



Robert Schuffert Studios

Huntsville, Alabama 35803

www.SchuffertStudios.com

(256) 881-1354

Issue 11, May, 2008

Schuffert's Strides

Newsletter

May, 2008

Follow along with Robert Schuffert on his recent photographic expeditions



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Hot Air Balloon Festival - 2008



Alabama Jubilee - Decatur Alabama Hot Air Balloon Festival

Saturday morning May 24th, I arrived at Point Mallard Park at 6 am, making sure to have time to find a parking space and walk the distance to the balloon launch area. I wanted to be on the same side of the balloons as the rising sun so it would better illuminate the colorful fabrics. This required a longer walk since I parked in a grass area on the west side near the water park. The Hound and Hare Balloon Race was scheduled to begin at 6:30 am, and I had plenty of time to get into position and ready to photograph balloon inflation and launch. The skies were covered with heavy broken clouds, but the sun would frequently peek through. When the sun did break through, the remaining cloudy skies helped to disperse the light, brightening the darker side of the balloons. It turned out to be a great day for photographs, although I did have trouble with white balance settings and had to correct for this later.



After the pilot's briefing, one balloon launches early to set up the target for the race. This balloon travels downwind, finds an appropriate field several miles away, lands and positions two wide ribbons on the ground in the shape of a large "X". The objective of the Hound and Hare race is for the other balloonists to follow this path as closely as possible, then drop a bean bag from the air nearest that X. The contestant getting closest to the center wins, with the prize being a new car or truck; quite an incentive!

Once the balloons begin inflating, Point Mallard comes alive. Visitors are allowed to mingle among them as they please. During this time, different angles can fill an image frame with colorful balloons in all stages of inflation. With 55 to 65 balloons in the field, it is hard not to get at least one or two good photographs. Since the cloudy sky was so bright, I tried to fill the frame with balloons as much as possible. This strategy not only reduces the high contrast between bright and dark areas of the frame, but it also adds more interest and color to the image. Fabric on some balloons seems to become iridescent with color when sunlight strikes directly.

For about thirty minutes, balloons begin on their sides filling with air from large fans. Then pilots use the burners to heat air inside, causing them to float upright. Ready for launch, pilots heat the air even more and the balloon gently lifts off the ground and floats away, as spectators



chase beneath them photographing from below.

I always like to follow the balloons and capture images of a multitude of them in the same small area at the target site; the sky is literally filled with them. Finishing the race, team members arrive to help deflate and pack the equipment for their next flight.

Alabama Jubilee is an annual Memorial Day Weekend event at Point Mallard Park in Decatur, AL and includes additional hot air balloon launches and other events such as tractor and antique car shows and fireworks.





A pilot keeps the balloon warm prior to launch.



At the landing site, balloons gather in a field for deflation after the Hound & Hare Race. The distant balloons floating below center are nearing the target area.