conditions will soften the light for perfect colour saturation, but harsh bright sunlight is best avoided (which, let's be honest, isn't difficult at this time of year).

Where To Find

Snowdrops love damp, shady broadleaved woods and the banks of streams, and chances are you'll also spot them in your local park or churchyard. Many country estates that are prime spots for snowdrops normally open their gardens at this time of year, but with the current national lockdown restrictions you'll need to check with each location, and booking is usually required. Top spots that are currently admitting visitors include Colesbourne Gardens in Gloucestershire, Anglesey Abbey in Cambridgeshire, Dunham Massey in Cheshire, Kingston Lacy in Dorset and the Royal Botanic Gardens in Edinburgh.

Shooting Snowdrops In A Landscape

At their peak, snowdrops create magnificent white drifts to rival bluebells and heather. Go for a wideangle lens such as the 16-35mm f/4 or 10-20mm DX, or for Z series either the 14-30mm f/4 S or 14-24mm f.2.8 S to focus on foreground clusters, using them as leading lines into the rest of the image – this is ideal in woodland photography, where you might otherwise be struggling to identify a single point of interest in a busy frame.



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How To Get Great Close-ups

With long, fine leaves and drooping, bell-shaped flowers, the snowdrop's delicate structure makes it perfect for close-up shots, where you're creating a very shallow depth of field that isolates the plant against a beautifully defocused background with dreamy bokeh. This is easily achieved with a macro lens, such as the 40mm or 85mm Micro DX, or the 60mm or 105mm Micro if you're shooting full frame. Alternatively, use the long end of a telephoto as physically close as you can get without going beyond its close-focusing distance.

Your aim with close-ups is to keep the camera as still as possible. You can shoot handheld, especially if you're using a VR lens with inbuilt vibration reduction , while the new Z series cameras actually build that stabilisation into the sensor allowing you to achieve even lower shutter speeds when handholding the camera.

For absolute belt and braces, use a tripod with the leg low to the ground to get the camera as low as possible, so you're shooting from the flower's "eye view". A beanbag is a great alternative – inexpensive, portable and enabling you to position the camera even closer to the

ground. To further minimise the risk of blurring when the shutter fires, use a remote release or exposure delay mode to reduce the risk of camera shake when the shutter fires.

When you're shooting close to the ground, compose and check focus in Live View – it's far more comfortable than trying to squint through the viewfinder. You can also take advantage of the tilting LCD screen if you camera has one one. To ensure critical sharpness in a close-up, use the + magnification button to zoom in to the LCD screen on a the critical area of the frame you want to be pin sharp , and now use autofocus or manual focus to bag it. Alternatively, on your Z series camera, choose Focus Peaking or Pinpoint Focusing.

You can find more macro tips from Nikon School here.

Expert Tips

• Close-up shooting invariably means kneeling or lying down. Use a waterproof sheet to protect you from damp ground, but do take care not to squash any snowdrops while you're getting down and dirty with them!

• Maximise the vibrancy of the snowdrop's leaves and cut down on glare from their surprisingly shiny surface by using a polarising filter. A reflector can be handy for brightening up darker areas of the image – use a foldable, lightweight pop-up or make your own from foil-covered card.

Upgrade your photography skills with a Nikon School course – check out what's on here.

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