

CAPTURE
LIGHTNING

IT'S SURPRISING how easy it is to photograph lightning—it's mostly a matter of setting up your tripod and waiting. When a storm hits, watch for a few minutes to better anticipate the lightning, and keep your distance to avoid being struck or soaked. Here are three ways to make sure you don't miss a one-in-a-million shot.

1 Choose your storm. The most dramatic? Flash lightning bolts that go cloud-to-ground and are less than 15 miles away. Sheet lightning, where the lightning illuminates clouds from behind, is very photogenic, but it's much less predictable—and more dangerous. Set your tripod far enough away from the storm that wind and rain don't affect your image.

2 Compose your shot in advance. Frame your image with a low horizon—the action in the sky is your main subject. But be sure to keep an interesting shape (e.g., a building or tree) in the foreground to give perspective and context. Set your focus manually to infinity, so that your camera's AF doesn't go hunting in the dark.

3 Shoot in manual mode. Set a wide aperture (unless you want to capture details in the near foreground) and a low ISO.

If you're shooting at night, set your shutter to Bulb—which keeps it open until you release it—and wait for lightning to strike. You may be able to simply leave the shutter open while you wait, but when there's a lot of light pollution, your frame may overexpose in just 30 seconds.

In daytime storms, underexpose 1 or 2 stops from the camera's meter reading to help the bolts stand out against the background. Set your shutter for 1/15 or 1/30 sec—long enough to catch the strike but short enough to maintain contrast.

Once you see the first strike, just start snapping. —Kathleen Davis