

# Photographing the Pennsylvania Coal Region from the Air



I have always been fascinated with looking at the ground from airplanes. Whenever I take a commercial flight, I'm sure to book a window seat, not over the wing, if possible. One of the most interesting flights that I remember was in 1984, flying over the Taurus Mountains of Turkey in mid-winter, over seemingly endless, treeless, winding, snow covered valleys and peaks. I was fascinated by this strange and bleak topography. From the day that I took my first ultralight flying lesson at Green Landings, in Hedgesville WV, I was in awe of the gorgeous scenery, from the Appalachian ridges running in nearly parallel lines from southwest to northeast, to the tranquil upper Shenandoah River meandering through the countryside. Having studied photography in the early 80's in college in Vermont, it was only natural that I wanted to capture the beauty and complexity of the aerial landscape as soon as I was

venturing out for short flights in my first plane, Bluebird, my Quicksilver MX. Although the countryside around my home base of Shoestring Airport (0P2) is, for the most part, all gorgeous from the air, I began to seek out the most unusual and complex landforms, and soon was photographing places like quarries, landfills, and junkyards, looking for patterns, colors, textures and shapes that, together, appeared more as abstract compositions than simply photographs representing a subject in its basic form.

I can't remember why I made my first flight to the Coal Region, in the fall of 2008; perhaps it was just someplace to fly to where I hadn't been. My first exhibition of aerial photographs in Baltimore that summer had only fueled my desire to explore new landscapes from the air, and moving up to my first digital SLR camera, the Nikon D300, gave me a powerful tool

for capturing the lighting and detail that I wanted in order to make my photographs as visually striking as possible. With camera in hand, I set out for Hazleton in my Rans SXL-12 on a crisp, cool day. As soon as I crossed the mountain ridge north of Schuylkill Haven, I realized that I had discovered a strange and uniquely fascinating area: the Pennsylvania Coal Region, the largest deposit of high-grade anthracite in the western hemisphere.

The entire area is a patchwork of bizarre, disfigured, and scarred earth; deep coal pits and ridges of tailings miles in length and hundreds of feet high; vast strip-mines lined by nearly vertical walls



Hazleton, PA





Drag Lines Near Nanticoke, PA

the exposed seams, are on a scale that is almost unbelievable, with bases nearly the size of 4-story office buildings, and hoists towering several hundred feet into the air, can fit several cars in their enormous buckets. Scattered throughout the landscape, one finds the processing facilities, the sorting areas and the gigantic "breakers," also hundreds of feet high, with conveyors emanating like the spindly arms of a spider, crushing the coal to be shipped out. And to move the coal from its origin to its destination, roads, canals, railroads and rail-depots snake and meander through the valleys.

Interspersed among this strange and twisted

of shale and granite looking more like moonscapes than the familiar Earth we know; fields of gray coal tailings covering tens of square miles, some with the barest of vegetation clinging to the barren land, some older areas where sparse forests have managed to take hold, and others where no life appeared to exist at all. Here and there, the "bony piles," mountains of low-grade coal and waste coal, heaped hundreds of feet high like grey-black dunes, weathered by wind and erosion. And everywhere, amidst all of this, you can see digging and earth-moving machinery working away. The "drag-lines," enormous cranes used to dig out the pure coal from

Centralia, PA

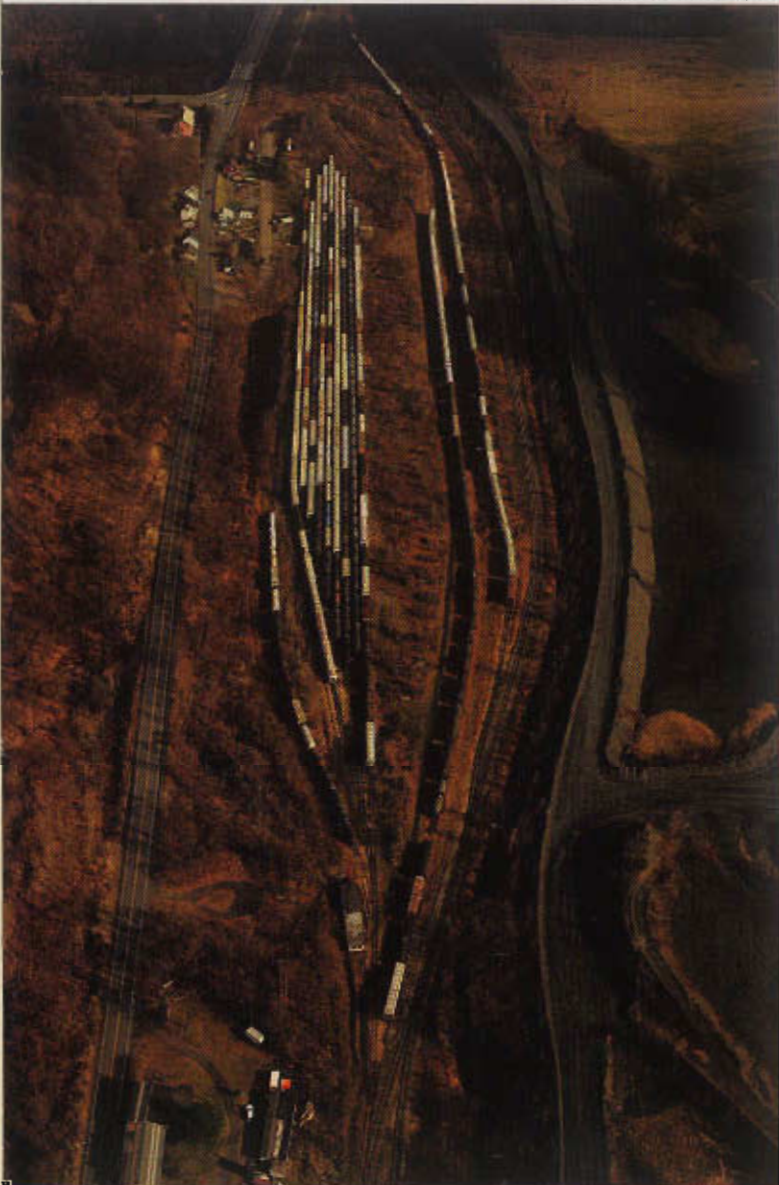




landscape lie the coal towns: Pottsville, Shamokin, Hazleton, Carbondale, Coaldale, Shenandoah, and the ghostly and nearly-deserted town of Centralia: once a community of 3000 and now reduced to a maze of roads and empty lots, with less than 10 residents remaining. A fire was started intentionally in a landfill in 1962 and quickly spread into the coal seams and underground mines, which has been burning to this day. It caused the main highway leading into town to heave and crack irreparably, and opened up holes in the earth spewing carbon monoxide and smoke into the air, driving nearly all of the residents to leave the town. Finally, the federal government bought up all of the property, dissolving even the zip code for Centralia and incorporating what remained into neighboring Ashland.

The Coal Region is an area nearly 500 square miles with a rich yet troubled history. Nearly 50,000 miners have died there digging the coal from the earth. Coal barons have made bil-

Railroad Yard Near Gilberton, PA



Abandoned Strip Mine Near Shenandoah, PA

lions of dollars in riches, while, for decades, miners worked in the most unbearable of conditions and lived in poverty. Black lung disease claimed the lives of many miners, and in the early 1900's, "breaker boys" as young as 10 worked their bloodied hands sorting the coal as it passed by on conveyors. Yet immigrants continued to arrive from all over the world to work and settle in the area, giving it a rich and varied ethnic and cultural history.

Today, the Coal Region continues to produce the largest supply of Anthracite in the US, but amidst the backdrop of increasing environmental regulations, concern has increased about the effect of coal-burning on air quality and global warming, and new technologies for producing cleaner and more efficient energies have emerged.





Coal Ridge Forrest

But in addition, I wish to know more about the history, the geography, the technology, and the culture, that makes up the Coal Region, and present it in a way that informs and adds to people's understanding of it. Perhaps, one day, these images may end up on a gallery wall, or in a book of aerial photographs and stories about the Region... that is to yet be seen. But for now, I continue to strive to make the long journeys in my slow airplane to learn more, to see more, to seek to understand the complexity of the Pennsylvania Coal Region, and to bring it back so that others might share in the fascination that I have for this compelling and distinctive topography.

Anthracite Seam Near Pottsville, PA

Flying over and photographing the Coal Region in a very light plane is itself very challenging. Even on relatively calm days, the winds in the valleys can be gusty and unpredictable. The landscape redefines "hostile terrain", where, for miles, very few places for a safe landing exist. Many areas are so rugged and remote that getting to them by land would be complex and difficult. There are many vertical hazards to beware of, like the row of dozens of wind-turbine generators lining the ridge south of Hazleton, whose blades tower hundreds of feet into the air. Airstrips are few and far-between. Photographing from an aircraft in these conditions, let alone flying in them, requires a great deal of concentration, and weighing out the risks versus the benefits. Having the benefit of the reliable HKS 700E 4-stroke engine on the S-12 gives added confidence, but is no guarantee that an engine-out could not occur at any time. But then, flying is always taking a risk, and sometimes we need to take risks to realize what we truly aspire to achieve.



As I continue to explore and photograph the Coal Region, I do so with several intentions. First, and foremost, it is to capture, through my camera, the fascination that I have for this strangely beautiful, yet also harsh and sometimes ugly and disfigured landscape, and convey it in images that inspire the viewer through the arrangements of the composition, the lighting, the forms and textures, the unique colors, as would a painter applying pigments to a canvas.

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