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THE RPS
ROYAL PHOTOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

THE IRIS

MAGAZINE OF THE NATURE GROUP OF THE RPS

Issue No. 147 / Winter 2023/24

RPS Nature Group Summer Residential Trip - Bempton Cliffs and Cober Hill Hotel

Dates: Wednesday 5th – Monday 10th June 2024

During this two-centre nature photography trip, we will be staying at Cameron Court Guest House in Flamborough and Cober Hill in Cloughton.

Wed 5th and Thurs 6th June at Cameron Court. Includes B&B and packed lunches.

Fri 7th - Mon 10th June at Cober Hill. Includes the same as above, plus 3 Course evening meals.

A spectacular six-hour diving Gannet photography boat trip, led by Steve Race of Yorkshire Coast Nature, is planned for the morning of Thursday 6 June.

There will also be opportunities to photograph a variety of flora and fauna with both your macro and telephoto lenses.

Prices: **Cameron Court B&B** – either a twin/double room occupancy £92 per person.
If you are in a shared outside cabin, the price is £102 per person.
Single room occupancy is £132 per person, but this option is limited. Please speak to James Foad for further details.

T**he Cober Hill Hotel** stay is £437

Diving Gannet Boat Trip is £135 (In the event that the diving gannet trip is cancelled by Yorkshire Coast Nature due to poor sailing conditions, a full refund will be given).

Eleven spaces are available, and anyone on the waiting list from last year will be prioritised, but will still need to contact James Foad to book their place.

Deposit: A deposit £248.50 is required to secure your place upon booking. This deposit is non returnable unless there is someone on the waiting list who is able to take your place.

It is strongly advised that you take out travel insurance in case you need to cancel due to unforeseen circumstances

Further Details and Booking: Please call: James Foad LRPS on 07834 810430 before emailing.
You may also email James, jamesfoadlrps@proton.me - but for a quick response, a phone call is the preferred option.

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Publication information

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Winter	Copy deadline 31st August Published early November.

All contributions should be submitted to the Editor. Items covering any aspect of nature photography and/or natural history are welcomed, including reviews on equipment and relevant books. The Editor can be contacted at: natureeditor@rps.org

- Copy should be sent as .txt or .doc files by email. Please do not send typed or hand written copy.
- Digitally captured photographic images to support your article (whether vertical or horizontal) supplied as 8bit tif or jpg files, 216mm (2555 pixels) on the longest edge, at 300 pixels per inch, quality 12, file size approx 5 MB. Please send images via WeTransfer.
- If your image is selected for use on the cover of The Iris you will be asked to supply a larger file.
- No payment will be made for material used.

The views expressed within The Iris are solely those of the contributor and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Nature Group Committee or the Editor.

Distribution:
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Design & layout: by Dawn Osborn FRPS

Contents

Cover Image:
Brown Hare
by David Wilkinson ARPS

Committee

Officers

Chairman: Duncan Locke ARPS
Worcester.
E-mail: duncan.locke@btinternet.com

Hon. Secretary: Greg Lovett ARPS
Saltford, Bristol
E-mail: greg.lovett@sheol.co.uk

Hon. Treasurer: Peter Ward
Ashbourne, Derbyshire
Email: peter.ward448@btinternet.com

Committee Members

Vice Chairman: Position to be filled

Editor of The Iris: Dawn Osborn FRPS
Breckland, Norfolk,
Email: natureeditor@rps.org

Exhibition Secretary: Ralph Snook ARPS
Bristol
E-mail: rpsngexsec@btinternet.com

Membership Secretary: Christine Holt LRPS
Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire
E-mail: chrisandged93@gmail.com

Programme Co-ordinator: Ann Miles FRPS
Cambridge,
E-mail: annmiles70@gmail.com

Webmaster: Ralph Snook ARPS
Bristol
E-mail: natureweb@rps.org

Residential Weekend Advisor: James Foad LRPS
Ramsgate, Kent
email: jamesfoadlrps@proton.me

Facebook/Competition Admin: Position to be filled

Ex officio Committee members

NG Immediate Past Chairman: David O'Neill LRPS
Reading, Berkshire
Email: david.oneill_nh@outlook.com

President of the Society;
Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Society;
Hon. Treasurer of the Society;
Chair of the Natural History Distinctions Panel

Nature Group Exhibitions

CDs/DVDs of Nature Group Exhibitions are available for purchase by camera clubs/photographic societies for use in their programme.
Please contact the Exhibition Secretary, details above.

Editorial

Its hard to believe I began my role as Editor of The Iris twenty years ago. Yes, twenty years. My first solo issue was the Winter Issue 2003 - Issue No. 87.

Early in 2015 I expressed my desire to 'retire'. A suitable replacement was found and we hoped that he would take over as Editor later that year - unfortunately that did not happen.

By the AGM of 2017 we had once again found a replacement but unfortunately, after only one issue, he was forced to resign due to ill health. I had already been persuaded to produce eNews, the first issue of which was emailed to members in September 2017, and for a short time I was Editor of both eNews and The Iris.
In Summer 2018 I finally handed over the responsibility for The Iris to a new Editor. I produced 18 editions of eNews between September 2017 and September 2021, when unfortunately, The Iris suddenly found itself in need of an Editor once more following a resignation.
I took back responsibility for The Iris but could not fill both roles and consequently eNews came to an end.

Two years on and this issue of The Iris will be the seventh A4 issue since my return as Editor. I must say a big "Thank you" to all those members who both supported The Iris with their contributions and their compliments - it has all been very much appreciated.

This brings me to the future. It is my intention to step down at the AGM in 2025 - albeit 10 years later than I initially intended. I can't go on forever. I've Edited 51 issues covering a span of 20 years and very much enjoyed my time as your Editor, but it really is time that someone else picked up the Editor's proverbial pencil.

There must be another member out there who has at least as much experience as myself with QuarkXpress (or Adobe InDesign) and has time available. If you can help, please get in touch - soon!

Anyway, while I am still Editor, I thought I would make a few contributions of my own to The Iris. This issue includes the first in a series about some of the species found The Falklands - a place I love and have visited 14 times during the last 26 years - in this issue it's all about King Penguins. I hope you enjoy!

Dawn Osborn FRPS - Editor

From the Chair

I am writing this in early September just as a week of wonderfully warm weather is coming to an end. The summer weather in the UK this year has been very mixed. I run a moth trap in my garden, usually about twice a week during the summer months. By early June I was convinced that there was something wrong with the trap as there were so few moths being attracted. Thankfully this righted itself as the summer progressed and the recent warm weather produced plenty of moths for me to identify and photograph. It is also encouraging that the UK's Big Butterfly Count has shown an increase in butterfly numbers compared to the last four years.

Websites – Bad and Very Good News:
The Bad News is that there have not been any signs of improvement in the RPS website over recent months. Ann Miles has faced increasing difficulties in putting events on the website and this coupled with other issues with the RPS website has resulted in some Good News. Very Good News. By the time that you read this you should be aware that we have a completely new Nature Group website – also advertised elsewhere in this issue.

Apart from providing somewhere for Ann to advertise forthcoming Events and report on past ones, our new website has provided an excellent platform for two facilities that we have been keen to provide for Group Members for some time:

- Monthly Competition and
- Image Critique Forum.

I very much hope that the Monthly Competition will be successfully established – we plan to start in October. Please do enter – there will be prizes!

Do have a look at our new website, where you will see that apart from future Field Meetings, we also have a programme of winter Zoom talks advertised.

Field Meetings and Residential Weekend:
Ann Miles has run an excellent programme of Field Meetings this year and with more still to come. I have attended as many as I could and also ran some myself. For me the highlights have been chasing Great Bustards on Salisbury Plain, Bonsai Bank in Kent, especially as it didn't pour with rain as in 2022, and photographing White Faced Darters on Whixall Moss in Shropshire frustratingly (for the other participants) on the day before the Field Meeting!

In mid-June, 18 Group Members including myself, attended James Foad's excellent Residential Weekend in South West Wales. The weather was superb and we had five days of great photography including a day on Skomer Island. The weekend provided a great variety of photography from the seabirds of Skomer to the funnel web spiders at Kenfig near Port Talbot, which is an excellent nature reserve if you have not visited it.

Distinctions:
I would like to thank Ann Miles for organising a very successful Distinction Advisory Day on Zoom on the 19th August. Mick Durham, Ann and Andrew McCarthy provided advice on eleven prospective ARPS panels. Hopefully we will be seeing some if not all of them as successful panels in future issues of The Iris.

Congratulations to David Wilkinson, who achieved ARPS earlier in the year and whose panel is featured elsewhere in this issue.

Annual Exhibition:
Elsewhere in this issue of The Iris you will find information on how to enter the Group's Annual Exhibition. Please do enter (no AI generated images please!). As you probably know, the accepted prints will be shown at our Spring Meeting in Smethwick on – date for your diary – Saturday 20th April 2024. It would be good for them to be seen by a wider audience – suggestions on how we can achieve this are welcomed.

Going Forward:
I'll return to the question posed at the end of my previous 'From the Chair': What do YOU want from YOUR Group?

We want to enable you to develop your skills and get greater enjoyment from your Nature Photography by participating in a programme of Meetings and Workshops. At present we run very few Workshops, but we are hoping to change this. Would you welcome Workshops on getting the best out of the increasingly complex technology in your camera? Or photography of particular subject matter?

We are planning to hold a Zoom talk on presentation of images and our new website will provide an Image Critique Forum. But what would help You?

I, ended my previous 'From the Chair' on the subject of Artificial Intelligence. I plan to attend the RPS two day Conference on this in early October, which should help to clarify the Group's position on this. Watch this space!

Enjoy your Nature Photography.

Duncan Locke ARPS

Wildlife Photography
Codes of Practice, Ethics and the Law

by Mick Durham FRPS

Chair of the RPS Natural History Distinctions Team.

One would hope that all wildlife photographers, and especially those who are members of the RPS Nature Group, adhere to the various codes of conduct with respect to the subjects they are working with.
The Nature Group has produced a Code of Practice which can be viewed at:
https://rps.org/media/1xcnsuga/the-nature-photographers-code-of-practice.pdf.
This can be summed up as follows –

> ***The welfare of the subject is more important than the photograph and includes disturbance, damage to the environment, inappropriate baiting including the use of live prey and the removal of a subject to a more photogenic location where this causes stress or damage.***

The Code of Practice has no legal status but under The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 there are laws governing the protection of a great many bird, mammal, plant, insect and amphibian species. Photographers of wildlife need to not only know these laws but to be able to work within their confines and this means knowledge of the subject, a high level of fieldcraft and good photographic skills.

So how does all this work? Many birds that are rare or sensitive breeders are protected under the act and are given Schedule I classification. Included in the list are many raptors, Barn Owls, Kingfishers, Red-throated Divers to name a few. It is an offence to recklessly or intentionally disturb a Schedule 1 species while it is building a nest, or is in, on or near a nest containing eggs or young; or to disturb the dependant young of such a species.

But it's not that simple. Although the law is written in black and white its interpretation is a lot greyer.
What constitutes *"deliberate disturbance"* and what is *"at or near a nest"*? Wandering along a river bank past the nest of a kingfisher, without realising that the nest is there would not be considered illegal. Setting up near a nest with the intention of carrying out photography however would be deemed intentionally disturbing that bird. Some birds would only be disturbed if you went right up to the nest, a Golden Eagle on the other hand might be disturbed if you went within several hundred meters of its nest.

Nature doesn't make it easy either. There are many recorded instances of Schedule 1 birds nesting in very public places where they get constant disturbance – but because they have chosen the site they get on with their breeding without any signs of problems.

Many years ago when I worked in North Wales I visited the RSPB Reserve at South Stack. Near the visitors centre, on a cliff ledge in full view of the path there was a Peregrine nest. The adults had produced two chicks and the day I was there, a great many people enjoyed watching them through binoculars and telescopes. I set up my camera and tripod with the intention of watching and photographing the bird and a very zealous warden told me I couldn't take pictures because it was against the law. He was of course correct but clearly in this instance the law made no sense. The Peregrines were not being disturbed by the birdwatchers and they wouldn't have been disturbed by my photography.
I think these days a little more common sense is employed.

Many photographers understand that some birds are protected but are unaware that similar protection is afforded to other species. I am sure that a great many photographers who visit Mull to photograph Otters would be surprised to learn that if they are working near a holt or lie-up without a licence they are breaking the law.

So what about licencing.
It is possible to get permission to photograph protected species by applying for a licence. There are four agencies covering the UK and they are responsible for issuing the relevant licences.

These are:
- English Nature,
- NatureScot,
- Natural Resources Wales and
- Dept of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Obtaining a licence is not a straightforward process. Obviously they are not issued automatically. You have to submit evidence that you have the skills to work with sensitive subjects and you need references from licence holders who know you and your photography.

These days 'at the nest' photography is not very popular but you still need a licence if you want to work close to a nest. I have photographed Merlin, Peregrine, Barn owl and Kingfisher in this way. Each have required a slightly different approach. For the Merlin I needed to be shown into the hide by a friend (he and I took it in turns to be photographer and walker in!!), for the Peregrine I had to be in the hide in the dark and for the barn owl, before it got dark!! The latest project – the Kingfisher, involved building a platform in the river to sit the hide on.

Over the last few years my friend and I have worked at the same site without causing any problems for the birds. In fact, they would often appear before I had chance to get settled in the hide and set my camera up. This year they successfully reared three broods – a sure sign that all was well.

Protected by law or otherwise – it is up to us to work in such a way that we do no harm to our subjects.

Remember

> ***"The welfare of the subject is more important than the photograph***


Barn Owl hide


Kingfisher hide


Peregrine hide


Approaching the Merlin hide

Why the ARPS?

by David Wilkinson

To answer this question, I must start with an explanation behind my decision to apply to become an Associate of the Royal Photographic Society. My journey started in the Winter of 2013 - and concluded almost 10 years later as I sat behind the panel of assessors listening attentively to every word and gesture they made, a process taking 15 minutes, feeling more like hours!

Having come from a farming background I was accustomed to seeing wildlife at close quarters. However, not ever having owned a camera, none of my sightings had bee documented. With retirement on the horizon I made the decision to pursue a hobby in photography. I joined Devizes Photography Club (formerly Devizes Camera Club). Next I purchased a second-hand camera and a couple of lenses from a club member, on the proviso that he would teach me how to use it. Luckily for me, he accepted the challenge and my journey began.

Natural history was and will always be my first choice, be it an insect or large mammal, their daily life choices can often be the difference between life and death. Their reactions to daily life are quite extraordinary, I find this intriguing, and, in some way, it was an ambition of mine to document it pictorially when possible.

As time passed I wanted a role model, something, or someone I could aspire to. Amongst others I viewed many Associate panels of Natural History on the RPS site and found the challenge I needed. If I could achieve anywhere near that standard, I would be very pleased .

So firstly, I had to master my newly acquired D300, maintaining a focus or catching the subject in the frame seemed an impossibility, to say it was a steep learning curve would be an understatement of the task I had taken on. The following 3 years were practice, practice and more practice, any thoughts of distinctions were at the bottom of my list to do.


01


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08

In Autumn of 2018 I retired, my wife and I converted the bottom half of the garden to a wildlife area and built a pond for wildlife, knowing if we had a pond the wildlife would come. Within weeks we had several Common Newts living in the pond, dragon flies visiting, offering wonderful photographic challenges. Lock down was particularly beneficial to my photographic journey, sitting by the pond daily my photographic abilities improved dramatically,. Thoughts of ARPS returned - was I now ready for the challenge.

Showing my work to two Fellows of the RPS, they collectively agreed I was nowhere near the standard required, suggesting I should consider applying for the Licentiate Distinction as a first step. Although initially disheartened, further discussion confirmed what was blindingly obvious. My work wasn't up to standard.

Working towards an LRPS was very much out of my comfort zone and I found this challenging. Landscapes, waterscapes and buildings were all new to me. Having decided my panel layout and experiencing a helpful one 2 one with an Advisor I applied and failed. I did however receive an invitation to reapply, as many of the prints were considered acceptable including dragonflies in-flight, birds and mammals, giving me hope for my future attempts at a further distinction. Following excellent advice and guidance from Dave Jordon FRPS at my second attempt I was awarded a Licentiate Distinction.

Hindsight is a wonderful thing. For an inexperienced photographer like me, I would recommend starting with the "L". Learning so much that I initially thought was irrelevant has without doubt improved my photography.

Turning my focus once again to a panel of 15 prints, working towards an Associate Distinction, my first and only question was, which subject would I really enjoy working with.

Having many Dragonfly images and an active pond to work with, it was a major contender. However learning good field craft has stood me in good stead. If I had the choice between sitting by the pond or crawling along a ditch, the latter would win. The challenge of being in the right place at the right time without disturbing my subject has always been my number one objective.

Initially I chose not to use commercial hides however there are times when it would be impossible to photograph some subjects without them, the image of the pair of Tawny Owls would be a good example. Whenever possible I would create my own hide - images of the Fox, Greater Spotted Woodpeckers and Siskins are other examples. My challenge is always to be close enough to fill the frame but sometimes this just isn't possible.


03


04


06


07

09

10

11

12

With my quarry type chosen, I decided to photograph only native species, choosing iconic subjects when possible. When sharing my pictures, I like my audience to be able to recognise and appreciate the subject without further discussion from me.

Living in the Southwest I've had many photographic opportunities however I've also travelled around the United Kingdom and images are from my home and surrounding areas, the Southeast, Scotland and the Inner Hebrides.

By studying my individual subjects at length, I have a greater insight into anticipating possible reactions in certain situations. This is not a fail-safe as I often mis-judge a situation, however sometimes I do read a situation well and achieve the image I had hoped for. For example, Male Greater Spotted Woodpecker feeding the juvenile. The process started when I noticed the male taking food regularly from a setup I had created in my garden, in my opinion this was to feed the female or young. This was followed by the female coming into the setup, taking a beak full of food, heading off in the same direction as the male. With both adults active it was only a question of time before the fledgling appeared. Having set my feeding station as seen in the image, my hope was they would feed the youngster across the two limbs, they obliged and I obtained the image.

Another challenging shot was that of the Wild Foxes living in a quarry near to my house. They were on my list from the very beginning of my journey. I knew where they lived and denned, however, to physically photograph them appeared to be an impossibility. Having tried for three years without success I had almost given up when my trail cam picked one up in my garden! From that night to this, I put out a small amount of food to encourage them into the garden. It took a further 12 months to bring them close enough to the house to photograph them. Initially I sat in the summer house, then the greenhouse. They instinctively knew of my presence. Now I photograph them through the open window - much easier. However I always wait for a minimum of two hours before they appear, on many occasions they don't.

In pursuit of wildlife imagery, I have spent many weeks in and around the Inner Hebrides photographing and observing Eurasian Otters they became another of my target species. I had many images to choose from. Ideally, I didn't want to crop heavily, but I wanted to demonstrate behaviour. The Eurasian Otter is a good example of the importance of a general understanding of their routines, habitat and feeding patterns, they

have good eyesight with excellent hearing and a very good sense of smell, these attributes help to keep them away from many dangers which include inexperienced photographers. Having spent many hours sitting in kelp, usually in heavy rain facing a bitter wind trying to anticipate their next move, I do feel I have a limited understanding of their difficult lives. It appears they have an excellent food source however they are subject to predation, usually in the form of mankind and motor vehicles - many are run over as they cross the narrow Island roads as they head for fresh water and their holts.

During this period of my photographic journey, observing and photographing our native species, I have realised how vulnerable most are, from larger mammals to smaller insects, many are only one meal away from starvation. Changing climatic conditions can adversely affect so much of our wildlife and wildlife habitats. Owls are by nature nocturnal, so often we observe them feeding in daylight as a necessity, due in part to wetter and windier conditions. Voles are no longer plentiful, being a major food source for many birds. Bird flu has decimated many colonies of breeding birds and Gannet colonies have been severely affected.

Some species have benefitted from our modern way of life, Urban Foxes are an excellent example of how animals can adapt, however the Wild Fox has suffered severely, either by man and hunting, accidents with

13

vehicles or starving to death. Interestingly most of their food source is derived from worms and ground insects. Having studied my local family I have empathy with their struggle to survive.

Brown Hares are beginning to increase in numbers, certainly in Wiltshire and other counties, due to farmers and farming practises showing a measured and considerate view to the wildlife within their farming system. Sadly this is not always the case throughout the UK, however it is a start.

My journey has been helped by so many. Devizes Photography Club has been instrumental in my progress, from the most experienced members who wear their Fellowship badges with great pride to the man who sold

14

me my first camera, Derek Mason, who became my mentor and very good friend. The RPS who set the bar very high, giving me a challenge I thought I would never achieve. Mick Durham FRPS who patiently sat through our one2one session answering umpteen questions afterwards. Finally, to those who will remain anonymous, but who will know who they are. Having shared my original panel over coffee one morning they uttered these immortal words to me, "David, you can do a lot better". I went away feeling somewhat dejected. However, reflecting on their comments and suggestions, I reviewed my images and reworked them accordingly. To you I say "thank you for travelling with me on this journey, all the way until my eventual submission", which, I am so pleased to say, was accepted.

Statement of Intent.

Wildlife in the United Kingdom can be found just about everywhere.

I aim to share the passion and enjoyment I have experienced when photographing some of our iconic species at close range. By using Fieldcraft, I have learnt how to avoid disturbing my subjects as they go about their daily tasks.

I have chosen to include both habitat and portrait images and have tried to demonstrate the diversity of the individual subjects and species.

With a couple of exceptions, the species within the panel can be viewed, with careful observation, by any one of us - some quite literally at the bottom of our gardens.

David Wilkinson

ARPS Hanging Plan


01


02


03


04


05


06


07


08


09


10


11


12


13


14


15

Miniature Gardens

by Edmund Fellowes FRPS

In late January 2022 while walking in Mabie Forest Dumfries, I noticed a row of decaying fence posts. These were from a time 50 or so years ago when the currently forested land had been a field for sheep.

Many of the posts had rotted away at the base and were held upright by the wires of the old fence. They were covered in a mix of mosses and lichens and at the top of several there was a natural miniature garden. All were unique.

The weather was overcast and dull, but the light was very even with no shadows. Time for an experiment.

Using my Olympus E-M1 Mk3 fitted with 12-40 Olympus lens mounted on a focussing rail attached to a sturdy tripod, I set my lens' focal length to 35mm and the camera to 1/50th sec at f/4.5 and ISO 200. Then, moving the camera on the rail by 1 mm at a time and working from back to front, I took about 60 images in RAW. The unvarying Scottish winter light was in fact a great help as no reflectors or extra lights were required. After a few attempts I found that it was best to start at the back as this allowed me to choose the size of the post in the image.

Back at home it was time to process the images using the Helicon programme, after which I put them through Photoshop to adjust the saturation, contrast and colour.

I have struggled to identify the mosses and lichens found on the posts. Perhaps there will be an expert reading this.

Nature Group Field Trips

by Ann Miles FRPS
Nature Group Programme Co-ordinator

Thanks to a growing team of organisers, we ran a large number of field trips during the first half of 2023 and have many more to come. Myself and Nick Bowman have run many events in East Anglia including the Norfolk weekend, Lakenheath, Welney, Wicken Fen, Buxton Heath, Winterton Dunes, etc. I extend my range westward to the middle strip of England to include Summer Leys, Stanwick, Sandy, Sharpenhoe etc. Our trip to see various orchids around Stamford (Lincs) with Ken Rasmussen was one of the most productive days I have taken part in. As always I am grateful to Duncan Locke who covers Southern Counties in search of butterflies and orchids as well as his own area in the Midlands such as Whixall Moss, Grafton Woods etc. Bruce Kendrick continues to extend the range with trips to the Dee Estuary and Burton Mere, while Peter Ward has guided us around Potteric Carr, Bradgate Park and Rutland Water. Alan Hartley led a group around Chartley Moss, a real gem of a site. Unfortunately two trips organised by David O'Neill to Havergate Island for hares had to be cancelled due to high winds. We had two trips to Salisbury Plain which were paying events led by Robert Hardy – we are hoping to repeat these and maybe advertise some others by professional tour leaders. Again your suggestions and comments welcome.


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If there isn't an event in your area then please suggest interesting reserves/areas that we can visit and the best times of year. Scotland, the North of England, Wales, the Southern Counties and the Southwest are poorly covered. We do have a visit to Ham Wall on the programme. Though we appreciate that the number of Members in some of these areas is small, there are Members who would join day trips as part of a planned holiday (myself included!). I have visited some great new reserves this year and value UK wildlife a lot more in consequence.

Please do consider helping out in your home region. You really don't need to be an expert in wildlife identification or cameras, just have a desire to share your favourite places for wildlife, whether plants, insects, mammals or birds. If you feel you could lead a walk with back-up from one of our team please let me know - we have found that works well. I take care of all the advertising and booking queries etc.

The images on pages 12-15 and inside back cover, represent some of the hundreds taken on the year's outings so far – reports of the field meeting can be found under News banner on the Nature Group Home Page.

Images

1 Welney Moon Set by Ann Miles FRPS
2 Black-tailed Godwit by Maggie Bullock
3 Oystercatchers by David O'Neill
4 Ringed Plover by Kevin Pigney
5 Hummingbird Hawk Moth by Neil Avery
6 Great Bustard in flight by Jeff Steady
7 Corn Bunting by Jill Dyson Orme
8 Man Orchid by Gordon Brown
9 Water Avens by Ken Rasmussen
10 Marsh Helleborine by Lesley Simpson

Images

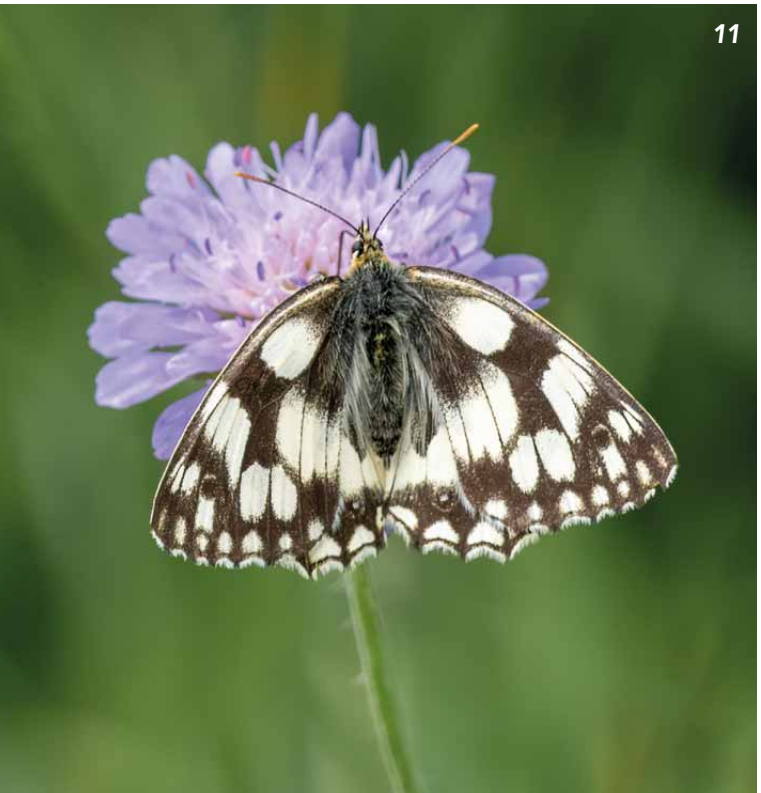
1 Grey Heron by Penny Reeves
2 Hen Harrier in flight by Sarah Kelman
3 Kingfisher by Greg Lovett
4 Swallow by Jon Mullin
5 Water Rail by John Harvey
6 Great Egret by Dave Belton
7 Orange-tip Butterfly by Peter Ward
8 Golden-bloomed Grey Longhorn Beetle by Andre Néves
9 Grasshopper by Kirkelionis
10 Silver Studded Blues mating by Lesley Simpson
11 Marbled White by David Barret
12 Duke of Burgundy by Duncan Locke


7


8


9


10


11


12

The Magic of Liuwa Plains

by Sandeep Seeripat

Viewed from the plane - a vast sprawl of grasslands intertwined with water pockets left by rain.

I had always dreamed of visiting Liuwa Plains, a remote and pristine National Park in western Zambia that encompasses 3,660 square kilometres of untouched wilderness. As a wildlife photographer, I was fascinated by the stories of its vast open landscapes, its rich birdlife, and its famous wildebeest migration. Liuwa Plains is home to the second-largest wildebeest migration in Africa after the famed Serengeti migration, making it a must-visit destination for wildlife photographers. Tens of thousands of blue wildebeest move across the plains, creating a spectacle that is both awe-inspiring and challenging to capture. The park's legendary wildebeest migration is second only in grandeur. I had seen some stunning images of Liuwa taken by Heinrich van der Berg, an award-winning wildlife photographer and author from South Africa. When I learned that he was leading a photographic tour to Liuwa in May, I didn't hesitate to sign up.

Our journey starts from OR Tambo International Airport to overnight in Lusaka, the capital of Zambia. The flight to Liuwa was in an 8-seater Cessna Caravan where weight is critical and that challenged me over which gear to bring. I banked on Heinrich's experience. I am a Canon user, and I packed two bodies and four lenses: a 500mm f/4 with a 2x converter, a 100-500mm, a 70-200mm and a 24-70mm. I also brought plenty of memory cards and an external hard drive, as I knew that the Canon R5 would fill them up quickly with its electronic shutter. The flight itself was an adventure. The view from the plane, presented a vast sprawl of grasslands intertwined with water pockets left by the rain. This was my introduction to the dramatic landscape I was about to encounter.

Upon landing at the rustic Kalabo airport, the rumbles of our small aircraft were swapped for the expertise of John, a guide whose life revolved around Liuwa's every

Wattled Cranes

nook and cranny. Our gear found its place in a Landcruiser, and soon enough, the expedition to the heart of Liuwa began. Bumping along deeply rutted dirt roads, we head toward the Time + Tide King Lewanika lodge. The Luanginga River demanded our passage via a pontoon which was a novel travel experience for me. The lodge is named after the king who proclaimed Liuwa as a royal hunting ground in the 19th century, and who entrusted its protection to the Lozi people. King Lewanika Lodge has six luxurious villas that blend in with the environment and offer stunning views of the plains.

But we were not there for the comfort of the lodge. We were there for the photography. And Liuwa did not disappoint us. Heinrich had timed our trip to coincide with the start of the dry season when the water levels were still high enough to create beautiful reflections and contrasts in the landscape, but low enough to allow us to drive across the plains and explore different areas. We spent 4 days in Liuwa, driving out every morning before sunrise and returning after sunset. Heinrich rotated us between the seating positions every day allowing various angles for viewing the game. We spent the afternoon getting tips and feedback on our shots. He also gave us presentations on topics such as composition, light, exposure, and post-processing in the evenings at the lodge.

Every year, tens of thousands of wildebeest move across Liuwa in search of fresh grass, followed by predators such as lions, hyenas, cheetahs, and wild dogs. One of the highlights of Liuwa Plains is the breathtaking display of lilies. These vibrant flowers create a picturesque scene that is perfect for capturing stunning close-up shots or wide-angle landscapes. The lilies of Liuwa Plains provide a colourful backdrop against the vast grasslands, creating a visual feast for photographers and zebras alike.

African Skimmers

Yellow-billed Storks and Spoonbill fishing

Great White Pelican

Grey Crowned Cranes

Lion 'Bon Jovi'

Lioness in long grass

Throughout the days, Liuwa reveals its magic. I frame rapid-fire images of wildebeest, zebras, and red lechwe scattering across the plains. Red-billed storks and spoonbills fill several pools, catching catfish with regularity. The park, which hosts over 300 bird species, offered countless frames—a skimmer here, a crane there, and pelicans for good measure. Back at the lodge, Heinrich reviewed our shots, helping me adjust settings to capture Liuwa's unpredictable action. The tutelage proves invaluable.

Liuwa provides photographers an opportunity to take pictures from the ground creating unique perspectives, which is a rarity in many locations. The giant pools, earlier admired from above, now teemed with life. Zebras wading, a lion's roar echoing in the distance, and wattle cranes' sudden appearance were moments that demanded precision, patience, and passion.

The subsequent days were a blur of awe and action. Early mornings painted portraits of iconic creatures like "Bon Jovi", the lion with a majestic mane. Heinrich's tips sharpened my skills, emphasizing the nuances of settings to match Liuwa's dynamism. Customizing autofocus and ISO, I seized moments otherwise lost in

Lion with Wildebeest

Blue Wildebeest

technicalities. Afternoons were serene yet bustling. The elegant dance of the African skimmers, backlit by the setting sun, was a photographer's dream. Every day was a masterclass in adaptability, from playful hyena pups to storks feasting, each frame telling a unique tale.

What made Liuwa unique was not only its wildlife, but also its landscapes. The plains were dotted with islands of trees that created interesting shapes and patterns against the sky. The water reflected the colours of the sunrises and sunsets, creating stunning mirror images. The clouds added drama and depth to the scenes. The light changed constantly throughout the day, creating different moods and atmospheres.

Through my lens, I hope to share its enchantment with the world, advocating its preservation for posterity. Every frame captured is a testament to Liuwa's timeless beauty, a world waiting to be explored and cherished

Regrettably, our photo tour nears its end. Having filled numerous memory cards with Liuwa's beauty, we board the Cessna with hundreds of photos and a profound admiration for this hidden pocket of wilderness.

Oribi

Liuwa Plains is not just a destination; it's an experience. My images aim to share Liuwa's magic so that it might be experienced, cherished and preserved for many generations to come. Gazing down as the tiny plane climbs over the park, I promise myself - I will return.

More of Sandeep's images from Liuwa on the back cover.

Zebra in a pool

Photographing Fungi – an alternative viewpoint?

by Adrian Davies

Many of the entries in the RPS Nature Group Exhibition are images of fungi – lovely clumps of photogenic Mycenas, Pholiotas or Amanitas for example. Most of these show the top and sides of the caps of the specimens, but equally interesting and photogenic are the undersides of many species, some of which can be photographed in situ, whilst others may need to be picked and photographed upside down. (Don't pick specimens unless absolutely necessary). The underside of a toadstool type fungus can help identify it – does it have gills, where the colour can be distinctive, like the spokes on a bicycle wheel, or pores, like a sponge? They can also be very beautiful with wonderful patterns, textures and shapes. A mirror will be useful to check the underside of the specimen, and possibly even to photograph it.

One of the most photogenic gilled species is the Porcelain fungus, (*Oudemansiella mucida*) bottom left. The common name alludes to the translucency of the cap, and if you can get underneath a group, possible with sunlight shining through to backlight it the effect can be stunning! Many sprout from low growing branches of Beech trees, where you can sometimes crawl underneath them. Finding a perfect specimen, in the right position for you to get underneath it, and with an uncluttered background is a challenge – I have only managed it on a couple of occasions. If you are photographing from underneath a specimen, such as the Oyster fungi shown below, a silver or silver/white reflector will be useful to add some light to the underside, giving detail in the gills.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One of the ways of identifying *Boletus* species in particular (and other species including some brackets) is the sponge like spore bearing surface consisting of long tubes through which the spores fall. These can make wonderful pattern images, such as the Oak Mazegill shown here. These are probably most effective when the subject completely fills the frame, without any surrounding material. Try to get the whole area sharp, by using a small aperture, aligning the camera so that it is parallel to the main plane of the fungus, or maybe use focus stacking if possible.

Interestingly, many bracket fungi will gradually re-orientate themselves to a horizontal position if the tree on which they are growing falls over, to ensure that the spores fall freely from the spore tubes by gravity.

Another type of spore bearing surface are spines, making them members of the Toothed Fungi (*Bankeraceae*). The spines can be very long, as with the Hericium species shown here. They can be very beautiful, and make stunning images. Most are rare in the UK and well worth searching for. Another good example is the edible Wood Hedgehog (*Hydnum repandum*), a relatively common, and much foraged species of deciduous woodland. The spines are very delicate, and the specimen will need to be handled very carefully.


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Another example is the Ear Pick Fungus (*Auriscalpium vulgare*) above. This species is small, around 2cm across and takes some finding. It grows on partially or fully buried pine cones, and has a beautiful array of spines. The specimen shown here was brought indoors and lit with a single flash grazing the surface to accentuate the texture.

A relatively recent addition to the UK fungus list is the brilliantly named Ping Pong Bat fungus (*Favolaschia claudopus*) below. The specimen shown below was on a damp twig found on the coast path near Fowey in Cornwall, and was so small that I picked it up thinking it might be a slime mould. It was around 5mm across. I needed to tilt the twig by around 40 degrees to make the cap parallel to the camera.

8

Another, very different way of looking at the underside of some fungi is with an ultraviolet (UV) light. Several species, including the Sulphur Tuft (*Hypholoma fasciculare*) fluoresce bright colours as seen in the specimen here. You will need a UV source (an LED torch emitting 365nm is good). A long exposure in a dark room will be required (I usually use around 15 – 20 seconds at f/11 at 200 ISO) and use a "light painting" technique where the torch is moved around during the exposure to cover the whole specimen. The fluorescence is probably a chemical "accident" rather than having any biological significance. This is not to be confused with bioluminescence, where some fungi, particularly in the tropics, glow in the dark.

I am constantly looking for new under-the-cap fungal subjects, and often surprised at the beautiful patterns I find.

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1 **Porcelain Fungus** (*Oudemansiella mucida*)
A lovely group found on the horizontal branch of a Beech tree about 1.5 metres from the ground.

2 This clump of **Oyster fungi** (*Pleurotus ostreatus)* was growing around 2.5 metres high on a tree trunk, and required a 105mm lens with 1.4x converter. A silver reflector was used to reflect light up into the gills.

3 ***Boletus sp***. The underside of a typical *Boletus* fungus, showing the spore tubes.

4 **Oak Mazegill:** (*Daedalea quercina*)
I found this specimen lying on the ground having been knocked from the tree on which it was growing. It was important to align it with the camera to ensure overall sharpness.

5 **Bearded Tooth Fungus**: (*Hericium erinaceus*)
This stunning specimen was photographed at a well known site for it at Naphill Common, in the Chilterns.

6 **Wood Hedgehog** (*Hydnum repandum*).
I deliberately allowed the background and foreground to stay out of focus to give a sense of depth to this specimen, around 6cm across.

7 **Ear Pick Fungus** (*Auriscalpium vulgare*)
I brought this tiny specimen indoors and lit it with a single flash. I needed an extension tube to enable a reasonable magnification.

8 **Ping Pong Bat fungus** (*Favolaschia claudopus*)

9 The underside of **Sulphur Tuft** fungi (*Hypholoma fasciculare*) lit with daylight, and

10 fluorescing with UV light.

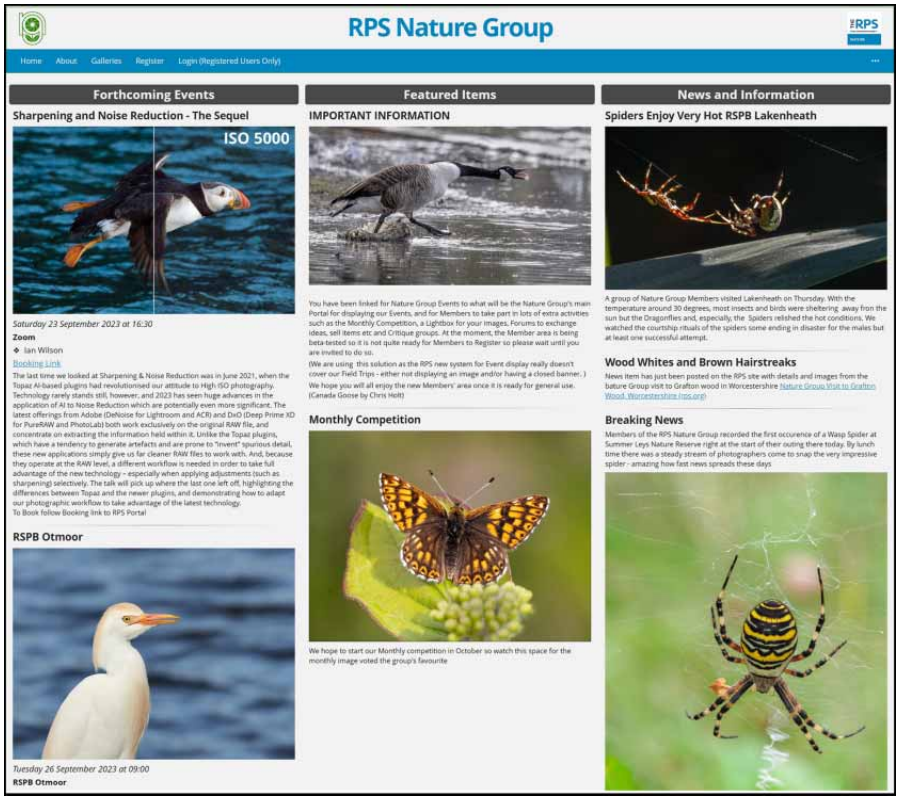
All images shot with Nikon D850 or Z7II, with 105mm micro Nikkor lens.

Adrian's new book - ***"Plant Photography"*** was published by the Crowood Press, earlier this year.

Have You Visited Our New Website Yet?

The 'go to' place to:

- find the latest Group News
- see what's coming up and book on Group Events
- enter our New Monthly Competition
- get constructive advice on your images
- read Reports with Images from Field Meetings
- see Members' Distinction Panels and much more.



You'll find the website at: https://www.rpsnature.org.uk/ Please enter the Monthly Competition – there will be prizes!

Penguins of The Falkland Islands

Part 1 - King Penguins - *Aptenodytes patagonicus*

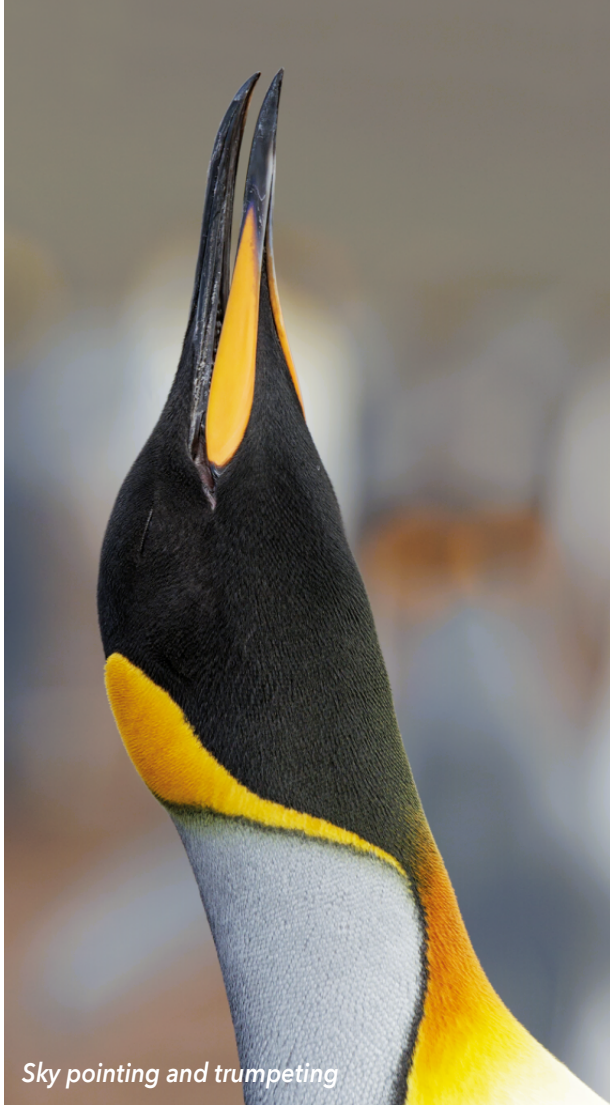
by Dawn Osborn FRPS

The Falkland Islands is probably the best place in the world to get up close to Penguins. As many as eleven species of penguin have been recorded there, five of which breed regularly in the Falklands - King, Gentoo, Magellanic, Rockhoppers and Macaroni, the latter being the relative newcomer and also the scarcest. They are all superbly evolved for a life in the ocean, having sleek torpedo shaped bodies and wings that have evolved into powerful paddles enabling them to 'fly' underwater.

Of the five species of penguin found in the Falklands, the King is the largest - measuring about 37 inches from the tip of its beak to its tail and is typically around 30 inches tall when standing. Sexes are alike but males are generally slightly taller than females. They are the most colourful and handsome of the penguin species found in the Falklands and can be seen all year round as they remain close to their breeding colony. The breeding cycle of Kings is approximately 15 months - making it possible for a pair to raise two chicks in a three year period. Unlike the other species of Penguin in the Falklands, Kings do not make a nest - the single egg is incubated on the parent's feet for about 55 days; the young develop a dense dark brown down during their first two weeks. They are cared for by both parents until fledging at about 12/13 months by which time they will have moulted out the down and grown in their adult feathers. Sadly there are always losses especially if the timing is a little off and the winter weather is wet and very cold. It is believed that the lifespan of a King Penguin could be up to 26 years in the wild, increasing to 40 years in captivity. King Penguins are mostly monogamous and assuming that the pair successfully raised a chick previously they will stay together, if not they may look for another mate.

The largest colony of King Penguin in the Falklands is at Volunteer Point, a headland located in the north-east of East Falkland and about 3.5 - 4 hours drive from Stanley, much of it being off road. The largest colony of Kings outside of South Georgia, Volunteer Point is now a National Nature Reserve. It features a beautiful white sand beach facing the Southern Ocean and a sheltered lagoon on the South-west side; the colony of Kings is situated in between on a grassy plain. It's a beautiful location - green turf, white sands, big skies and turquoise seas - very picturesque!

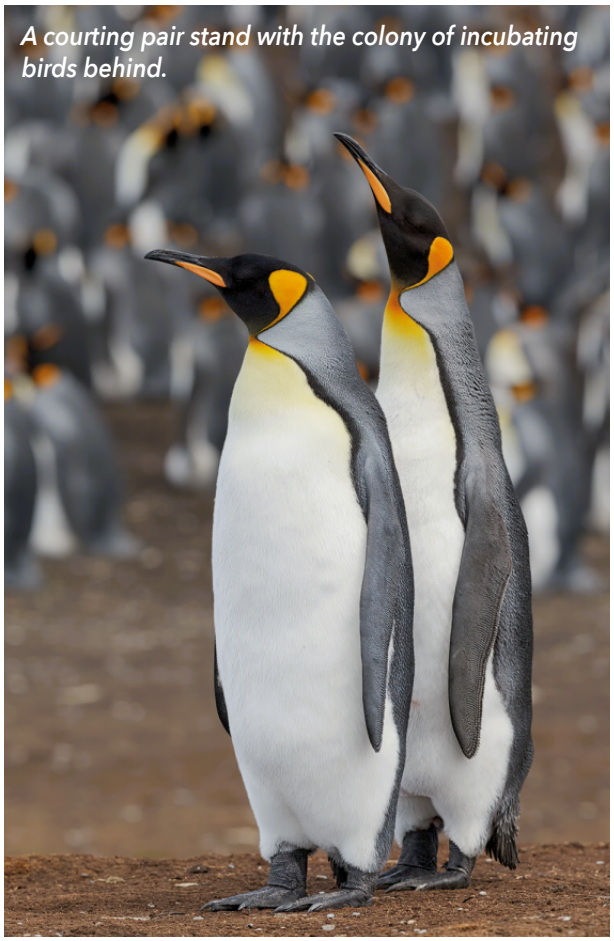
Kings on the beach at Volunteer Point.



Sky pointing and trumpeting

Courtship

Courtship bowing ritual



A courting pair stand with the colony of incubating birds behind.

Consenting female and her mate

Mating

Crossing the sand dunes and heading for the beach.

In and around the colony its possible to see birds of various ages, from the shaggy brown teddy bear like chicks to mature adults. Due to their unique breeding cycle, adults can be seen courting, mating, incubating eggs and feeding young at any time of the year. Annual counts of chicks estimate numbers of adult Kings at Volunteer Point has increased up to 2,000 pairs - in 1988 there were only around 200 pairs throughout the islands. Other small colonies are located on uninhabited offshore islands and the only other accessible colony is located at The Neck on Saunders Island and numbers there are slowly increasing annually.

If one sits quietly on the turf around the outer edge of the colony, curious adults and chicks will approach, often close enough for those intimate portraits and also enabling the use of a wide angle lens. However, it's down on the beach that the wide angle lens really comes into its own. Kings can frequently be seen parading up and down the beach before they decide whether or not to go to sea, offering countless opportunities for lovely images. The skies are often incredible and in sunny conditions the ocean becomes a wonderful turquoise colour and the wet sand offers reflections of the parading Kings. However, weather conditions here can change from good to bad very quickly as fast moving weather systems spiral out from the Antarctic across nearly 250 miles of the cold Southern Ocean - so its a good idea to keep a rain jacket for your camera at the ready. King Penguins don't seem to notice bad weather, they're one of the most densely feathered species in the world after all - they just turn their backs to whatever the weather throws at them and get on with their day.

Its' been my good fortune to have visited the King Penguins at Volunteer Point many times - it's always a great experience! Whatever the weather the Kings are always active and provide so many opportunities to keep pressing the shutter. I used a variety of Canon kit: DSLRs and Mirrorless plus a range of focal length lenses including 24-70, 70-200, 100-500 and 300mm + 1.4X/2X extenders.

Occasionally you may see an unusually marked bird

A huddle of incubating birds - backs to the wind

A King Penguin stretches while crossing the beach

The precious egg is revealed when this penguin stands to stretch.

Kings gather on the beach

Returning from the Southern Ocean

Returning from the lagoon

A full grown chick prior to moulting into adult plumage.

A trumpeting adult attracts attention from hungry chicks

Incubating adults and a chick waiting for a parent

Wales Residential Meeting 2023

Wednesday 14th to Monday 19th June.

Puffin with Sand Eels by James Foad LRPS

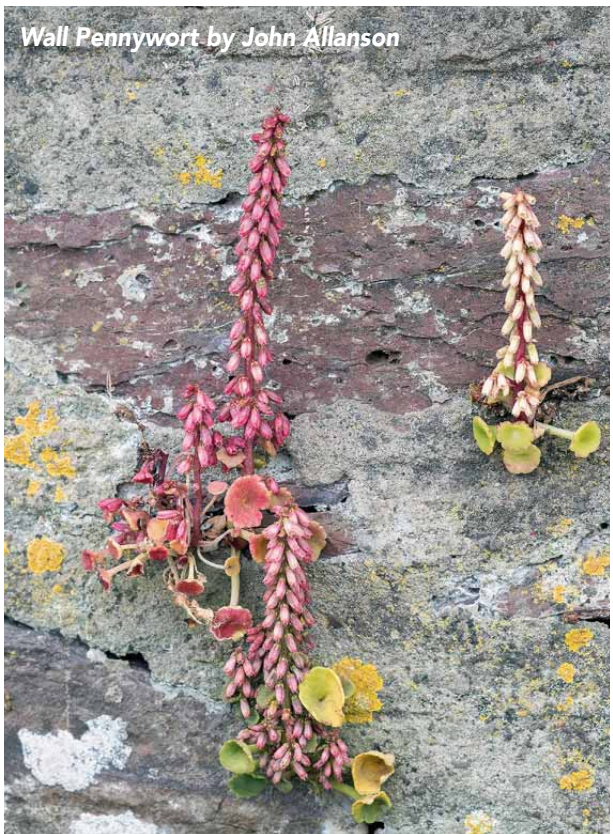
Puffins_Courtship by Greg Lovett ARPS

Swallow by Ian Nichol.

Wednesday 14th June:
A very successful residential trip was held during June 2023 in Pembrokeshire and Port Talbot lead by James Foad LRPS. The trip started on June 14th with the majority of the group staying at Hotel Mariners in Haverford West and in the evening most of us ate at Wetherspoons.

Thursday 15th June:
We enjoyed a wonderful visit to Skomer Island. My thanks to Stephen Hyam ARPS for taking joint lead with me on this trip.

We met at the car park near Lockley Lodge and received a quick briefing on do's and don'ts from Stephen, then we made our way to Lockley Lodge to check in for the boat. Pembrokeshire Islands run the boats and we were lucky to be on the first boat out. During our journey over to Skomer we were given a fascinating and amusing talk by our boat's guide on the history of Skomer and some of the other Islands.



Wall Pennywort by John Allanson

Upon arrival on Skomer we received another briefing and talk before getting on our way.

As well as Puffins, which Skomer is well known for, there were Razorbills, Lesser Black-backed Gulls, Herring Gulls with chicks, Oystercatchers with chicks, Meadow Pipits, Wheatears and Swallows. Wall Pennywort was also found. Later in Haverford West we enjoyed at a lovely meal at Hotel Mariners.

Friday 16th June:
A visit to the Gann Estuary, led again by Stephen Hyam ARPS, turned out to be successful despite the windy conditions that made macro and close up photography challenging. Nevertheless, there were plenty of opportunities to see and photograph a wide variety of bird species. Linnet, Grey Heron, Little Egret, Grey and Pied Wagtail, lots of Oystercatcher, Curlew, Lesser Black-backed and Great Black-backed Gull as well as Black Headed Gull, Meadow and Rock Pipit, Kestrel, Starling, House Sparrow, Lapwing, Dunnock, Goldfinch, Wood Pigeon, Cormorant, Shelduck and Mallard were among the birds that put in an appearance.

Among the insects where Thick-legged flower beetles and various bees.

When we left the Gann, we made our way to Port Talbot and Blanco's Hotel. Unfortunately there was a delay for quite a few participants - a lorry had shed it's load. Blanco's was located on a small industrial Estate, with easy access to the main road.

Saturday 17th
We visited Oxwich National Nature Reserve . Located on the south coast of Gower, just 11 miles from Swansea, the reserve consists of a bewitching mix of beach, sand dunes, lakes, woodlands, cliffs and both fresh and salt water marshes – in fact, it's rare to have so many different habitats in such a relatively small area in the UK.

The Nature Group last visited Oxwich Bay with the late Margaret Hodge FRPS in 2007. Our morning was spent in the dunes and marshes where we were kept busy with insects such as: Burnet Companion, Silvery Leafcutter Bee, Labyrinth Spiders and the rare Pink Grasshopper. The birds we encountered were mostly Meadow Pipits After lunch a few of us spent time amongst the rock pools where we found plenty to photograph, including Anemones, Blenny, plus a variety of crabs and shrimps.


Thick Legged Flower Beetle by Dave Mckay


Meadow Pipit running by Greg Lovett ARPS


Pink Grasshopper by John Draper


Ringlet Butterfly by John Haige

Sea Pea Flowers by John Allanson

Shrimp by James Foad LRPS

Burnet Companion by Pete Bott

Sunday 18th:
Following a good night's sleep and a hearty breakfast, we collected our packed lunches and made the short journey to Kenfig Pool NNR. The last time the Nature Group visited Kenfig Pool was during June 2008, led by John Hankin LRPS

Kenfig Pools make up part of the largest active sand dune systems in Europe, and is the home of many rare and endangered species, including Fen Orchid. Since visiting the site first in June 2008 I have returned on many occasions and it has never disappointed, our visit this year did not disappoint either.

There were plenty of subjects both Flora and Fauna to keep us all happy. Upon our arrival at the car park, one of the group spotted an Emerald Damselfly resting on bramble. Within the dunes the flora included: Fen Orchid, Marsh Orchid, Round-leaved-Wintergreen, Yellow Rattle, Sea Pea flowers, Marsh Helleborine, Sea Bindweed. Birds included: Meadow Pipit, Sky Lark and Kingfisher.

There were insects in abundance: Five Spot Burnet Moths, Common Blue Damselfly, Ringlet Butterfly, Common Darter and Emperor Dragonfly, Green Shield Bug Nymphs and also Shield bug eggs.

Crab Spider by Margaret Beardsmore

Emerald Damselfly - Lestes sponsa.jpg

Fen Orchid by Dave McKay

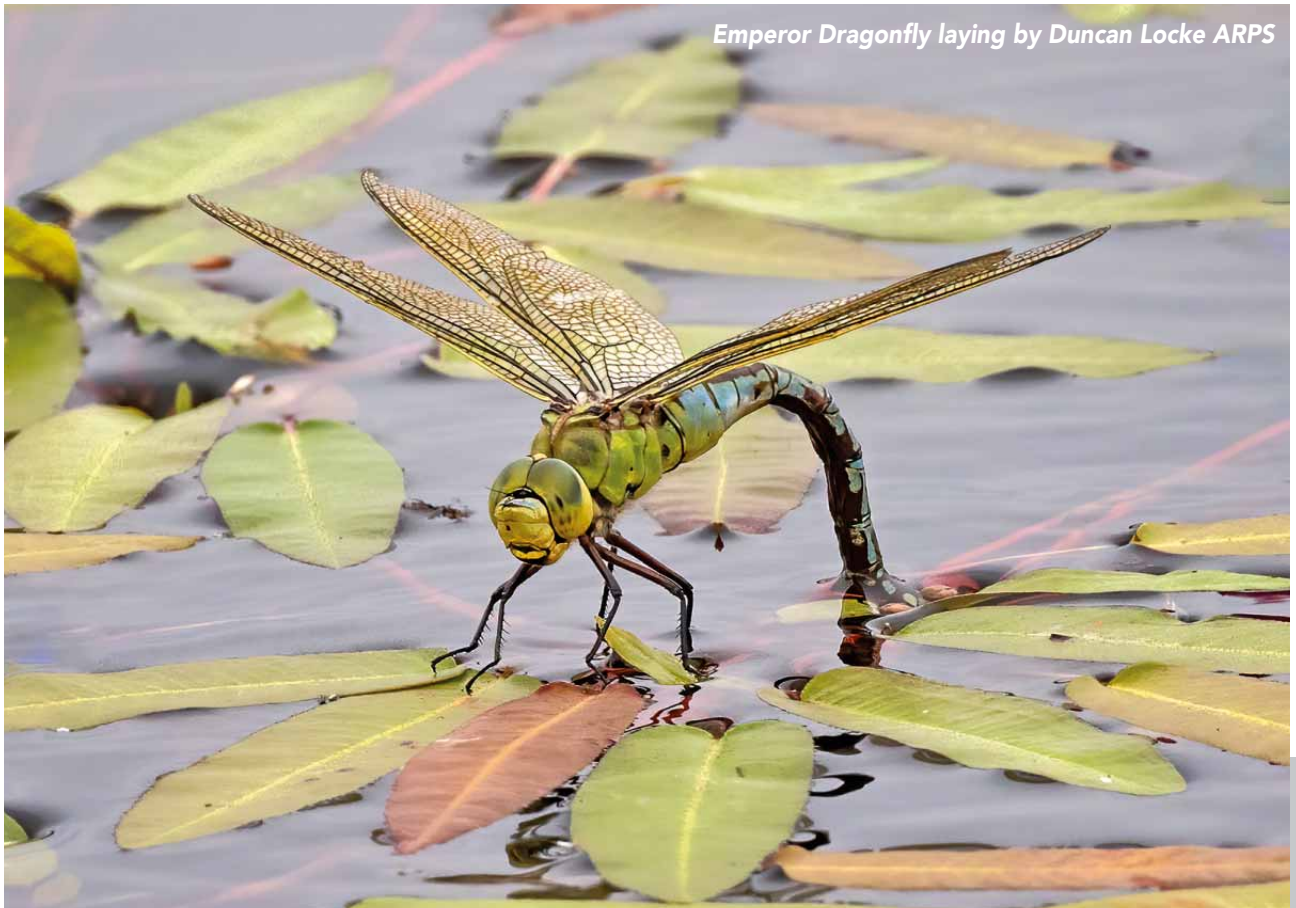
Green Shieldbug Nymphs by Andre Neves

Kingfisher by Andre Neves

Monday 19th -

Our final day was spent at Parc Slip Nature Reserve. We were ably led by Stephen Hyam ARPS and I extend my thanks to him again. Parc Slip was the site of a colliery disaster in August of 1892 when an explosion took the lives of 112 men and boys. There were large numbers of insects as well as birds and other subjects.

The Residential Meeting concluded at about 1pm.



Emperor Dragonfly laying by Duncan Locke ARPS

The Novoflex Castel-M Focusing Rail - A Field Test Review

by Robert Thompson FRPS

The following review of the Novoflex Castel-M focusing rail has been reduced to accommodate the available space in The Iris. To read the full review including the main features and images go to: www.robertthompsonphotography.com

Introduction

Since the evolution of digital photography, there have been many new and innovative products that have appeared in the photographic sector. The design of specialised accessories is one aspect that has seen many changes, with new equipment appearing frequently. Software development has also undergone considerable change. It is now possible with a few clicks of the mouse, to overcome many of the time-consuming processes and issues that were once challenging a few years ago. One of the biggest advances in macro photography is the ability to extend the depth of field by combining individual images using specialist equipment and software to capture subjects in ways that would have been almost impossible to achieve pre-digital.

In today's digital age, there are many companies both recent and established that specialise in the design and manufacture of a wide range of equipment for the photography industry. One of those companies with a worldwide reputation for quality and precision is Novoflex. They are a highly respected company based in Memmingen, Germany. Founded in 1948, it has a long-established reputation and is synonymous with innovation and the manufacture of precision quality equipment for the photographic industry, its trademark being '*THE BEAUTY OF ENGINEERING*'. As a company, they have designed and developed many unique products, particularly in the field of macro photography, where they have exceptional expertise. The Castel-M is the latest addition to their extensive macro line-up of specialist-focusing rails. The design is unique and has been developed specifically for photographers engaged in macro photography, especially those that routinely focus stack and work at magnifications above 1:1 (life-size) up to reproduction ratios of 5:1.

Castel-M ARCA SWISS Focusing Rail

In macro photography there are many challenges to overcome. Depth of field is one of the biggest that photographers have to contend with. As magnification increases, depth of field decreases, making it difficult to maintain sharp focus throughout the entire subject. Before the digital revolution, it was common practice to shoot at smaller apertures, for example, f/16, to maximise the zone of sharpness. The downside of this approach however leads to diffraction producing an image which can appear lacking in contrast and reduced sharpness. Working at magnifications above 1:1 creates additional challenges. The risk of vibration, or movement of the camera can compromise the final result. Reduced depth of field at higher magnifications makes it more challenging to achieve consistently acceptable results, especially when photographing outdoors. Equipment needs to be designed and manufactured to the highest standards to alleviate all these difficulties. Most automated macro lenses generally do not extend beyond 1:1. There are a few manual lenses that exceed 1:1, such as, the Laowa 100mm f/2.8 Ultra Macro with a maximum magnification of 2X. Other specialised macros include the Laowa 25mm f/2.8 2.5X-5X and the Canon MP-E65 f/2.8 1X-5X. All of these lenses are ideally suited to the Castel-M rail. Stability of the setup is another important factor to consider especially when focus stacking at higher reproduction ratios. Having a sturdy tripod and solid head with no creep is essential if you want to achieve continuity in your results.

Camera with the Laowa 2.5-5X macro lens in place on the rail.

First Impressions

Having owned and reviewed other rails from the Novoflex range. I was delighted when given the opportunity to test the prototype of their latest all-manual focusing rail. Like all of their products, it is beautifully engineered and finished to an extremely high standard. It also bears the typical Novoflex colour branding present in all of their equipment creating a connection and uniformity between all of their products. The rail itself is not large or too heavy, but feels robust and nicely balanced in the hand, each part connected with precision and accuracy.

Another typical Novoflex feature common on all of their rails is the elongated Arca Swiss dovetail mount which allows you to position the rail by hand to where you want focus to commence. You can also attach the Castel-M to a second rail for ease of precise placement, or when working at higher magnifications. A second rail can also be used horizontally to create a cross slide setup when the lens to subject distance is very close. It makes it easier to make fine adjustments on that plane. The rail and the large focus wheel have laser-engraved scaling to assist the photographer with maintaining precise stepping distances between images. The rail comes standard with the screw retained Q=Mount.

Castel-M ARCA SWISS elongated dovetail.

The Castel-M's design is unique and differs from the typical universal approach adopted by most equipment manufacturers. It's another example of Novoflex's ability to push the boundaries by creating a rail that makes all of the calculations for you in a precise and systematic way. No need to worry about stepping distances and focus overlap. You can concentrate on the subject and produce accurate, consistent results every time. The Castel-M also bridges the all-important gap between conventional rail designs such as the Castel Q, and XQII and high-end electronic focusing rails such as the Castel Micro offering a medium-priced alternative to their motorised equivalent.

Rail Description

At the heart of the rail is a high-precision spindle which drives the sliding block forward by rotating the rear focus wheel. The spindle's low thread pitch means the camera assembly can be advanced forward in very small, even incremental steps making it ideal for focus stacking at higher magnifications. The travel or stepping distance is determined by the setting on the increment selector. One of the unique features of this rail is its click-stop pre-sets. The focus wheel when rotated always locks into place after each pre-set distance. An image is captured at each click stop until the subject's range of focus is completed. There are five incremental settings which can be selected via the blue-coloured increment selector situated on the inside of the focus wheel. These incremental distances have been optimised for a 35mm full-frame sensor calculated at f/4 on the lens to minimise the onset of diffraction and to ensure a sufficient overlap of each image, which is necessary for focus stacking software to produce the final composite photo. Reproduction ratios from 2:1 to 5:1 are possible depending on the magnification chosen with the increment selector lever. The appropriate stepping distance is then adjusted to the correct amount depending on the magnification chosen. When the increment selector is set to X the focus wheel's click stop is deactivated and it can be rotated freely.

There is a laser-engraved scale on the wheel which can be used to move the camera at precise distances when a completely manual approach is required. One full clockwise rotation of the wheel advances the sliding block forward by 0.8mm. The engraved division marks on the focus wheel scale correspond to 0.01mm movement of the sliding block. A red ladot provides a starting point for all movements and the front of the focus wheel has circular clockwise direction indicator.

Focus wheel

Increment Selector

Locking Lever

The sliding block incorporates the Q=Mount quick-release unit with an integrated spirit level which can be rotated by loosening the central screw of the plate and moved to the preferred angle. The clamping screw will now be at the side or front of the base depending on the position selected. The different positions facilitate tripod collars on lenses and clamping plates attached to the camera base or lens. When rotating the Q=Mount a raised element on the base ensures precise alignment in a parallel or transverse direction. The sliding base incorporates a locking lever which when disengaged allows positioning of the base freehand. When in place, locking the lever engages the base to the spindle again.

The underside of the long dovetail Arca style guide has dual tripod 1/4 and 3/8 mounts. The rail can be connected directly to the tripod or to a copying unit if necessary. There is also a milled cut-out for a safety pin and stop screws to keep the sliding block within the confines of the spindle. The Castel-M can also be mounted directly on the BALPRO and BAL-F bellows systems for complete versatility and obtaining greater reproduction ratios with a wide variety of lenses. The Castel-M is also ideal for product photography. It can be equipped with the CASTBAL-PRO bellows attachment, transforming it into a fully-fledged technical camera. In this configuration, the stacking steps are performed by moving the bellows rear standard, while the lens standard remains fixed. Employing this approach means the position of the lens does not change in relation to the subject, which can be important in certain types of product photography in controlling unwanted reflections, especially in jewellery and other similar types of subjects.

CASTBAL-PRO with the Castel-M attached.

In The Field

The ultimate test for any piece of equipment is how it performs, and whether it meets the expectations of what it claims to deliver. Like any new piece of kit, it takes a little time to acquaint yourself with the settings and how and when to use it. If you routinely use focus stacking in your photography and don't use or can't justify the price of an electronic rail, then look no further than the Castel-M. There is no other rail quite like this one currently available. Attaching the camera assembly to the rail is straightforward. You will need an Arca Swiss clamping plate. I suggest using one of the Novoflex QPL plates as the milling and angulation of the dovetail is precise ensuring that the camera is held firmly with no play whatsoever. One point to bear in mind is that all Arca-style plates differ slightly between manufacturers. The angle on the dovetail and design may not be as secure as those designed by each manufacturer for their own products.

I found the Castel-M straightforward to use in the field. I have tested it on a range of different subjects all with excellent results. The rail is quick to attach to your camera and tripod head. It's an ideal size and weight, easily carried and fits neatly into smaller backpacks. The easiest and most efficient way to use the rail is attached to a focusing rail for quick positioning and fine-tuning especially if you are working at high reproduction ratios. But an additional rail is not essential in my opinion. The elongated dovetail allows for easy placement of the rail close to the desired starting point. Unlocking the lever on the sliding block will let you make fine adjustments to your starting position. When shooting at higher magnifications you can rotate the focus wheel in either direction to fine-tune the focus point before commencing photography.

Having used the Castel-M and Castel Micro in the field on a range of different subjects I can say the results from the Castel-M are impressive and certainly on par with those from the Castel Micro up to the magnification range of 5:1. The Castel Micro is Novoflex's premier electronic rail capable of much greater reproduction ratios and can be used with other specialised equipment which justifies its higher price. The diffraction calculation based on an aperture of f/4 quoted by Novoflex is the same in both the Castel-M and Castel Micro ensuring both rails are on equal standing within the designated magnification range. The manual rail is obviously quicker to place and set up while the electronic rail requires a

Castel-M in the field

little more time to prepare, but much quicker in capturing the sequence since you do not have to touch the camera assembly in-between shots. Both have their respective niches within the macro field.

The design of the Castel-M ensures that the most vulnerable parts are enclosed making it safe to use in the field irrespective of the weather conditions. There is no routine maintenance required and the rail should function flawlessly for many years to come. I was also keen to see if there was any transfer of vibration during the rotation of the wheel to other parts of the rail or camera assembly, but that is not the case. The whole action of rotation of the focus wheel is extremely smooth, solid, and nicely balanced. It was a pleasure to use this rail in different locations and terrains. I have tested the rail with several different lenses and camera bodies. I find the Laowa 25mm f/2.8 2.5-5X the ideal setup to get the best from the rail within the reproduction range. When I need to focus stack images below 1:1 I still prefer to use the rail rather than focus ring

Slime Mould Metatrichia species covered in a tiny fungus. Magnification 4X.

1 Tiny developing millipede in chamber. Magnification 2.5X
2 Tiny Common Grey Disco Fungi Mollisia cinerea Magnification 2X
3 Woodland Crocus Stamens Crocus tommasinianus Magnification 2X
4 Wolf's Milk Lycogala epidendrum Magnification 2.5X
5 Snowy Disco Lachnum virgineum Magnification 3.5X
6 Common Centipede Lithobius forficatus 0.5X
7 Orange-tip Anthocharis cardamines close-up of head. 2X

rotation for several reasons. In-camera focus stacking is not completely reliable especially at higher magnifications. It also utilizes autofocus which is not ideal. In addition, the magnification is changing with each rotation although the software compensates for this shift. Using the rail with the lens in manual gives you complete control. It's the focus point that changes, not the magnification as you progress through the image sequence. I find the manual approach produces fewer artefacts and cleaner results at any magnification. When photographing below 1:1 I use the rail frequently with the Nikon Z 105mm macro with the incremental lever set to X, this gives me the freedom to control the degree of movement between each shot using the engraved markings on the focus wheel. The beauty of this rail is you can customise it to suit the way you normally work. At lower magnifications when the click stop is engaged you may find shooting an image every second or third click stop is adequate. Carrying out a few simple tests at typical magnifications below 1:1 will allow you to establish a routine procedure.

The Castel-M can be used in combination with the BALPRO and BAL-F bellows systems with a wide variety of lenses including Schneider Kreuznach Pyrite f/4.5/90 which is a perfect combination for photographers engaged in product photography. My preferred choice in most cases is the Z MC105mm f/2.8 VR-S and the Laowa 25mm f/2.8 2.5-5X macros on my Z 9. The Laowa is light and shooting images in the region of 2.5-3.5X in the field is very straightforward. The rail can be attached directly to the CASTBAL-PRO by attaching the camera standard of the bellows directly to the sliding block of the Castel-M. In this configuration, the lens remains static and does not change in relation to the subject. The stacking sequence is carried out by moving the camera standard on the bellows. This approach has more relevance in product photography and in situations where the movement of the lens may give rise to reflections.

To get the best from any piece of equipment especially when shooting high-end macro, you must have an excellent head and a stable tripod; this is essential in my opinion to achieving continuity in your results. Mounting a high-quality rail and camera on an inadequate head or tripod will affect the final image. A 30-image stack will require you to touch the camera assembly each time to complete the series of photos for the composite. I can't stress the importance of having a solid setup, you don't want it to compromise your work.

Another point worth mentioning is the durability of the anodising on the rail. It is very scratch resistant. Most manufacturers of photographic equipment tend to opt for black or grey, but I usually find that within a short period of time scratches begin to appear as a result of use which is an accepted fact. During my few months using the prototype out in different terrain and weather conditions no visible signs of scratches etc. were detected; this is similar in my experience with all Novoflex products.

A Final Word

There is no doubt the Castel-M is another excellent invention from Novoflex. It more than measures up to the professional standards that you would expect from such a well-designed and crafted product. The solid construction of the rail and its parts indicate that it should give many years of trouble-free service without any issues. I have no doubt this rail will prove popular among the macro fraternity for its ease of use and most importantly, the results it can deliver. Not everyone can justify the cost of an electronic rail. The fact that there is now a credible alternative capable of delivering comparable results to an electronic rail will make it a popular choice among macro photographers engaged in other photographic sectors.

The uniqueness of the Castel-M warrants the price tag of £599.00 (€649.00) in my opinion. It surpasses any other manual rail that I have owned, seen or tested. It is well worth going the extra mile for a quality product such as this. Having purchased other rails over the years, this one outperforms all of them for many of the reasons already stated. I have bought many accessories and other specialised equipment from Novoflex and have never been disappointed with the performance of any of their products. Buying into a system where every accessory works seamlessly with another is the way to go in my opinion. You get that continuity and perfect integration between components which, for me, is worth that little bit extra for peace of mind.

The innovation is what sets this rail in a class of its own. No other equipment manufacturer has developed anything remotely like it. I have no doubt it will generate a lot of interest from competing manufacturers. Novoflex is renowned for its creative innovation. Rather than following a conventional approach, the engineers at Novoflex have ventured yet again to be different, as they often do. The result is a 'top-of-the-range' product that sets it apart from the rest.

2024 Nature Group Exhibition of Prints and Digital Images

Exhibition Selectors:
Mike Rowe FRPS,
plus two others.

Entry system opens	**25th November 2023**
Closing date for entries	**25th February 2024**
Selection Day	**6th March 2024**
Report cards sent by	**20th March 2024**
Exhibition Opening	**8th April 2024**
Rejected prints returned	**Late April 2024**

- The very strongly preferred method of entry is via the online entry system. All Nature Group members will be sent an invitation email that will contain a link to the entry system. Any member unable use the online entry system can post a completed entry form along with their images, to the address shown on the form.
- The Members Exhibition page of the Nature Group section of the RPS Website will contain a link to the entry system, and a copy of the entry form can also be downloaded from there.
- Gold Medals will be awarded to the best print and best digital image of the exhibition. In each category a Bronze Medal, plus Selector, and Highly Commended certificates will be awarded. The 'Tony Wharton' award will be presented to the most successful entrant in the exhibition.
- The acceptance list, plus a selection of award-winning images, will be published in the Summer 2024 issue of 'The Iris'. The awarded images will also appear on the RPS Gallery website.
- Once again slide shows of all accepted images will be available to download from the Nature Group Dropbox Account, there will be no DVD automatically issued to each entrant.

Digital Entries
The maximum dimensions for digital files are 1600 horizontally and 1200 vertically.

Print Entries
Please read the information on print submissions before you send your entry
All accepted prints will be displayed at the Exhibition Opening. They will also be displayed at Edinburgh PS and possibly other locations. The 2024 accepted prints will therefore be retained until the 2025 AGM. Unaccepted 2024 prints will be returned at or immediately after the 2024 AGM along with any accepted prints from the 2023 exhibition that have not yet been returned.

Further details of the entry conditions can be viewed in the online entry system, the Nature Group area of the RPS website, and on the manual entry form.

CONDITIONS OF ENTRY

Entry is restricted to members of the Nature Group of the Royal Photographic Society.

General Conditions

- All entries must be titled with the correct English name. Only use the scientific name where there is no English name. Trivial and/or cute titles are not acceptable and will result in disqualification.
- All images must convey the truth of what the author saw at the time of taking. Any manipulation must be confined to exposure adjustments and the removal of minor blemishes or distractions. The final image must have been produced from a single negative, transparency or digital recording and must not be a combination of images. The only exception is focus stacking. Nothing may be added to the original image by any means.
  Images of captive subjects or those captured using live bait are not permitted.
- Work accepted in previous Nature Group Exhibitions is not eligible regardless of which section it was entered into, ie prints cannot have been accepted as slides/digital images, and vice versa. This also applies to near duplicates of previous acceptances.
- Entering this Exhibition assumes that entrants agree to their entries being used to promote the Nature Group by inclusion in for example, the Exhibition 'slide shows', 'The Iris', the RPS Journal, the Nature Group's section of the RPS website, and the Nature Group Gallery Website. Copyright of all images remains with the author.
- Acceptance of entries will be notified by a report card which will be emailed to all entrants.
- Whilst every care will be taken of all entries submitted, the Nature Group cannot accept any responsibility for loss or damage, however caused.
- Submission of work implies acceptance of the above conditions.
- Failure to comply with the Conditions of Entry will result in your entry being rejected.

PRINT conditions

- Mount size for prints MUST BE 50cm x 40cm. Please keep the thickness of the mount to a maximum of 2.8mm. Mounts having Velcro pads, peeling tape, or any sticky substance on the back will be disqualified, as they could damage other prints.
- Overseas print entries can be sent unmounted but will not be returned. Although overseas prints will not be returned, packages should be clearly marked on the outside -
  'Photographs for Exhibition only - to be returned to sender. No commercial value'.
- The back of each print must bear the title and name of the author. The title should correspond to the title entered in the online system or the manual entry form. The author's name must not appear on the front. Please include a copy of your entry confirmation or entry form with the prints.
- If NOT entering via the on-line entry system then you must send digital copies of your prints to the exhibition secretary. See the notes below relating to this.
- Unaccepted prints not being collected at the exhibition opening will only be returned if the correct return postage has been paid in advance. Prints will be returned in their original packaging – please ensure this is adequate taking into account the parcel has to be opened by the exhibition secretary. Accepted prints will be retained for display in 2024 and will be returned after the 2025 exhibition opens in April 2025

Production of DIGITAL files.

- Maximum size is 1600 pixels horizontally x 1200 pixels vertically. Files to be in jpg format, in the sRGB colour space and 300dpi. Please do not add a background fill as the projection software will do this automatically.
- For manual entries digital files can be sent by CD/DVD/Memory Stick or by electronic means using WeTransfer or Dropbox. Files should be in a folder clearly identifying the entrant and containing up to 16 image files.
  File naming protocol: - Category and number corresponding to the details on the entry form, space, and Title. (e.g. PA1 Common Seal DB1 Oxeye Daisies). Please use both upper and lower case, as in these examples. If sending a CD/DVD burn as Data and close it, do not use options to write 'Session' or 'Multi Session'.
- All CDs/DVDs will be destroyed after the close of the Exhibition and all unaccepted images deleted.

RPS Nature Group Members Exhibition 2024

ENTRY FORM (Manual Entry Only) 1 of 2

ENTRANT DETAILS (Please complete legibly in BLOCK CAPITALS)

Name: ..... Honours: .....

Address: .....

.....

.....

..... Post Code: .....

Tel No: ..... / .....

Email: .....

I accept the Conditions of Entry and confirm I am a member of the RPS Nature Group

Signed: .....

The fee for entering the exhibition is £8.
The fee for returning print entries remains at £8.
Prints will be returned by Royal Mail 2nd Class or Evri/Hermes
Please note, prints from overseas entrants will not be returned.

Entry Fee	£8.00	£.....
Return postage	£8.00	£.....
Total Amount Due	£.....	£.....

Payment to be made via the NG Exhibition Event on the RPS website.
A link to the payment event will be provided to all members at the time the entry opens. Please do not send cheques with your entry.

Please send your entry to: RPS Nature Group Exhibition
c/o Ralph Snook ARPS
8 Knole Close, Almondsbury
Bristol, BS32 4EJ
Email: rpsngexsec@btinternet.com

RPS Nature Group Members Exhibition 2024

ENTRY FORM (Manual Entry Only) 2 of 2

IMAGE ENTRY DETAILS (Please complete legibly in BLOCK CAPITALS)

Prints – Category A

All creatures – birds, mammals, reptiles, marine life, insects, etc.

Cat Id Image Title

PA1

PA2

PA3

PA4

Prints – Category B

All plant life (including flora, fungi, lichens) and all other subjects including geological and microscopy, plus patterns, (design and form found in nature).

Cat Id Image Title

PB1

PB2

PB3

PB4

Digital Images – Category A

All creatures – birds, mammals, reptiles, marine life, insects, etc.

Cat Id Image Title

DA1

DA2

DA3

DA4

Digital Images – Category B

All plant life (including flora, fungi, lichens) and all other subjects including geological and microscopy, plus patterns, (design and form found in nature).

Cat Id Image Title

DB1

DB2

DB3

DB4

Images from Nature Group Field Meetings
continued from page 15

1 Canada Goose by Chris Holt
2 Small black ants (Lasius niger) by John Bulpitt
3 Tree Sparrow by Mike Harris
4 Kestrel with Prey by Bruce Kendrick
5 Man Orchid by Nigel Symington
6 Marbled White by James de Courcy
7 Parkgate Flocks by Janet Richardson

Red Lechwe

Zeal of Zebra

Images from Liuwa Plains by Sandeep Seeripat
see article on page 16

King's Pool

Liuwa Plains

Spotted Hyena and cubs