

Silhouettes

By Marilyn Nieves

An intriguing image of a woman with her crow... Hair blowing in the wind as a rider gallops down the beach on her horse... Someone reading a good book on the hammock at sunset...

Silhouettes can be striking and very emotive. They can convey drama and a sense of mystery, sparking the viewer's imagination.

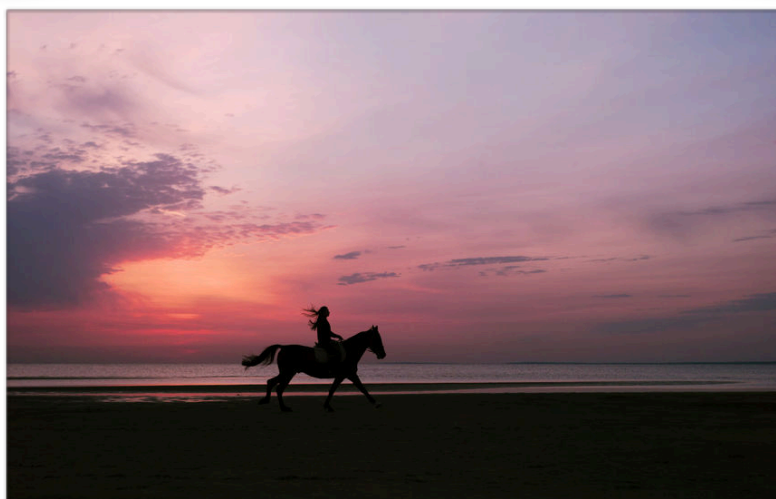
A silhouette is a photograph in which the main subject is completely dark against a brighter background.

Silhouettes work well for a wide range of subjects, making them perfect material for stock photography. Follow the tips in this Roadmap, and you'll be on your way to creating some awesome silhouettes.

Silhouette Images as Stock

One beautiful thing about silhouettes is that they can provide a dramatic feel while still keeping a sense of mystery and anonymity. For example, the silhouetted figures on the next page are clearly a group of executives, but because they are in silhouette, they become anonymous figures. This provides for a broader use as a stock photo than if we could see their individual faces and expressions.

Silhouettes are all about the overall idea or concept, rather than the particular individuals.



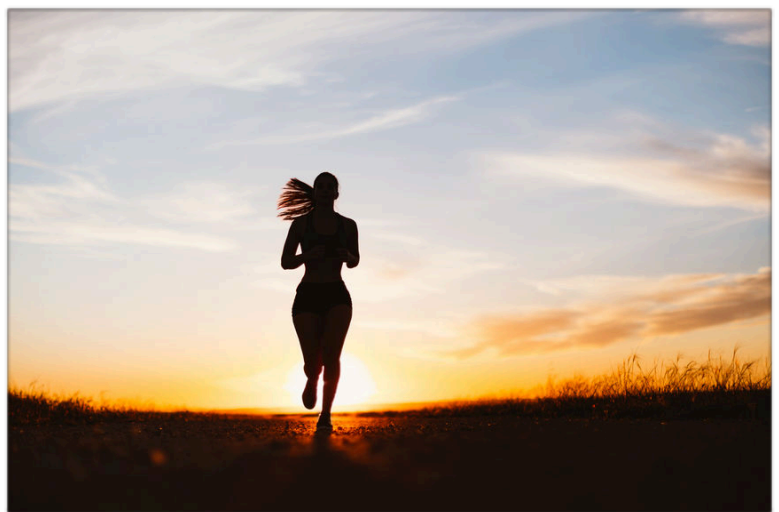
Ideas to Get You Started

Experiment with combining silhouettes and reflections to convey an abstract and high-tech feel. These types of images are quite useful as backgrounds or for any type of technology or business industries.

Most any subject can be a silhouette, but the more useful and emotive ones have people in them. Silhouettes invite you to tell a story and draw in the viewer more easily because they can subconsciously see themselves or someone they know in the photo. The anonymity of silhouettes makes them more universally relatable.

For example, this photo at the bottom of a runner on a trail through a vast field gives you a sense of determination. It could be used for an athletic apparel company, a fitness gym, or even something like a protein bar company, to name just a few. An image like this has many possibilities, which means it could be a hot-seller for stock.

When shot with a wide-angle lens and a minimalist composition, silhouettes also provide great copy space that greatly appeals to designers. When you're photographing for stock, a good rule of thumb is to remember to take a few shots that leave room for text to be overlaid on the image.



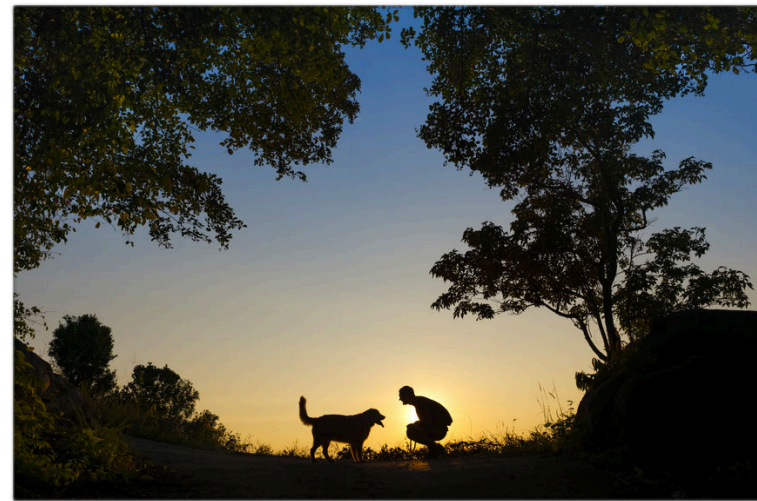
Shooting Tips and Techniques



You only need one light source.

All silhouettes have one thing in common and that is that they are back-lit.

What that means is that the light source is coming from behind the main subject and generally (though not always) at a low angle. Having the background brighter than your subject creates the contrast that will cause your subject to appear as a shadowy silhouette in your image.



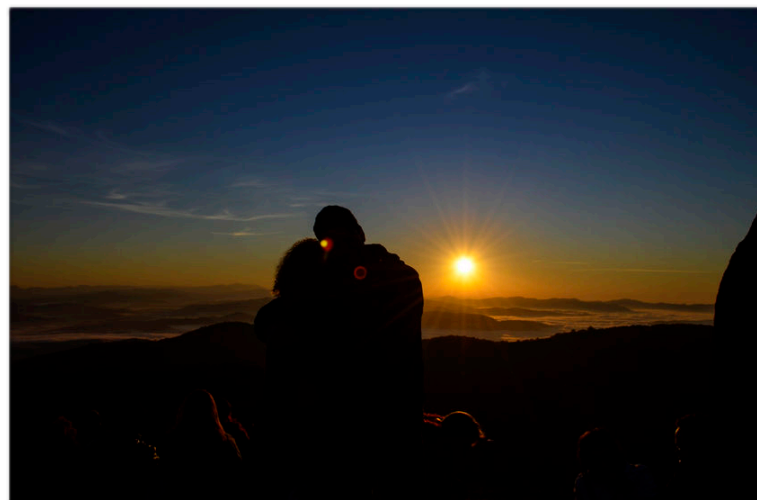
In this scenario, your camera is aimed in the direction of the light and you are not exposing for the main subject, but instead you are exposing for the background. That sounds a bit backwards, doesn't it? But this is the key to capturing a silhouette. Your main subject remains dark and anonymous while your background is properly exposed.

Using the sun as your light source is the best way to start out.

Choose an interesting shape and look for separation.

When you choose your main subject, look for an interesting shape.

For example, in this center photo of a dog and owner, they are at a slight distance from each other. This provides for an interesting profile view of the two interacting.



On the contrary, in this next photo to the left, you can see that without some separation between subjects, their silhouettes merge into a blob-like shape, causing the photo to lose some of its message and visual impact.

Be aware of your shooting angle.

Also look for good separation between your main subject and the environment. You can often achieve this by shooting from a low angle. In the previous example, the high angle partly contributed to not having a clear and interesting separation between the main subjects and their environment.

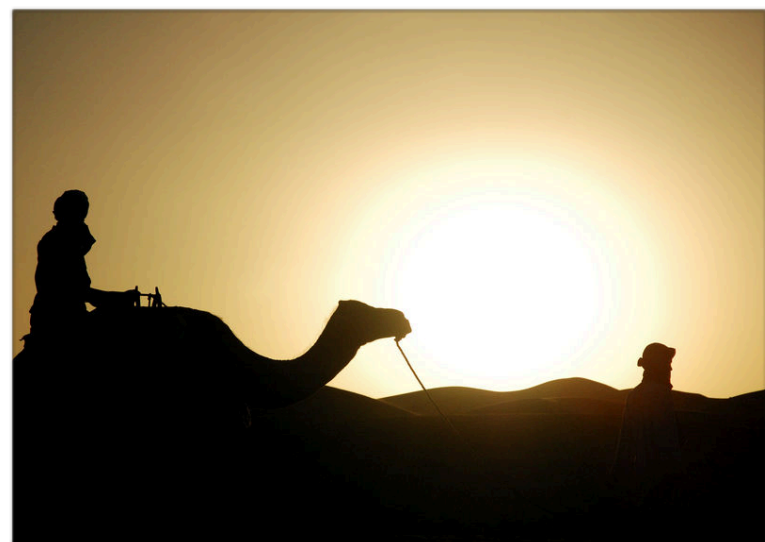
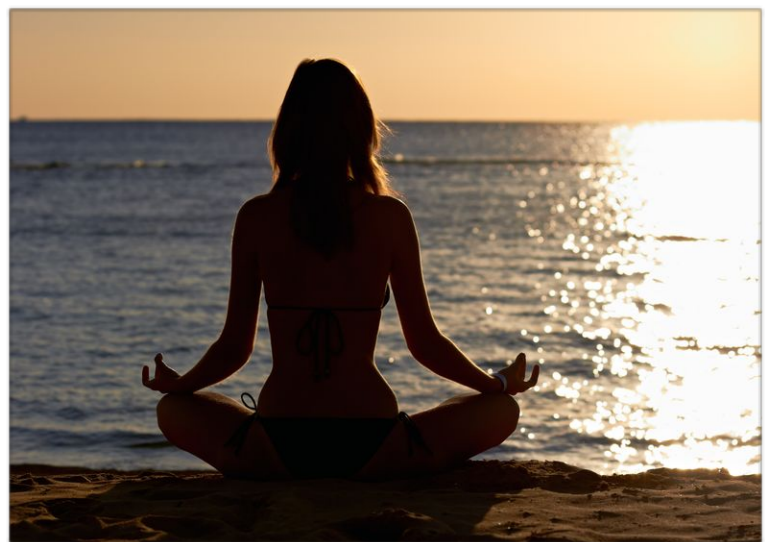
Backlighting will provide you with the contrast you need for a silhouette, but your angle can also determine how impactful your composition will be.

This top image was shot at a higher angle, and while it can still be useful as stock, notice how the woman's legs are blending in with the ground. Compare that to this next photo in the middle...

In this example, the photographer chose to shoot from a slightly lower angle, providing for more clarity and separation between the subject and the ground/environment.

Let's look at one last example to illustrate the importance of choosing angles and perspective.

This one was shot at a high angle. Notice how the main subjects blend in with the sand dunes in the background. Perhaps that was the intention, but if you want to see the camel and its handler walking, a ground-level angle would be ideal and provide a more interesting silhouette in this image.



Shoot Early or Late in the Day

Depending on the time of day and weather conditions, the sun will light up the sky differently, adding a variety of color palettes to the backdrop of your silhouette.

For example, an early morning image will provide for a light, fresh, uplifting feeling. By contrast, shooting silhouettes at sunset will add vibrant, saturated, and moody tones. Similarly, shooting silhouettes at twilight (blue hour) will create more of a mysterious or ominous feeling within your photo.



Camera Settings

Now that you know some key elements to photographing silhouettes, let's talk about your camera settings.

Shoot in RAW so that you have full editing superpowers.

In the Raw file format, you will be able to add contrast without losing detail where you want it. It's the format that provides for the most flexibility if you use editing software such as Adobe Lightroom. (If you're not

currently set up to edit Raw images, don't worry — you can still achieve great silhouettes shooting in the JPEG file format as well.)

Use a normal to wide-angle lens (10-50mm).

You want to be able to capture your subject with the environment surrounding them. It makes for a stronger composition to put the silhouette in context and it also can help leave room for potential copy space.

Don't use your camera's flash.

Your only light source should be the one coming from *behind your main subject*. Any flash coming from your camera will add fill-light and eliminate the silhouette effect.



How It Works

Let's say you will be shooting a landscape at sunset with a lonely tree as the main subject. Here's how you would set your exposure for this scenario, step-by-step:



For Photographers Using Program Mode, Aperture Priority, or Shutter Priority:

- Make sure your camera's exposure dial is set to P for Program Mode, A (AV) for Aperture Priority, or S (TV) for Shutter Priority.
- Point your camera at the sky and be sure to completely fill your viewfinder with the brightest part of the sky that will be in your photo. (Excluding the tree from the frame completely.)
- Press your shutter button halfway down to activate your light meter, and then press and hold the "exposure lock" button. (Check in your camera manual if you aren't sure where this is.)
- Frame your composition with your tree as the main subject.
- Take the shot.

Your subject (the tree) should look like a dark shape. If the background is too light or dark, use the "exposure compensation" button to lighten or darken any following images as needed.

For Photographers Using Manual Exposure:

- Set your camera's exposure dial to M for manual control of your exposure.
- Set your ISO as low as it will go (100 or 200).
- Select your aperture based on the depth field you would like. For this scenario, let's go with f/8 to get a fairly deep depth of field.
- Now point your camera at the sky and be sure to completely fill your viewfinder with the brightest part of the sky that will be in your photo. (Excluding the tree from the frame completely.)
- Press your shutter button halfway down to activate your light meter, and then move your shutter speed dial until the needle on your light meter reads zero.
- Once you have set your ISO, aperture, and shutter speed, go ahead and frame your composition with your tree as the main subject. (Don't change any of the settings you previously selected.)
- Take a test shot.
- Your subject (the tree) should look like a dark shape. If the background is too dark, open up your aperture to f/5.6. If it's too light, drop it down to f/11 or select a shutter speed one stop faster. If you are shooting in lower light conditions, you will want to bump your ISO slightly higher as well, to ensure that you get a fast enough shutter speed to hand hold your camera without producing camera shake.

NOTE: Depending on how dark it is when you shoot, you may want to use a tripod to get a nice, crisp image.

More Shooting Ideas for Silhouettes

Experiment, have fun, and play!

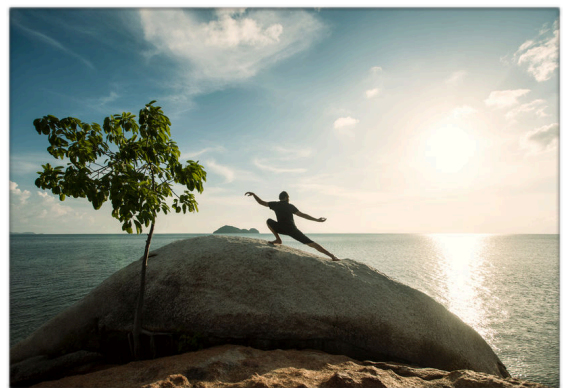
Once you get the hang of it, try different ways to capture a silhouette. For example, look at the first photo on the right, adding movement can make your image more dynamic and interesting...

Or, in the second photo, try incorporating a reflection of your silhouette...

The third photo experiments with the light coming from a slightly higher angle in relation to your subject...

Play up the Halloween Season! In this spooky photo, while still a silhouette, the characters are backlit, but also have a small light source in their hand to illuminate just a hint of their faces.

You can also shoot through something semi-translucent like fabric...



The key to any silhouette is having a bright light behind your subject, which causes your subject to be in shadow. (Just be sure to set your exposure for the background and not your subject!)

While the sun works great as your light source for outdoor silhouette images, here are some additional ideas for creating silhouettes indoors:

- Use a window as backlighting, placing your subject in front of it. For example, someone could be washing the dishes in front of a brightly lit kitchen window or turn your cat looking out the window into a silhouette.
- Use a fireplace as your light source. Try placing some wine glasses close to the camera with the fireplace several feet away.
- Try artificial lighting using a flashlight, lamp or candles. Just be sure to set your white balance within your camera as needed.

Keywording

With each image you upload, you must keyword thoughtfully, using only keywords that are relevant to each image. You want the buyer to find your image when it's appropriate to their keyword search. For example, some good keywords for this image below are:

Surfing, action, ocean, anonymous, athletic, sunset, wave, splash, activity, boy, perseverance.

Poor keywords would be: sun, postcard, caucasian.



Sun - The sun is still out, but it's not visible and "sunset" applies best.

Postcard - technically any photo can be used on a postcard but if a buyer searches for this term, more times than not, they are looking for a photo of an actual postcard.

Caucasian - while he may be Caucasian, the viewer can't tell, so this keyword actually limits how this photo might be found and used.

When keywording a silhouette, here are a few additional things to think about:

- What is the main subject of your image?
- What's the setting/location?
- Is it daytime or dusk?
- What's the concept and what emotions does it evoke?

I hope that you feel inspired to go out and experiment with making silhouettes to add to your stock photo portfolios. They are fun, sellable, and easy to create!