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# A Landscape Photographers Guide to Visiting the Blue Mountains, Australia

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SEPTEMBER 1, 2014 *by* GARY HAYES

## Introduction

Inspired by other guides for photographers in well known areas of the world (eg: Colby Brown's [Yosemite](#)) I thought I would put together a page / few screens that (a) demystifies the Blue Mountains for visiting photographers and (b) acts as a nice upfront, illustrated walkthrough to my more detailed location-by-location [guide on this site](#). This 'hotspot' photo location list also details best gear to bring and best times etc:).

For now though a broad sweep introduction to photographing Australia's Blue Mountains – All text and images © Gary P Hayes 2014.

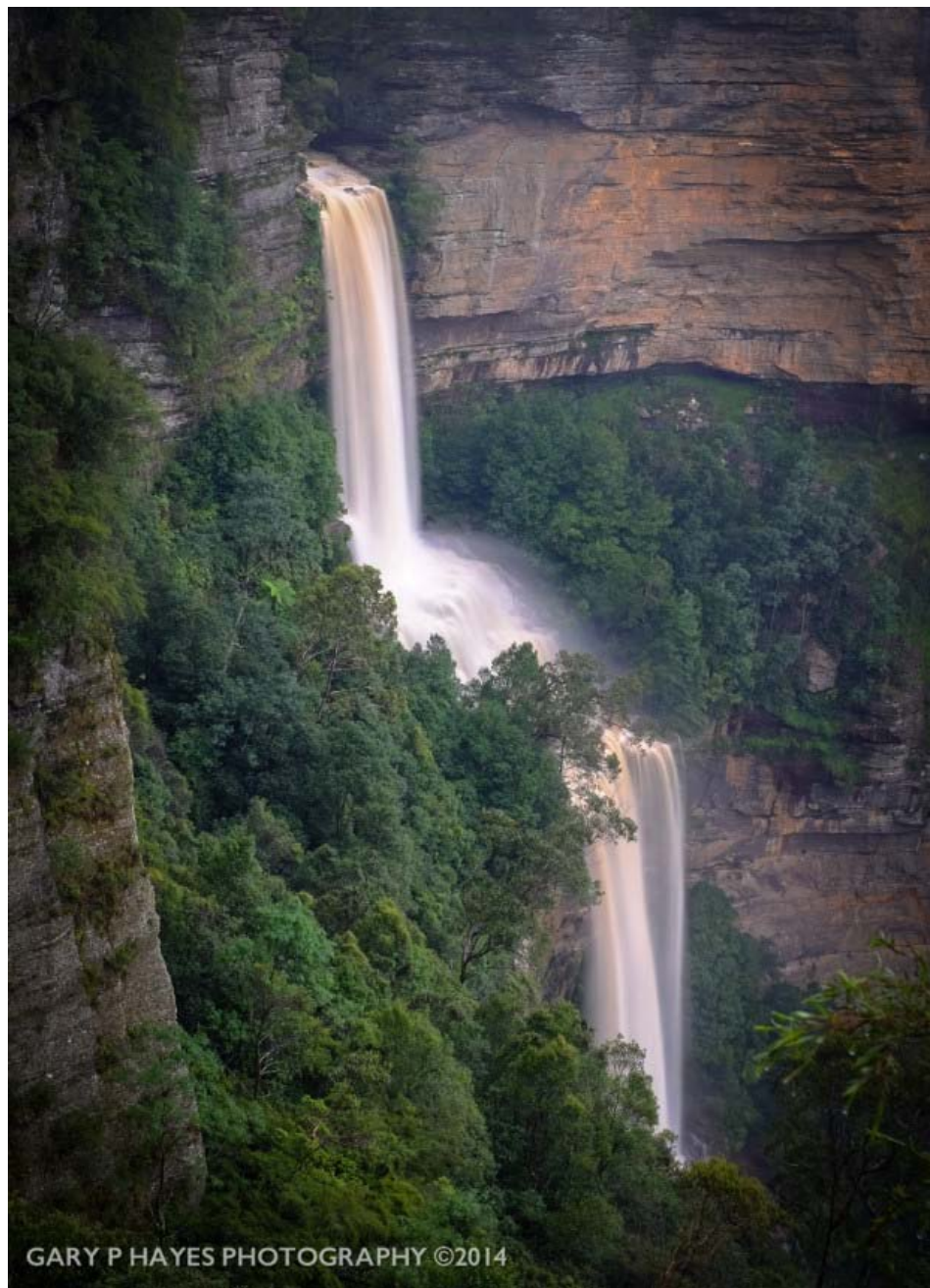


Magic sunrise from Govetts Leap Lookout

## Overview

The Blue Mountains is a plateau that rises up over 1000m above the plains west of Sydney. The high plateau is 170 million year old layers of sediment pushed up as part of the movement of the earth's crust that resulted in the Great Divide. Over many millions of years since then several valleys have formed in these plateaus as the waters from the various rivers and creeks have eroded this sandstone. The erosion is also due to wind, heat and ice causing thousands of years of landslides as weaker rock inside the layers give way under the weight of the heavier sandstone.

For the photographer this has resulted in a unique environment of sheer exposed cliffs, temperate rain forests on the valley floors, with large waterfalls dropping over the cliff edges, an abundance of rare plant and wildlife plus some unique atmospheric and micro weather conditions. The walks on the valley floors are great for tree, vegetation and wildlife shots but with very few clearings, shots looking up at cliffs are few and far between. Consider this when deciding to do a long valley hikes – great for fitness less for big landscape shots.



The 800ft Katoomba Falls

Late 1800s settlers created a route across the plateau, now taken over by the Great Western Highway which is the modern backbone for photographers travelling across this amazing landscape. But the Greater Blue Mountains extends further west across the Oberon plains, Kanangra wilderness and through the amazing Jenolan Caves areas as well as north towards Mudgee passing Lithgow, Wollemi wilderness, Gardens of Stone and Wolgan & Capertee Valleys – all amazing areas to explore in their own right. But for the visitor who wants to initially limit their time and distance the Upper Blue Mountains are more than enough for several days and weeks of photographing and exploring.

## The Seasonal Blue Mountains

A quick ‘personal’ (not very scientific) overview of the mountains in the four seasonal quarters after coming here for the last 9 years and living here for over a year – but bear in mind that because of the



micro environments and unique heating/cooling of the general Australian climate, the weather can be surprisingly varied in all months of the year. A photographer should come dressed for at least a season each side of the one they are in!



The amazing Kanangra Walls part of the Greater Blue Mountains

### **Spring (Sep – Nov)**

Spring is still quick cool up at 1000m, it tends to be the windiest and also has the best atmospheric conditions for photography. That said last year 2013, October brought massive bush fires at 40C temperatures and 100km winds, which luckily didn't last into summer. The up shot of this for the photographer is amazing misty valleys as the rains slowly evaporate and also incredible cloud formations at sunrise and sunset as the warming spring airs flow up from the plains below and cool in the evenings. The water falls are still pretty strong in spring after several days of winter rains that keep the ground water high, this combined with excellent opps in other types of landscape photography make it the best time to photograph. Another thing to be aware of when out and about on the trails are the newly hatched insects which are particularly troublesome when you are their only food at 7am on a cliff top! So lots of repellent recommended.

### **Summer (Dec – Feb)**

The driest months of course and a lot of waterfalls will have almost completely dried. Even the mighty Katoomba or Wentworth Falls sometimes stop flowing completely, but late summer rains will return and keep them alive. But the Blue Mountains are never barren of course and even a few mm of rain can produce dramatic mist in the valleys, indeed I have taken my most powerful mist/fog shots in the summer periods, including valleys full of mist and the amazing phantom falls effects. Also significant flash rains can cause floods but amazing waterfalls as the warmer air brings clouds from the plains that

collect moisture as they rise up the plateau. The other benefit in the summer is lovely long days to go on the trails in the semi or full canyons which are so deep in places that it could be any season. Late summer is particularly good after a day or two of rain, as the deep oranges of the rocks & creek beds contrast with sparkling new water.



Clearing summer morning mist from a lookout on Narrow Neck ridge.

### **Autumn (Mar – May)**

Autumn doesn't bring as much of the traditional red and orange to the landscape as in other countries of the world. In the Blue Mountains it is mostly introduced trees that 'turn' and a few areas like Mount Wilson, Blackheath and selected gardens are worth exploring. In fact a mass influx of local and international photographers go to Mount Wilson which has large swaves of imported plants. The weather in this season is more predictable than other months and there are less 'atmospherics' it seems. A good time to visit if you like more manageable weather, not too hot or cold and good easy trail walking and camping.

### **Winter (Jun – Aug)**

You can get a few inches of snow in the higher plains and higher towns in winter but it general won't stay for more than a day or two, so most photographers are on alert and the first sign of a fall and they will travel 40km plus for their winter wonderland shots. Generally around Oberon or Jenolan areas vs the last sections of the Upper Mountains. Winter can bring big rains too and my best waterfall shots are generally in the later winter period when it can be known for 10-20cm to fall in a day and when a lot of waterfalls become too dangerous to visit and a lot of trails around the cliff edges are too slippy. Winter is also know for some amazing displays in the sky at sunset, less at sunrise.





Amazing winter sunset at North's Lookout

## The Photographic Zones of the Blue Mountains

One of the main reasons for doing this little guide is to help simplify the Blue Mountains for the visiting photographer. Rather than just a long list of locations or a few 'must' visit tourist spots, I wanted to break it into zones. When I set out in the mornings or late afternoons I have in mind the direction at any location I will be facing, but also the type of shot and therefore the zone I decide to go to. There are lots of ways to break down the 'type' of shot you want to do in the mountains from cliff edges into the valleys, valleys up at mountains, waterfalls, forests, creeks, lakes, rural, plains and then specific atmospherics, mist, sunrise clouds/light, sunset clouds/light etc: but the remarkable thing about the blue mountains is that almost all of the above are available in each of my 'zones'! So focusing your time during the golden hours and on the trails you can potentially stay within say a 3-6km radius and have all of the above – assuming the direction works for you. So the following should help you choose the best places to stay and be a few minutes vs 40mins+ from your sunrise/sunset shots or easy access to that 3 hour waterfall walk.

## The Seven General Upper Blue Mountain Photographic Zones

These zones correlate with my location specific guide and this serves as an introduction to each. The general layout of the Upper Blue mountains is based around the Valleys and the Great Western Highway that connects all the towns. The towns don't really have a great deal to do with the range of

locations and walks at each but serve as a way to break them into groups.



**SOUTH FACING** – The lookouts based around the towns of Wentworth Falls, Leura and Katoomba have mostly north to south aspect looking into the Jamison Valley.

**WEST AND EAST FACING** – Medlow Bath lookouts face west into the Megalong Valley while Blackheath and Mount Victoria face both west into the Megalong and Kanimbla but also east into the Grose Valley. There are spurs (and valley edges) on the south facing Wentworth, Leura and Katoomba that face east or west. Tablelands in Wentworth Falls has great west facing sunset views, Sublime Point in Leura has both directions and my favourite Narrow Neck at Katoomba stretches far into the Jamison and has great east and west vistas. The Bells line of road locations are on the opposite side looking back towards Blackheath and are great west facing sunset locations.





The iconic Three Sisters sunset from a slightly different angle

Most of the photographic walks below drop down into a gully or valley and then back out, often a 200–400m descent and ascent on well made steps. All of the ‘exit points’ require a certain level of fitness and can be done slowly by most people, but photographers with BIG back packs of gear will need to think hard about weight to make it comfortable. All of the below have locations covered in the [Guide here](#) (I will hyperlink them all eventually)

### Zone 1 – Lawson / Hazelbrook and Environs

I added this as a zone as they are nice packaged loop walks but they only take in waterfalls whereas zones 2–7 include vistas and significant rain forest elements. There are three approx 1.5 hour loops to choose from in Lawson and Hazelbrook and are covered in detail on my guide but as an overview:



Fairy Falls in not usual heavy flow

The [South Lawson](#) loop takes in some great 5–10m falls including Adelina, Federal, Junction, Leslie and Cataract. The [Hazelbrook](#) loop has three unique and slightly larger falls Burgess and two you can walk behind, Oakland and Horseshoe while the [North Lawson route](#) is more ‘deep glen’ based and covers Fairy at the top and Dantes and St Michael falls at the bottom, so require a bit of a climb down whereas the others are much more gradual edge of valley walks. Worth also considering also the single in/out route of [Terrace and Victor Falls](#) where Terrace is the more iconic shot with guess, lots of drops over terraces.

## Zone 2 – Wentworth Falls and Environs



The Majestic Wentworth Falls from Rocket Point

**Best 1-3 hour Photographic Trail.** My favourite and recommended first time walk for visitors is the [National Pass loop](#). This starts or ends at the Conservation Hut and drops half way into the Jamison and along a ledge for the middle section but takes in around 5-8 waterfalls depending on a couple of tangents and several vistas. The main walk drops through the [Valley of the Waters](#) past Empress, Sylvia and other photogenic falls all next to each other then along a ledge around the valley walls and comes out below the much bigger Wentworth Falls with a climb up victorian steps for about 40 minutes. A great way to get 10+ locations in one go.

**Quick 1 hour Falls and Vistas** – A series of 10 minute walks from the main Wentworth Falls car park can take you down to very friendly access [Weeping Rock](#) falls, or out to some great lookouts across the main falls, [Princess Rock Lookout](#) for example and also a short 10 minutes extra walk at the start of the National Pass and before the long staircase down, takes you onto a great ledge overlooking the valley and across the top of the falls where behind you Queen's Cascades tumble.

**The Iconic Shot** – For me the shot worth doing well in this area is probably the very beautiful Sylvia Falls.

**Other shots worth considering** – [Wentworth Falls lake](#), McMahons Point (a long dirt road 20km drive), Charles Darwin Trail creek shots and more





The Gorgeous Sylvia Falls on the Valley of the Falls route

### Zone 3 – Leura and Environs



Tablelands on the left, Mt Solitary on the Right taken from Sublime Point in Leura

**Best 1-3 hour Photographic Trail.** The best loop here can start or end at [Leura Cascades](#) and drop down into the valley, along the Amphitheatre track, through Leura forest and back up past a few great glens and waterfalls to Solitary Restaurant area. Leura Cascades has a great upper falls next to the car park and several on the walk out to the lookout above [Bridal Veil Falls](#). A step walk down gets you beneath these and also takes in Leura's own [Weeping Rock](#) (just below). Around the cliff edge and then back up past Lila and Linda falls and a few lovely Glens. The walk out either way is a good 45-60 minutes steep.

**Quick 1 hour Falls and Vistas** – The waterfall loop that takes in [Pool of Siloam](#) and Lyrebird Dell Falls from Gordon's Falls car park is a nice one hour route but for easy vistas consider Olympic Lookout just around the corner from Gordons Falls.

**Best Iconic Shot** – The most iconic Leura based shot is probably the best view of Mount Solitary in the middle of the Jamison Valley at dawn or sunset when it is lit up alone above the mist or dark valley from Olympic Rock or [Sublime Point](#).

**Other shots worth considering** – Sublime Point at sunrise or sunset with misty valley, the long 15km drive to [Mount Hay](#) areas and enroute offers lots of photographic potential (and [Butterbox](#) & [Fortress Ridges](#) nearby some of my favourite, secret places!), simple garden shots at the Everglades and more



A flock of cockatoos and two visitors above Bridal Veil Falls in Leura



## Zone 4 - Katoomba and Environs



The small 2nd falls of the 800ft Katoomba Falls

**Best 1-3 hour Photographic Trail.** There are a lot of trails around Katoomba but the one with most bang for buck is the Furber steps route starting or ending at Katoomba Kiosk car park area. The walk drops quickly into the valley then you follow it around the valley floor and up the Golden Stairs to the [Three Sisters](#) and back down to the kiosk. The start of the walk passes the unique [Witches Leap Falls](#) and then a short path out to the middle of the 800ft [Katoomba Falls](#) followed by a step walk down the Furber Steps and down to Cox's Crossing and smaller falls, a long walk around the bottom of the Three Sisters spur and up the dreaded steps – perhaps to take sunset at Echo Point.

**Quick 1 hour Falls and Vistas** – There are some great walks and viewpoints off Glenraphael Road on [Narrow Neck ridge](#). You can drive out onto this plateau and take some great shots east and west. A good one is the walk from the second steel barrier on the left, which takes you right next to [Dogface \(Landslide cliff\)](#) with wonderful views of the valley and the monolith ridge.

**Best Iconic Shot** - There are so many in Katoomba but apart from the obvious Three Sisters at Echo Point consider a sunrise shot of the Jamison from one of many lookouts on Narrow Neck

**Other shots worth considering** - Great lookouts include [Norths](#), [Therabulat](#), Narrow Neck, [Eaglehawk](#), [Landslide LO](#) (the ridge to the left of the tourist lookout) as well as north Katoomba a great falls called [Minnehaha](#). A few nice lookouts on [Prince Henry Walk](#) going towards Leura and for the serious photographers well worth considering the route out to the top of Mount Solitary and staying overnight up there for amazing shots if misty in the morning... and more



Jamison Valley sunrise from Gary's lookout 2a

## Zone 5 - Medlow Bath / Blackheath and Environs



The famous Hanging Rock near Baltzer Ridge

**Best 1-3 hour Photographic Trail.** The best loop trail for me is the [Grand Canyon](#) one which although doesn't have lots of iconic falls does have a lot of variety of shots from wispy ledge falls through to creeks and deeper canyon type shots. It also starts and finishes at [Evan's lookout](#) which has a great view of the wide and more rugged Grose Valley. You can continue towards the more wild Rodriguez Pass route off this loop and come up at [Govetts Leap](#), this passes some great falls like [Beauchamp](#) and has amazing valley views too, but it is for more advanced walkers.

**Quick 1 hour Falls and Vistas** – One of the best there and back routes providing lower



views of the Grose than Govetts Leap is the walk to the bottom of [Bridal Veil \(the Leap part\)](#) at Govetts. Park in the top car park and follow the route down to the right of the viewpoint, keep going until you are at the bottom of the falls - great views looking up. A little further some more falls worth 10 minutes return.

**Best Iconic Shot** – Has to be the main view from the car park area at the east facing Govett's Leap. A fine composition for anyone who clicks, but sunrises are fantastic here and easy to keep warm in the car! But spending time with different lenses here can produce amazing results, the misty valley shots or god rays from morning clouds all amazing.

**Other shots worth considering** – So much in this area. A long 4km to [Hanging Rock](#), a drive to great earlier Grose Views at [Perrys Lookdown](#), [Anvil Rock](#) nearby and [Pulpit Rock](#) on the way. Consider the other side too from Blackheath, [Hargraves Lookout](#) is great at sunset, [Mount Blackheath](#) also and many more.



Better at sunrise but a rare sunset at Govetts Leap

## Zone 6 – Mount Victoria and Environs



A couple enjoy the sunset from Hornes Point

**Best 1-3 hour Photographic Trail.** There are not many big loop trails around Mount Victoria as it is at the end of the Upper Mountains before it drops into the Oberon plain. But a notable and favourite one for me is the one that starts and ends at [Mount Piddington](#). Walk out to [Hornes Point](#) from the car park here then loop back via [Ferris Cave](#) and several viewpoints. There are no waterfalls of note in the area but fantastic views of the rural Kanimbla Valleys below and out to Jenolan and [Kanangra](#) behind. It is possible to spend at good hour or more at Hornes point as it has almost 270 degree views across the whole of the west and southern areas of the valley below.

**Quick 1 hour Falls and Vistas** – A quick and easy sunset is at [Mitchells Ridge](#) that provides easy views across Victoria Pass and valley below

**Best Iconic Shot** – For me a sunset shot from Hornes Point into the rural valley below from the rugged rocks above sums up the photo ops here

**Other shots worth considering** – Sunset rocks are an easy sunset, the drive out to Victoria Falls LO is worth it midday or sunrise,



Ferris Cave on the Mount Piddington loop walk

## Zone 7 – Bells Line of Road and Environs



Walls lookout at sunset into the Grose Valley

**Best 1-3 hour Photographic Trail.** As this road is an alternative route across the mountains from the Great Western Highway the routes here tend to be out and back along the same track to the north edge of the Grose Valley. Two possible ones to join up are [Rigby Hill](#) and [Walls Lookout](#), both fantastic sunset locations but easy walks at an hour each. These provide unique views from steep cliffs into the upper arm of the Grose Valley, almost opposite Perry's Lookdown. Another favourite here is the Mount Banks loop, although I prefer the up and back down as the route around the back is mostly firetrail in trees.

**Quick 1 hour Falls and Vistas** - Another quick vista from this road is the viewpoints [De Fours](#) and Wynnes in Mount Wilson along with side trips into the town with lots of evergreen and flowering plants all around as well as a very cute church and main street.

**Best Iconic Shot** - For me Mount Banks one of the highest peaks in the area offers stunning rugged vistas on the way up to the top especially at sundown.



**Other shots worth considering** – For the adventurous very worthwhile doing the Pierces Pass route down into the Grose and the Gum Tree forest areas, camping at the bottom. Again valley views not great but forests provide fantastic up shots. [Mount Tomah gardens](#) has a few great vistas but provides more intimate garden setting shots. There are a few side routes off the Darling Causeway (that joins the two big mountain roads) and the routes into Hartley or down into the head of the Grose Valley are unique... and more



View from Mount Banks back into the Grose Valley

## Surrounding Areas



A wonderful European like landscape near Hampton on the Oberon plateau

The above really only scratches the surface and certainly has a lot more detail than I originally intended. But the other general areas to consider exploring in the region include

The lower and mid mountains from Penrith all the way to Woodford have plenty of vistas, trails and waterfalls too

Lithgow with its magnificent highest view in the mountains at [Hassans Walls](#), Vale of Clywd or more hidden low views of the Lost City,

the Ben Bullen Forest and [Gardens of Stone](#) area with relatively unexplored amazing rocks and hidden valleys

the Capertee Valley (worlds widest) featuring [Pantoneys Crown](#) and wild west drive to [Glen Davis](#).

Mount York views and the rural settings of Mount Kanimbla and Hartley, Little Hartley are fantastic on misty mornings and balmy sunsets

[Wolgan Valley](#) with its steep walls and very rural drive to Glen Nevis,

Jenolan Caves area has more than the caves with great nearby valley walks and steep vista

views in and out of the deep valley it is set in

[Kanangra Boyd NP](#) – especially the 30km dirt drive to Kanangra Walls and a great 1 hour walk out onto the ridge on the right with some of the best views around Bells, Mount Tomah, [Mount Wilson](#) and other towns on the Bells line of Road.  
many more



A Capertee Valley sunset near Glen Davis

## How to Get Here



The amazing Pantoneys Crown in the Capertee Valley

**Car** – As a photographer a car is the most useful of course and the drive from Sydney CBD is around 90 minutes with no hold ups. The driving time between each of the zones (towns) above takes about 5–8 minutes but remember you are often going 2km across the Great Western road to get to various lookouts or start points. The drive can go via Penrith and up the Great Western to the Upper Mountain towns or around via Richmond and the Bells Line of Rd towards the furthest town of Mount Victoria, and work your way back if you like to do a big loop.

**Train** – Each town has its own train station and it can take around 1.5 – 2 hours from Sydney to get to say the middle zone of Katoomba. Once at the station if you are on foot then a tourist loop bus or taxi will get you out to the lookouts which may be about 2–4km away. Consider though getting a cab at a remote lookout area after sundown as the best return option to the train.

**Tour/shuttle** – quite a few photographers I speak to on the trails book a tour then jump ship and do their own itinerary. A tour can be as little as \$50 and this will get you up into the area and back again (if you have a good relationship with the guide!) or there are less complicated shuttles from major hotels in



the city to get you to the main tourist area of Echo Point. From there it is only 15–20 minutes to any of the zones above.



A heavenly mist visible from an easy Princes Rock lookout at Wentworth Falls

## Where to Stay

Will add to this as there are plenty of sites that cover it. But you can stay at the higher end hotels like [Lilianfels](#) or [Hydro Majestic](#) (about to come on line) right down to camping in the wild.

There are fabulous nature cabins, B&Bs, lodges, motels to cover any budget and rarely to they all get full, so a lot will do walk in rates (obviously not XMas or Easter etc). A list of ones I recommend to photographers because they are close to sunrise viewpoints especially will be added below soon:

Posted in garys photo blog | 2 comments | edit

[← Spring](#)

## 2 comments on “A Landscape Photographers Guide to Visiting the Blue Mountains, Australia”



**Caro** says:  
[September 1, 2014 at 10:28 pm \(Edit\)](#)

Wow, thanks Gary. Incredibly generous of you and very inspiring.

[REPLY](#)



**Gary Hayes** says:  
[September 3, 2014 at 4:38 am \(Edit\)](#)

No worries – hope you are able to get up here and do some shoots!

[REPLY](#)

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