Winter Photography at Mono Lake



Poconip ice fog shrouds Mono Lake, allowing diffuse peach-colored light to illuminate the tufa. Photo by Joe Decker.

January 22–24, 2027 • Joe Decker

$410 per person / $390 for Mono Lake Committee members
enrollment limited to 15 participants

Winter in the Mono Basin offers a "visual quiet" that complements the silence of the coldest season in a most remarkable place. Poconip ice fog, ice-covered tufa towers, winter storms, and bright but low sunlight are all possible, combined with the towering Sierra Nevada backdrop, most likely blanketed in snow. Add the illumination of a super full moon and opportunities to photograph a snowy landscape under its glow, and the photographic possibilities are endless.

This photography field seminar will be based in Lee Vining, near the shores of Mono Lake. Though primarily a field seminar, we will discuss composition and methods of proper exposure under the diverse variety of lighting conditions encountered during winter in the Eastern Sierra—including nighttime and moonlit photography—visualization, filtration, and developing a personal vision.

All ability levels are welcome. **A fully adjustable SLR camera (not a point-and-shoot camera) is strongly suggested** but not required, along with an extra battery or two and enough memory for

1,000+ images at your selected resolution. A tripod will be a necessity for our nighttime work. A working knowledge of your camera's controls and functions is very important: *DO NOT BRING A CAMERA YOU DON'T KNOW!*

Instructor **Joe Decker** is a longtime Mono Lake Committee supporter and photographer whose work has been widely exhibited across the United States, from the San Diego Museum of Natural History to the Smithsonian, as well as having been recognized with residencies as diverse as Arizona, Iceland and Antarctica. Joe's award-winning book on photographic composition, *The Tuesday Composition,* is published by Flatbooks Publishing. Joe has led numerous workshops in the western US and has studied with master nature photographers Galen Rowell and Frans Lanting.

ITINERARY *(subject to change based on weather and road conditions)*

Friday, January 22 at 2:00pm: Meet at the Mono Lake Indian & Lee Vining Community Center in Lee Vining (296 Mattly Ave). After brief introductions we begin our dialogue on photography as a means of both documentation and also personal statement, as well as discussing techniques for night photography. A field session at sunset will be followed by a break for dinner, after which we will return to the field to photograph under the stars (sunset–5:08pm).

Saturday, January 23: We will photograph sunrise by the lake (sunrise–7:07am), breaking for breakfast afterwards and then reconvening to share work at the community center. We will return to the field, likely to Lee Vining Canyon for winter vegetation, aspen, and meadows. A long midday break will give you time for lunch and a rest before our sunset location shoot (sunset–5:09pm).

Sunday, January 24: We will meet at sunrise at the lake to capture the dawn light (sunrise–7:06am). We will spend the rest of the morning photographing at locations to be determined by available conditions. A late morning adjournment will allow for the drive home in the afternoon, unless you wish to stay for another optional evening session (sunset–5:10pm).

ACTIVITY LEVEL: MODERATE

This seminar's activity level: *moderate*. We will be walking up to one mile a day, some of which will be over uneven terrain, off trail, and will include stepping up and over obstacles. We may encounter snow, ice, and slippery footing. This type of walking requires good balance, some agility, and stamina.

WEATHER AND ROAD CONDITIONS

Weather conditions will either be challenging or very cooperative. January average temperatures in Lee Vining are 40°F (max) and 20°F (min). Average January snowfall is 19.7 inches. Relatively warm and sunny days are possible, but prepare for cold, wintry weather. Bring layered clothing in case of pleasant midday sunshine. Poor weather may require more challenging photography and patience, but it may also provide more photographic possibilities.

Highway 120 (Tioga Pass) will be closed for the winter at this time (as will be Highway 108, Sonora Pass), so plan on seeking alternate routes if you are coming from the Central Valley, western Sierra, or Bay Area. Highway 395 rarely closes except during a severe winter storm. If you don't

have 4WD with snow tires, you need to carry chains in case of winter weather. There is a possibility of significant travel on ice- or snow-covered roads so please be prepared.

Thirty-year January climate data for Lee Vining, along with road and weather information, can be found at *monolake.org*. There will be no refunds or credit of tuition for weather-related reasons.

ALTITUDE AND DEHYDRATION CAUTIONS

Remember to bring (and drink!) lots of water because your body loses more water at the higher altitudes of the Mono Basin. Experts recommend that you begin drinking extra water as you drive to higher elevation in order to prevent dehydration and headaches. Also, the sun is rather fierce at high elevations, capable of burning even on cold and cloudy days, so be sure to protect yourself thoroughly using sunscreen and sunglasses.

MEALS: Students will be responsible for their own meals. The nearest area with restaurants that are open in the winter is June Lake, which is about 20–25 minutes south of Lee Vining. Hours may be limited, so please plan accordingly.

INDOOR MASKING: We highly encourage masking indoors to reduce the spread of illness during COVID/flu season.

FEES

The cost of the seminar covers tuition only. Participants are responsible for all other fees:

- **lodging accommodations:** visit *leevining.com* to make reservations
- **all meals:** limited options in Lee Vining during the winter so please plan ahead
- **South Tufa fee:** the $3-per-person entrance fee to South Tufa is good for a week; 80% of it stays at Mono Lake for improvements to interpretive/educational activities
- **Old Marina fee:** the $3-per-car-per-day fee enables Mono Lake's state park to stay open

TO BRING

__ five examples of your work (see below)
__ a USB thumb drive to enable sharing of the photos you take during the weekend
__ extra camera batteries to keep warm in your pocket
__ note-taking material or tape recorder
__ pocket-size flashlight
__ travel alarm (some motels have no wake-up service)
__ cameras and lenses you normally use
__ memory cards/film
__ tripod
__ a watch or other device for timing long exposures
__ sun protection (even though it's late winter, we're at 6,000–8,000 feet above sea level!)
__ warm winter clothing
__ mask for the indoor sessions
__ snowshoes (**optional**—these may be useful at some field locations to help you navigate snow cover and increase your photographic options)

Students are encouraged to bring at least five examples of their work. These can be in the form of snapshots, slides, or fine prints (color or black-and-white), or digital format. Digital format should be as .jpeg files, preferably on a USB thumb drive—no personal laptops for viewing. Students working in black-and-white might also benefit from bringing negatives and/or contact prints of the finished prints they present. We will also try to view the photos everyone takes during the weekend, and those should be in .jpeg format on a USB thumb drive.

A letter will be sent to all registrants with a more specific list and updated information approximately two weeks prior to the workshop. For more information, visit Joe Decker's website at *joedecker.net*. Email questions to *joedecker@gmail.com*.