

ISSN 1757-2991

THE **RPS**
ROYAL
PHOTOGRAPHIC
SOCIETY



MAGAZINE OF THE NATURE GROUP OF THE RPS
Issue No. 148 / Spring 2024

THE IRIS



Celebrating New Distinctions Successes

Fellowship:

- 1 *Comatricha nigra*
The Unseen World of Slime Moulds
by Barry Webb FRPS
See page 4

Associate:

- 2 Merlin - *Falco columbarius*
Passionate about Dorset Wildlife
by Jennifer Warr ARPS
See page 12
- 3 Short-eared Owl - *Asio flammeus*
The ARPS
by Andy Marshall ARPS
See page 16
- 4 Red Kite - *Milvus milvus*
My Natural History Journey
by Fiona Turnbull ARPS
See page 20



Publication information

'The Iris' is published by the RPS Nature Group three times a year. Copy and publication dates are as follows:

Spring	Copy deadline 8th December Published mid March.
Summer	Copy deadline 30th April Published early July.
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:

'The Iris' is forwarded to members using addresses provided by the RPS Membership Dept in Bristol. Any member not receiving their copy should contact that department to confirm that their correct address is recorded. The Secretary will be pleased to post single copies to members who have failed to receive them.

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Printed by:

Partridges Limited
6-8 Bradfield Road, Wellingborough, NN8 4HB

Design & layout: by Dawn Osborn FRPS

Contents

- 2 Committee and Editorial**
- 3 From the Chair**
by Duncan Locke ARPS
- 4 The Unseen World of Slime Moulds
My FRPS Journey**
by Barry Webb FRPS
- 11 Notice of AGM, Spring Meeting and Opening
of the Nature Group Annual Exhibition**
- 12 Passionate about Dorset Wildlife**
by Jennifer Warr ARPS
- 16 The ARPS**
by Andy Marshall ARPS
- 20 My Natural History Journey**
by Fiona Turnbull ARPS
- 24 Insects in Action**
by John Bulpitt FRPS
- 28 The Habitat Photograph**
by Peter Roworth FRPS
- 30 Penguins of the Falkland Islands
pt 2 - Gentoo Penguins**
by Dawn Osborn FRPS
- 33 Membership Statistics**
- 34 Obituary**
Trevor Davenport ARPS
- 35 Hebridean Wildlife highlights**
by Richard Revels FRPS

Cover Image:

Curlew, North Uist,
by Richard Revels FRPS

Inside Front Cover

**Images from successful Nature Distinction
Panel submissions featured in this issue**



Committee

Officers

Chairman: Duncan Locke ARPS

Worcester

E-mail: nature@rps.org

Hon. Secretary: Greg Lovett ARPS

Saltford, Bristol

E-mail: greg.lovett@sheol.co.uk

Hon. Treasurer: Peter Ward

Ashbourne, Derbyshire

E-mail: peter.ward448@btinternet.com

Committee Members

Vice Chairman: Position to be filled

Editor of The Iris: Dawn Osborn FRPS

Breckland, Norfolk

E-mail: 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

Publicity: Bruce Kendrick ARPS

Macclesfield, Cheshire

E-mail: brucekendrick58@gmail.com

Residential Weekend Advisor: James Foad LRPS

Ramsgate, Kent

E-mail: jamesfoadlrps@proton.me

Web Administrator: Ian Wilson ARPS

Cambridge

E-mail: ian@greenmen.org.uk

Webmaster: Ralph Snook ARPS

Bristol

E-mail: natureweb@rps.org

Facebook/Competition Admin: position to be filled

Ex officio Committee members

Immediate Past Group Chair: David O'Neill LRPS

Reading, Berkshire

E-mail: 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

Depending on where in the world you live or your point of view, you may or may not have enjoyed the weather you were dealt this winter. I say dealt because certainly in the UK some parts have experienced snow while others have suffered with severe flooding. All signs of global warming I'm afraid. Here in East Anglia it has been very mild, you could count the frosty mornings with the fingers of one hand. Mostly it has been grey - overcast skies and precipitation in varying forms from drizzle to severe. We had some flooding too, but fortunately nothing that affected homes in this region. Mornings have most often exhibited low lying fog. Its been a trying time for outdoor photographers - even with very high ISOs I have found it difficult to achieve even a moderate shutter speed. Recently though there has been a subtle change in the weather and we are now experiencing some sunny days - Primroses are blooming in the hedgerows and our native birds most definitely feel that spring is here regardless of what the weather does.

Easter may have already passed by the time this issue drops through your letter box but I do hope you enjoy this Spring issue of The Iris. Turn to page 4 and marvel at a very different successful Fellowship panel. Barry Webb FRPS shows us what Slime Moulds really look like when you get very close up and personal. Amazing! There are also three new Associate panels to see and read about.

John Bulpitt FRPS has shared his interest of insects with some lovely shots of insects in action, the title of his article on page 24. Following, on page 28 an article from Peter Roworth FRPS concerning the importance of photographing habitat. Next, continuing my tale of Penguins in the Falklands, this issue features Gentoo Penguins. Last, but by no means least is a article by Richard Revels FRPS about wildlife photography in the Hebrides, accompanied by some lovely images.

Sadly, in this issue we also remember our fellow member and friend, Trevor Davenport ARPS. Trevor was a remarkable photographer and one of nature's true gentlemen. Many members will have attended his annual field meetings at Ainsdale Dunes. He will most certainly be missed by many.

Dawn Osborn FRPS -
Editor



From the Chair

Early March and it's a wonderfully sunny day in the UK, a welcome contrast to one of the wettest Februaries on record. But Spring is here and I am very much looking forward to a very productive year of nature photography.

Committee Additions:

I am pleased to announce that two very active Members of the Group have joined the Committee. Bruce Kendrick, who has led several Field Meetings in the north west of England and Ian Wilson. Many of you will know Ian from his excellent Saturday afternoon Zoom talks on image processing. Bruce will continue to help Ann Miles with Field Meetings as well as working to improve the Group's publicity. Ian is the driving force behind the Group's new website and will continue to develop our online presence.

Websites:

Our new Nature Group website has been extremely successful. I would like to thank Ian Wilson and Ann Miles for the tremendous amount of work they put into its creation. Over 280 Members are now registered on the site and it is proving to be an excellent place for us to run our Monthly Competition (now in its sixth month), to host Galleries of Members images (Distinction Panels and Field Meetings) and to provide access to accepted images from our Annual Exhibition.

At present we are developing the Lightbox section to provide constructive critique of Members' images, particularly for Members working towards a Fellowship.

RPS Developments:

There is hopeful news on the RPS website. A new version has been under test for some months and it is hoped that it will go live before the end of March.

The RPS is going through a period of change as it strives to operate more efficiently. Some of the changes will affect the Group, but nothing is finalised yet. I hope to be able to report more details at our AGM in April

Group Membership:

Elsewhere in this issue you will find a breakdown of the Group membership as of the 1st January 2024. After a dip in membership in January 2023, it is great to see that at the start of 2024, it was back to nearly 950 Members. In the first two months of 2024, the Group welcomed 35 New Members. Sadly there were also losses. This issue contains an Obituary for Trevor Davenport ARPS, a superb photographer and a very active and highly respected Member of the Nature Group. He will be sadly missed.

The RPS is driving an initiative to engage more with International Members and help them feel more part of The RPS community. This is led by Janet Haines, Chair of the Digital Imaging Group. I am actively participating to promote the Group and increase our international membership.

Members' Questionnaire:

Between early December and mid-January we asked you to complete a simple Membership Questionnaire. Many thanks to the over 150 Members who responded. Unsurprisingly, The Iris Magazine stood out as being very popular with our membership. There was also enthusiasm for Regional Sub Groups so this is something else we are looking into.

Field Meetings, Residential Weekend & Workshops:

Ann Miles is planning another excellent programme of Field Meetings this year and I will attend as many as I can. In 2023 the Group ran over 45 days of Field Meetings - close to one a week - which coupled with our other activities, makes us one of the most active of the RPS Special Interest Groups.

James Foad will be running the 2024 Residential Weekend on the Yorkshire Coast and in July a Macro Workshop is planned. I am very keen to build on our programme of workshops to help Members develop their nature photography.

Distinctions:

I would like to thank Ann Miles for organising a very successful Distinction Advisory Day on Zoom on the 13th January. Andrew McCarthy and Ann herself provided advice on fourteen 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 Barry Webb FRPS, Andy Marshall ARPS, Fiona Turnbull ARPS and Jennifer Warr ARPS, whose successful panels appear elsewhere in this issue. More will follow in the next issue of The Iris.

Spring Meeting:

Finally a reminder that our Spring Meeting, AGM and 2024 Annual Exhibition opening will be held at Smethwick Photographic Society on Saturday 20th April 2024. I am delighted that we have finally found a space in Robert Thompson's busy schedule and he will be our speaker on Saturday morning.

I look forward to seeing you there.



Duncan Locke ARPS

The Unseen World of Slime Moulds: My FRPS Journey

by Barry Webb FRPS

I first became involved in photography in the 1980s. The natural world has always been my main inspiration. In 2018 I joined the Bucks Fungus Group (BFG), a very active and knowledgeable group focused on fungi identification. Soon, I was regularly being asked to photograph their smaller finds. While on a fungus walk with the BFG, someone found an old, dry, brown *Stemonitis* slime mould. I was asked to photograph it for the records. At the time, I was using a Sony full-frame camera with no inbuilt focus-bracketing. I created a series of focus-bracketed images, manually turning the focus ring in tiny increments between each shot. Later, at home, I focus-stacked the images, using Zerene Stacker software. I was amazed at the intricate detail that the stacked image revealed. I started researching slime moulds, and the more I read, the more my interest grew.

Shortly afterwards, I went out photographing slime moulds with my wife and a friend, who were both using Olympus cameras. It soon became apparent to me that the in-camera focus-bracketing on their cameras would

be incredibly time-saving, as well as producing more accurately spaced brackets than manual focus-bracketing. The micro four thirds sensor also provided extra magnification, with its two times crop factor. My wife gave me a second-hand Olympus EM1 mk11 camera for Christmas 2019. Maybe she'd had enough of me borrowing her camera for days at a time!

Slime moulds are often found in hard-to-reach places, like on the undersides of logs. My new, small, manoeuvrable camera set-up, with an ultra-compact 60mm macro lens, allowed me to take pictures in situ. Soon I added extension tubes and a Raynox 250 magnifying lens to my kit, to enable me to achieve even more magnification when needed, as some of the slime moulds I was photographing were barely 1mm tall.

Covid and the ensuing lockdowns meant that I had a lot more time to pursue my fast-growing obsession with finding and photographing slime moulds. My daily exercise always seemed to involve a trip to the local woods. I am very fortunate to live in an area close to





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several ancient woodlands that are managed with the aim of preserving their rich biodiversity. So often, in less sensitively managed woodland and garden settings, fallen branches and decaying logs are tidied away. Over time, I was finding more and more species of slime moulds and developing a knack of predicting which kinds of decaying logs and fallen branches were likely to be worth inspecting.

The Covid lockdowns were also responsible for me entering some of my slime mould images into major photography competitions. The first one was the New Scientist Photography Awards, followed by Close-Up Photographer of the Year, Earth Photo and International Garden Photographer of the Year. In 2023 I entered a portfolio of slime mould images into the IGPTY 16



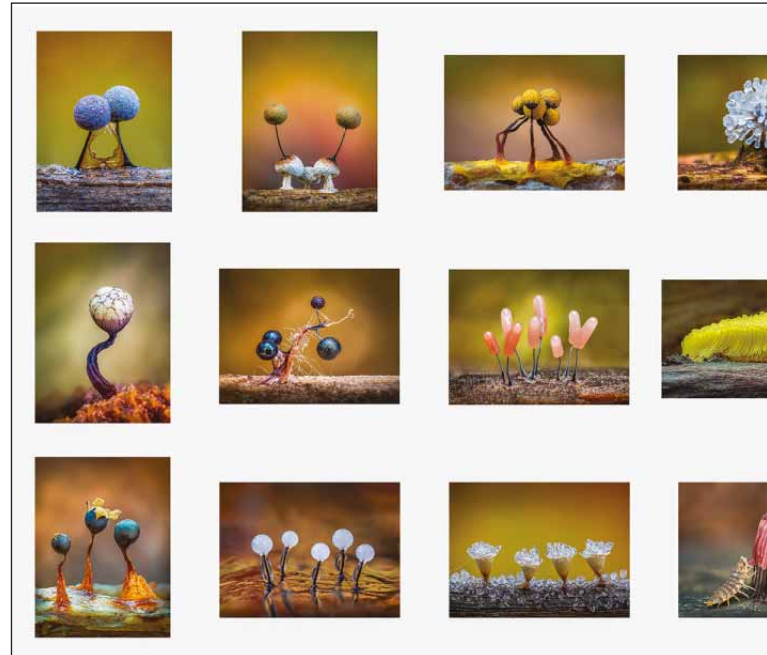
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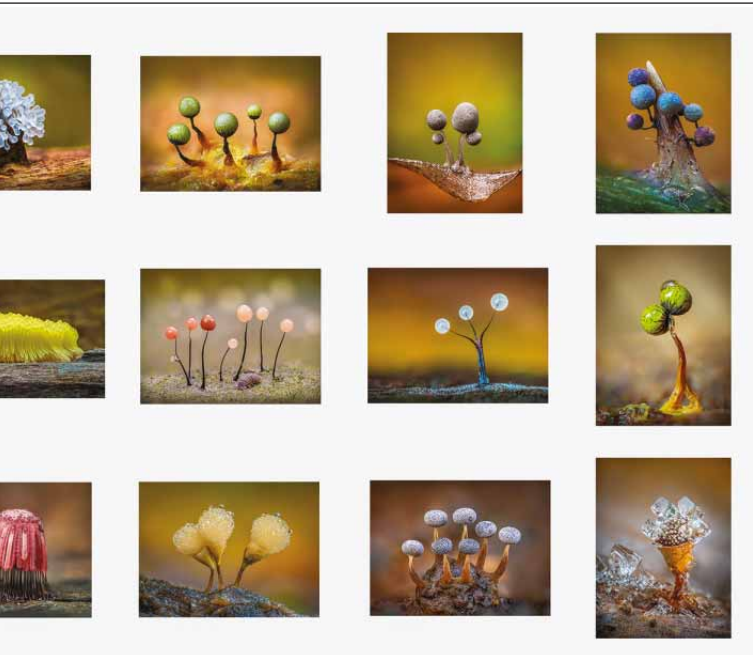
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portfolio competition, which is judged by the RPS. I went to the awards ceremony at Kew Gardens, where the President of the RPS, Simon Hill FRPS, presented me with an RPS gold medal. When he asked, 'Have you got any more of these slime mould images?' I found the question quite amusing as, by this time, I had accumulated a substantial library of them. I replied, 'I have hundreds.' It was then that Simon suggested that I really should consider applying for a fellowship. He even jokingly told me that he would look forward to signing my FRPS certificate. I had never considered applying for a fellowship, but this conversation, and Simon's kind encouragement, set me thinking about it.

I started by creating collections in Lightroom - 16x9 and 4x3 landscape and portrait images that I thought might be suitable. I organised the images within each





collection into groups with similar tonal ranges. I began to think that maybe I really did have the beginnings of a possible panel. The next step was to think long and hard about exactly what I wanted to achieve with the panel. I needed to write a relevant statement of intent before going any further. I found the RPS fellowship guidelines and genre definitions very helpful.

All through the spring and summer of 2023, I spent a considerable amount of time on my knees in the woods, making new images with the panel in mind. I was keen to show the incredible diversity of slime mould species and include a wide range of colour in the subjects, while maintaining cohesive colour tones in the backgrounds. I set up Lightroom to show three rows of seven images, and then spent countless hours moving pictures around to try to visualise a pleasing panel that really reflected



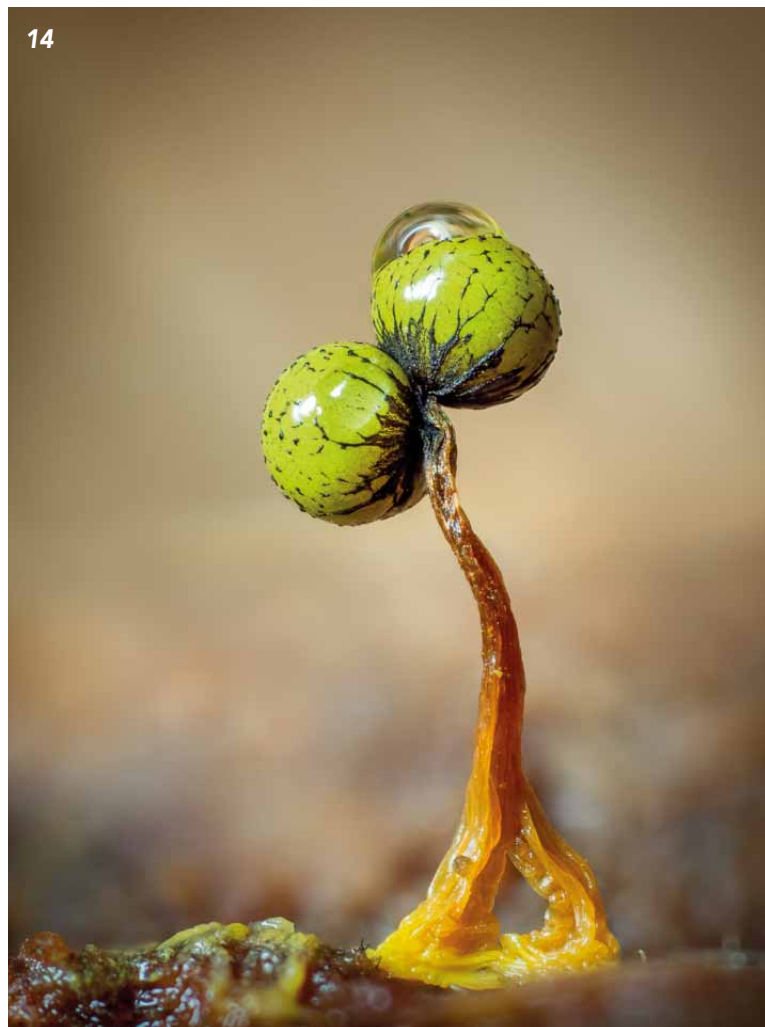
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my statement of intent. I lost count of the number of possibilities that I produced. The final panel contained only seven of the twenty-one images I had started with.

At the time I was juggling pictures around, Robert Thompson FRPS, a renowned macro photographer, happened to contact me to ask about the ID of some slime moulds that he had found. When I mentioned in passing that I was in the middle of putting together a fellowship panel, he was very encouraging and generous with his time and advice. My thanks go to Robert. My next step was to book a one2one and I was assigned Mick Durham FRPS as my advisor. I sent him the twenty-one images I had in mind plus 5 spares, the layout and the statement of intent. I was anticipating being told which images would not be acceptable, so was pleasantly surprised when Mick began by saying that he thought one of my 'spares' really ought to go into the panel. He followed with a lot of constructive advice, which I found extremely helpful.

I had originally thought that I would submit a digital application. However, Mick strongly advised me to produce a print panel, on the understanding that I was absolutely confident about the print quality. Chris Palmer FRPS, who is Chair of the Visual Art panel, came to a local exhibition of my work that summer. I asked him whether he thought the prints in my exhibition were of a high enough standard for a fellowship and he



confirmed that in his opinion they were. He offered to look at the actual prints I was going to use for my panel. I am grateful that he did, as he picked up a banding issue on one. This made me scrutinise each print with the x10 loupe that I usually use for searching out pleasing compositions when I find slime moulds. Viewed in such fine detail, I was not satisfied with several of the prints and decided to have all twenty-one images reprinted. I normally use a lustre paper but after having one image printed on both lustre and fine art paper as a test, I decided to choose the fine art paper. The prints appeared crisper and had visibly more tonal depth.

I knew exactly how I wanted the prints to sit within the mounts. I drew three detailed diagrams, showing the precise measurements of each aperture. This ensured that they would all line up centrally. I chose a smooth, off-white mountboard that had a slight warmth to match the autumnal tones of the prints. I had previously decided on my layout using the digital images. However, when the prints were viewed as a panel on the floor, I swapped the position of the central image on the bottom row with the central image on the second row. This final layout seemed to work better, as the yellow *Stemonitis* image in the very centre of the panel had a slightly darker background than the others and was the only image in the panel in a 16x9 format.



Last September I made the trip to the RPS in Bristol to observe the FRPS Natural History assessment day. It was fascinating to watch the assessment process in action. I strongly recommend anyone thinking of applying for an RPS distinction to either attend an assessment day in person or to book to attend an assessment via Zoom.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the distinctions team, the Chair, Mick Durham FRPS and the panel of jurors for their knowledgeable and thoughtful comments on my fellowship panel. I was absolutely delighted to be awarded the Fellowship of the RPS. See more of Barry's work at: barrywebbimages.co.uk Instagram: @barrywebbimages

Statement of Intent:

The Unseen World of Slime Mould

The incredible diversity of shape, colour and form of Myxomycetes (slime mould) is impossible to appreciate with the naked eye, due to their diminutive size. Most of them are between 1-4mm tall. My intention has been to produce a body of work that reveals their astonishing, unseen beauty and diversity.

Slime moulds are usually found on decaying wood and vegetation; feeding on bacteria, yeasts, fungal hyphae and algae. Their fruiting bodies are ephemeral: changing colour rapidly during their early development. This panel aims to show different stages of maturation as well as a wide variety of species.

These slime moulds were growing on a range of substrates on the floor of local, ancient woodland. They were photographed in situ, using entirely natural, unobtrusive backgrounds, to focus attention on the delicate, other-worldly structures of the minuscule slime mould fruiting bodies.

Species list

- 1 *Lamproderma scintillans*
- 2 *Didymium squamulosum* &
Lamproderma scintillans
- 3 *Cribraria aurantiaca*
- 4 *Ceratiomyxa fruticulosa*
- 5 *Cribraria* sp
- 6 *Arcyria cinerea*
- 7 *Lamproderma scintillans*
- 8 *Cribraria rufa*
- 9 *Lamproderma scintillans*
- 10 *Stemonitopsis typhina*
- 11 *Stemonitis flavogenita*
- 12 *Comatricha nigra*
- 13 *Comatricha nigra*
- 14 *Cribraria* sp
- 15 *Metatrichia floriformis*
- 16 *Lamproderma scintillans*
- 17 *Craterium minutum*
- 18 *Stemonitis* sp and *Porcellio scaber*
(Common rough woodlouse)
- 19 *Hemitrichia calyculata*
- 20 *Physarum* sp
- 21 *Craterium minutum*

Erratum,

I have been advised that two images included in the Winter Issue were provided with incorrect titles. The images are:

Page 13: image 7 by Jill Dyson Orme, title should be: Meadow Pipit

Page 30: Top image by John Allanson, titled Sea Pea Flowers should be: Common Restharrow.

When sending images members are asked to ensure that the image file name is correctly titled with the name of the species, or given a number that corresponds with the same number of a species list.

Thank you - The Editor.



RPS Nature Group Spring Meeting 48th Annual General Meeting Opening of the Annual Exhibition

Saturday 20th April 2024
Smethwick Photographic Society
The Old Schoolhouse, Churchbridge, Oldbury,
West Midlands, B69 2AS

Programme:

- 09:30hrs Doors open, tea and coffee available
10:00hrs Welcome and Introduction by RPS Nature Group Chair, Duncan Locke ARPS
10:10hrs **Presentation on 'Photographing the Natural World' by Robert Thompson FRPS FIPF
Natural History Photographer, Author & Conservationist and Nature Group Member**
12:15hrs Break for Lunch and to view the Exhibition
13:15hrs **48th Annual General Meeting of the RPS Nature Group**

Agenda:

1. Welcome to members attending the AGM by RPS Nature Group Chair, Duncan Locke ARPS
2. Apologies for Absence
3. Minutes of the 47th AGM 2023 (printed in Issue 146 of 'The Iris' - Summer 2023) and the EGM on Saturday 23 September 2023 (notified to Group Members by email on 26 September 2023)
4. Report on actions arising from the 47th AGM and the EGM on Saturday 23 September 2023
5. Annual Report of the Nature Group presented by the RPS Nature Group Chair, Duncan Locke ARPS
6. Treasurer's Report presented by Peter Ward
7. Secretary's Report presented by Greg Lovett ARPS
8. Programme Coordinator's Report presented by Ann Miles FRPS
9. Q&A Session for Group Members with the Group Committee
10. Date and Venue of the 49th AGM 2025
11. Thanks and Close of the AGM

14:00hrs Opening of the 2024 Nature Group Exhibition

Presentation of the Awards
Projection of the accepted images

16:15hrs Close

Throughout the day the prints accepted for the 2024 Exhibition will be on display
Please bring your own packed lunch as lunch will not be available.
There is a dining area. Tea, coffee and drinks will be available at the bar.

Watch the RPS Nature Group website for further information and how to book or contact:
Greg Lovett ARPS, Honorary Secretary - E-mail: greg.lovett@sheol.co.uk

Passionate about Dorset Wildlife -

An Associate Panel by Jennifer Warr ARPS

I've always had a love of nature and would often take a little compact camera with me when out on walks and on holidays, to try to capture what I had seen. It wasn't until I was given a DSLR and sigma 150-600mm lens for my birthday five years ago, that photographing nature became a hobby, some might even say an obsession!

Over the last five years not only has my knowledge of photography increased, but also my knowledge of the natural world. I've photographed birds and butterflies that I previously didn't even know existed. I'm quite short-sighted so having a long lens has enabled me to see the details that I would otherwise miss and it was those details that I wished to capture for my submission. I chose to photograph wildlife from my home county – Dorset. There were a few reasons for this. The first is

that I am passionate about Dorset wildlife and the importance of conserving it. In my spare time I volunteer for the local Wildlife Trust and Dorset Butterfly Conservation, so it seemed like the obvious choice. Secondly, I'd developed a reasonable understanding of the best places to see different species so finding them would be easier. And thirdly, choosing a subject close to home would enable me to build my panel over time, rather than having to squeeze everything into a one-week holiday, only to return home and find I needed an extra photo.

Learning photography has been an absolute joy. At the beginning I had no idea about settings and how to get away from auto. One of my first steps was to spend a day at Dean Mason's Windows on Wildlife Hide where he showed me the basics. I was blown away by the images I took. From there I built my skills through practice, joined my local camera club and workshops.

I know social media isn't for everyone, but not only have I found it helpful for learning techniques and choosing equipment, for example through YouTube videos, but I have found inspiration and made friends through Facebook groups and Instagram.

I've also enjoyed having projects. Last year I was lucky to be given permission to spend time in a local farmer's field where I spent hours photographing hares. The year before, my project was to see and photograph every species of English butterfly which took me all over the country. Although capturing the perfect photo is one of the pleasures of photography, making connections with other people, spending time in nature and seeing new places are just as important to me.





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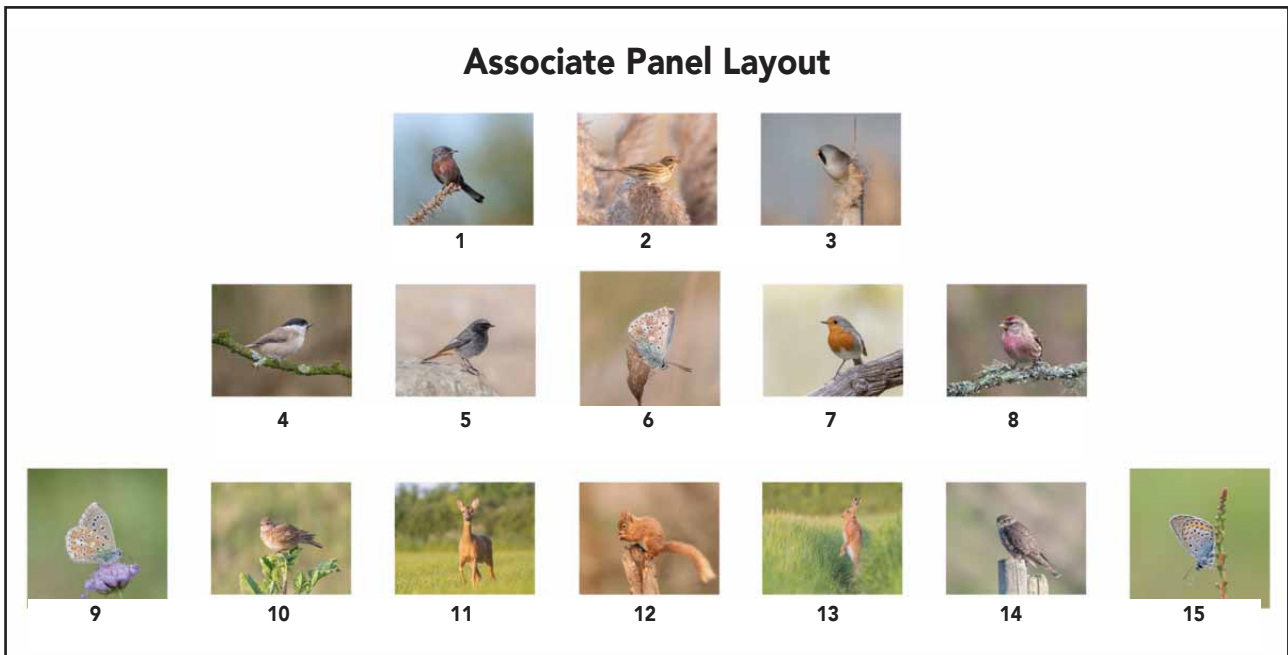
When I chose my first DSLR and lenses, I did a lot of research and I have been very happy with my choices. I'm very lucky to live in Dorset - there's so much open access land. I live near several nature reserves including heathlands, chalk downlands, wetlands, and the coast. Access to nature is so important to us both physically and mentally. I must admit to being a fair-weather photographer, much more likely to be spotted out with my camera on a sunny day! Enduring physical hardship in pursuit of a photo is not for me and one reason I love bird hides - there are never enough in my opinion.

The images for my panel were taken in a variety of habitats. The Robin was photographed in my garden using a piece of driftwood near a feeder. I've always found the problem with photographing Robins is they are usually too close! The images of the Bearded Tit and Reed Bunting were taken at Radipole Lake which is an RSPB reserve in Weymouth. A cold, still winter day is perfect for capturing these wonderful little birds who don't appear phased by photographers or passers-by.

The Dartford Warbler and Silver Studded Blue were captured on heathlands in east Dorset. The Merlin, Skylark, Chalkhill Blue butterfly and Black Redstart were all taken along the coast. I was out waiting for Short-eared Owls when the Merlin appeared a few metres away! The Red Squirrel taken at Brownsea Island during a women's photography week that I organised.

Many nature reserves and coastal areas get quite busy with people and it's important to be aware of the benefits and challenges. As a woman, I feel more confident being in places where people are around, and I find that photographing wildlife that is accustomed to people is slightly easier. For example, photographing Skylarks in the countryside is very difficult, but along the coast where they are used to people, they are less fearful. Similarly, the Red Squirrels at Brownsea Island will almost run over your feet! Seeing nature close by is a joy, but also a responsibility. As photographers we need to make sure we don't impact on breeding and feeding by overstaying and crowding out birds and animals.

Associate Panel Layout



While it's certainly possible to take photos of birds and animals accustomed to people, I also tried to develop my fieldcraft. The Hare and Deer that I photographed were not habituated at all - I spent hours sitting at the edge of a field, barely moving, to capture those images.

When I'm photographing wildlife, I'm thinking as much about the background as I am the subject. I love a clean background - to avoid distractions I move around as much as possible. I wanted my panel to show the colours of the environment which complement each species.

The images in my panel were taken with my Nikon D7500 and Nikon D500. The lenses I used were Sigma 150-600 Sport, Sigma 105mm macro and Nikon 500mm f/5.6 PF. I use a tripod with the Sigma Sport because of its heavy weight but the lighter Nikon 500mm enables me to hand-hold and I prefer the mobility it gives me.

When preparing my panel, I found the advice given by Ann Miles during my one-2-one to be absolutely invaluable. Ann saw things that hadn't crossed my mind and made some incredibly helpful suggestions. I really would recommend anyone considering applying for the ARPS to book a one-2-one session.

I also attended one of Kevin Pigney's online talks on processing nature images. Processing won't make a bad image into a good one, but it will make a good image stand out and convey the beauty as you remember it.

I was finally ready to submit my panel in August 2023 and my assessment was on 27th September. I chose to watch on-line and I'm pleased I did because my heart was thumping so loudly when it became my turn that it would have probably distracted the judges if I had been there in person! I was so pleased with the lovely comments and delighted to be awarded my ARPS.





10



11



12



14

Statement of Intent

My aim is to show some of the common and not so common species that can be seen in Dorset. When I first became interested in photography, I had no idea how much it would increase my knowledge and appreciation of the natural world. Although I went for walks through the beautiful Dorset countryside and knew a lot of the common species, there were many that I had never seen. Seeing through the lens of a camera has enabled me to discover and appreciate them in detail and I wanted my panel to show the fine details of each species, with the colours of the landscape providing diffuse backgrounds and complementing each species perfectly.

Species List

- | | | | |
|---|---|----|--|
| 1 | Dartford Warbler
<i>Sylvia undata</i> | 8 | Common Redpoll
<i>Carduelis flammea</i> |
| 2 | Reed Bunting
<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i> | 9 | Adonis Blue
<i>Polyommatus bellargus</i> |
| 3 | Bearded Tit
<i>Panurus biarmicus</i> | 10 | Skylark <i>Alauda arvensis</i> |
| 4 | Marsh Tit <i>Poecile palustris</i> | 11 | Roe Deer
<i>Capreolus capreolus</i> |
| 5 | Black Redstart <i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i> | 12 | Red Squirrel
<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i> |
| 6 | Chalkhill Blue <i>Polyommatus coridon</i> | 13 | Brown Hare
<i>Lepus europaeus</i> |
| 7 | European Robin
<i>Erithacus rubecula</i> | 14 | Merlin <i>Falco columbarius</i> |
| | | 15 | Silver Studded Blue
<i>Plebejus argus</i> |



13

The ARPS

by Andy Marshall ARPS

I bought my wife, Jessica, a camera for her birthday in late 2014. I had taken advice from various sources and opted for a Nikon DSLR. The following Summer while we were out, Jessica was taking images of a number of different things, when the camera stopped taking images; that is to say that the images were all very dark/black! We were very inexperienced, much more so myself, and hadn't realised that the camera was set to manual, no end of twiddling various knobs made much difference. This had now become a "technical problem", and therefore had my interest, and within a short space of time I was hooked!

I'm not much of a people person, nor do I have an artistic bone in my body! My preferred option of nature photography was fairly quickly identified. I love the peacefulness of nature and solitude. I prefer the technical challenges of photography, without having to overly concern myself with the crafting of an image in camera (e.g. designing, directing, etc), I merely attempt to obtain a technically competent image of what is there in front of me, particularly birds in flight!

My early forays into nature photography produced a very mixed bag of results, ranging from almost acceptable to completely awful. However I learnt a great

deal about the subjects, what they were (well, some if not all), how they behaved, how they moved, and also a little more about photography. I tended to go to local nature reserves and use the hides there or meander through woodlands seeking subjects. It was a chance meeting in a hide that led to me joining my local camera club. Joining East Grinstead Camera Club was singularly the most important step for me in improving my photography. Whether through listening to competitions being judged, presentations from visiting guests, or through discussions with other club members, there are always opportunities to learn and apply this learning to your own practice. The subject genre is almost irrelevant, often concepts from one genre are equally applicable, or transferable, to other genres.

I proceeded down this path with the camera club, focussing on nature with the occasional attempts at other genres, over the next five years or so, gradually improving my images, receiving some good reviews, and having some fortunate results. It was during the Covid, lockdown period that I made the decision to attempt an RPS distinction, I don't really remember why! I was still working albeit from home and had been doing that for quite a while. Many nature reserves had

1 Nuthatch (*Sitta europaea*)



3 Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*)



4 Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*)



limitations and most all of the hides were closed, but even if open there were far more people attending in the rush to be back to nature. So perhaps it was the time spent reviewing and ruminating over previously taken images, I don't really remember! Nonetheless the decision had been made and now it was time to proceed!

I decided to go straight for an attempt at the ARPS distinction as I wanted to focus only on Nature and not spend time taking images that I had little interest in (as with the LRPS having a requirement for varied genres!). I looked at the RPS website and decided to utilise the 1-2-1 mentoring option. I was pleased to be offered the services of Mick Durham FRPS, the chair of the Natural History Distinctions Panel. I worked on a panel of images, which is skill that needs learning! I'm accustomed to taking images to be presented as stand-alone images, not forming cohesive sets of images. Anyhow, a set of images was selected, plus a number of spares, and these were discussed in some depth with Mick. A final panel was decided upon and Mick seemed to think that this had a good chance of making the grade. This proved not to be the case - five images failed to make the grade for either pictorial or technical failings.

Time to work on a revised submission. Again this was worked on with Mick as my mentor. I made the choice to replace the five failures with fresh images, which necessitated a revised layout of the panel. On this occasion Mick was quite confident that the panel was up to the required standard and should be accepted. I'd done some further research viewing other, successful ARPS panels and was also more confident for this submission than my previous attempt. Sadly, once again, how wrong we were! On this occasion there were minor comments on two images, these were to be re-edited, but would remain in the panel; both of these had been in the previous submission without comments! Three of the new images were commented on and I decided to replace these images. Once again Mick was



4 Kingfisher (*Alcedo Atthis*)



5 Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*)



7 Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*)



2 Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*)



8 Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*)



10 Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*)



11 Short Eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*)



12 Buzzard (*Buteo buteo*)

confident, as best he could be, that this panel was of the expected standard. Me, I had long since lost the plot on whether it would pass, but remained hopeful... .. Again!!

For my assessment in September 2023, I decided to view the proceedings on-line - not something that I'd done previously. On the day the first panels to be assessed were print panels. There were five judges on this assessment - the fifth being a trainee judge, able to comment but without a vote. The first panel was set out and things got underway. The judges all got up for a closer view of many of the submitted prints before the time for the comments and voting. One of the assessors made their way to the panel, picked up image number nine and proceeded to explain why they thought that this was a poor image when compared to the others in the panel, and how they believed that this image let the panel down. Even I felt for the applicant after this lambasting! A second judge stood and approached the panel. After making some comments on one or two images they too picked up image nine. Oh dear thought I, but the second judge proceeded to explain why they thought the image was of an excellent quality, the best image of the set!! I realised then why such distinctions can be awkward to obtain, and why the feedback can be inconsistent. Serendipity can play a role, whether that be in the choice of images selected, or the make-up of the judging panel.

My panel was number one in the PDI order of play and would be first up after lunch. Comments were made on six or seven images, mainly positive but there



9 Tawny Owl (*Strix aluco*)

were some observations made on one or two of the images, which concerned me. My wife, Jessica, was watching with me on our television, she was confident I had passed, I wasn't! In the end luck was on my side and I heard Mick Durham announce my name and that I had been successful. Was I satisfied, happy, or euphoric? To be quite honest no! Should I have been? Probably! I merely had a sense of overwhelming relief, a 'thank goodness that's over' moment.

Overall the whole process had a positive effect on my photography. It isn't an easy process for everybody, that much I know, but it makes you look at your images in a different way and question your previously held beliefs, and that can only be a good thing. Once over the stresses of the assessment day and with time to reflect, I can now say that I am happy to have successfully undertaken the process and am pleased with the outcome.

Would I do it again? Who knows? Though I have it on good authority that its more fun than kidney stones!

Associate Panel Layout



Statement of Intent

For me nature photography is as much about escapism, and relaxation, away from the madness in which we all exist, and more so in our recent history. I find that these places of joy are to be found beside our lakes and lochs, within our woodlands, or surrounded by farming land, hopefully "far from the madding crowd".

My aim with this set of images is to show the energy, excitement, peace, and tranquility, that juxtapose in these environments. For example, the crashing dive of an Osprey fishing, fast and furious, yet over in the matter of a few seconds, against the majestic, silent flight of the Barn Owl quartering the land. My objective is to impart these feelings into the observer, through the visual medium of photography, creating both interest and awareness, and hopefully a sense of fascination.



13 Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*)



14 Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*)



15 Great Spotted Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos major*)

My Natural History Journey

by Fiona Turnbull ARPS

I still smile when I think about achieving an Associate of the Royal Photographic Society (ARPS) in Natural History on the 27 September 2023. There is something very special about being awarded this distinction by the Royal Photographic Society (RPS) who set the bar high for all of their distinctions. So, what made me embark on this challenge in the first place? My story is possibly similar but also a little different to other photographers.

My fascination with photography started when I was a teenager growing up in Glasgow. Nature and wildlife weren't on my radar at this point, it was more about photographing friends and family and the occasional holiday. Looking back on those images, I can honestly say they look pretty awful quality wise, but I did a great job of capturing memories!

Over many years, my photography interests broadened, and the images improved. A big turning point was the purchase of my first digital camera back in 2000, this spurred me on to improve my photography. Out of

the blue in 2009, after many years in conventional employment, my husband and I decided to start our own business. I have always been envious of people who have managed to turn their hobby into a career, but this is exactly what we did. In 2011, we set up a photography training school in Lacock (known as the birthplace of photography due to the photography pioneer William Henry Fox Talbot who lived at Lacock Abbey). From the start, I became Lacock Photography's principal tutor helping newbie photographers get to grips with their digital cameras.

A few months before starting the business, I decided to embark on my LRPS in order to improve my skills and also to boost my confidence as a photographer. In just three months, I put together my panel and submitted it to the RPS for assessment. Happily (and I remember surprisingly at the time!) the assessment panel liked my images and I was awarded my LRPS. Being a Licentiate of the RPS gave me credibility as a photography tutor and a secure foundation as a photographer, helping me

Associate Panel Presentation Layout



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1. Kingfisher - *Alcedinidae*

to train several thousand students over the last 12 years. I always recommend the RPS distinctions process to my students as an excellent way of improving their photography skills and advised them that it is a personal challenge which is definitely worth taking on.

One of my concerns of being a professional photographer was that I would lose my interest in my photography. I needn't have worried - fortunately this never happened! I am convinced my love of photography has made me a much better tutor - my students appreciate my enthusiasm for the subject and know that I am passionate about photography in all its different genres.

The genre of nature photography has crept up on me only in the last few years. I have always had an appreciation for lenses and when I bought my first professional zoom lens (Canon 100-400mm) and saw what it could do, I was hooked. Going out to local nature reserves photographing birds is where I started. I soon progressed to hide photography and took my first fox and kingfisher images. I still remember how thrilling it was to see wild birds and animals up close. Being Scottish, I was keen to spend more time in Scotland's wonderful countryside. Over the last few years, it has been inspiring to visit the Cairngorms, Shetland, Mull, Argyll, The Borders, and St Kilda to photograph wildlife, mainly birds but also animals (otters, red deer, mountain hares, red squirrels & dolphins). These images have been hung on my walls, have been shared on social media and used on our website to promote our business.

Having taken a keen interest in wildlife photography, I began running wildlife-based workshops at venues like Slimbridge, The Hawk Conservancy, West of England Falconry, and the Bristol Zoo Project. I wanted my students to have the best experience on these workshops and came to the conclusion that achieving an ARPS in Natural History would really help me to



2. Great Skua (Bonxie) - *Stercorarius skua*



3. Red Kite - *Milvus milvus*



4. Juvenile Wheatear - *Oenanthe oenanthe*



5. Puffin - *Fratercula arctica*



6. Oyster catcher - *Haematopus ostralegus*



7. Red Grouse - *Lagopus lagopus*



8. Goldeneye - *Bucephala clangula*



11. Fulmar - *Fulmarus glacialis*

improve my photography and enable me to pass on my experience and knowledge to other people. Subsequently, it has undoubtedly improved my credibility as a wildlife photographer.

When I started looking into the ARPS process for its distinctions, I was delighted to see that things had radically changed over the last few years in terms of the RPS volunteer support that is available. As an RPS member, I made the most of having the available 'one2one' distinctions process. Over a period of a year, Mick Durham FRPS (Distinctions Natural History Panel Chair) was my ARPS mentor. I presented Mick with my initial panel and then with my subsequent changed images based on his excellent advice.

The feedback I received helped me to improve two critical areas in my wildlife photography: technical quality and composition. On the technical side, it became clear that I had to pay more attention to image sharpness and depth of field. I definitely had not given this sufficient attention in some of my initial panel images. On the compositional side, some of the images were sometimes just a bit awkward or perhaps the format orientation just didn't work i.e. landscape versus



9. Dunlin - *Calidris alpina*



10. Starling - *Sturnus vulgaris*

portrait. In addition to these key areas, some images were just a bit dull as the birds weren't showing any particular behaviour or character! Thanks to the guidance I had received, I developed a much more critical wildlife photographer's eye which in turn in time raised the standard of my panel images. For his wonderful support, I will always be grateful to Mick.

On the day of my ARPS assessment in Bristol, I felt very nervous, but also fairly confident thanks to the mentoring I had received. Being first up on the day meant that I did not have long to wait before the panel members had reviewed my images and (happily) judged them to be of the required standard to be awarded an ARPS in Natural History.

A few months on from my achieving my ARPS, my mind is beginning to turn towards applying for a Fellowship. At the moment, this seems like such a daunting prospect as I know the success rate at this level is relatively low compared to the ARPS & LRPS distinctions. Will this put me off... absolutely not! I know I will love every minute working towards it over the next few years.

Statement of Intent

My love of the wilds of the British Isles and especially its amazing birdlife has grown over the years. Choosing wild birds found on both the mainland and islands around the UK was for me the obvious choice for my ARPS distinction submission. The aim of my panel is to illustrate the beauty and variety of these amazing birds.

I have photographed a diversity of birds to illustrate the bird's character and their behaviour. In addition, the birds have been photographed in a variety of habitats including woodland, cliffs, moorland, coastal fringe, and shoreline.



12. Tufted duck - *Aythya fuligula*



13. Buzzard - *Buteo buteo*

14. Song Thrush - *Turdus philomelos*



15. Gannet - *Morus bassanus*



Insects in action

by John Bulpitt FRPS

Insects are fascinating! First of all there is the infinite variety. Over 20,000 species in the UK, although this is only 2% of the world's known species. In practical terms this means that whenever I go into the field I usually find a species and/or a behaviour that I've not seen before

Then there is the incredible natural history of many insect species. Truly it is stranger than science fiction in some cases.

Even with some knowledge, acquired over 20 or more years, of when and where to find a particular species, actually spotting them is not always easy. Walk slowly, stop regularly and apply 100% concentration to the task in hand, is the best advice I can give.

Possibly because of my background in sports photography, I have a particular passion for capturing insects in action. In this article I will illustrate a number of behaviours that I have witnessed over the years. All of the images were taken in the UK.

I guess that most members of the Nature Group will have photographed mating butterflies or dragonflies at one time or another. Provided that you know a location for the caterpillar food plant of a particular species, this can be quite straightforward. And dragons mate almost exclusively near still or slow moving water.

My first shot (Image 1) below is of Chalkhill Blues (*Polyommatus coridon*) on Field Scabious. The Brassy longhorn moth (*Nemophora metallica*) was a bonus.

Two images illustrate egg-laying or ovipositing. The Sabre wasp (*Rhyssa persuasoria*) (Image 2), is the largest of our Ichneumon wasps, with the female reaching 10 cms. in length, half of which is her ovipositor. Her very sensitive antennae can detect the larvae of Longhorn Beetles and Wood Wasps up to 4 cms. below the surface of the timber. She then drills down, lays an egg on the larvae and the rest you can guess. Scientists have long wondered how such a delicate-looking ovipositor can drill into fairly solid wood. But recent research has revealed that the outer skin is toughened by high concentrations of zinc and magnesium. Who needs science fiction?

Most insects pupate as part of their life cycle. I watched for nearly an hour whilst this 6-spot Burnet Moth caterpillar (*Zygaena filipendulae*) (Image 3) pupated.

The Green Shieldbug (*Palomena prasina*) (Image 4) is egg-laying. A very common insect but this is the one and only time that I have witnessed this behaviour.

Another behaviour that is difficult to see is that of an adult insect emerging from the pupa. Emerging insects are at high risk of predation and tend to emerge in the very early hours and are often well-





hidden in the vegetation. Image 5 shows a 7-spot ladybird (*Coccinella septempunctata*) emerging. The diagnostic colouration and spots took about an hour to appear



Some insects are herbivores, others eat other insects! Robberflies are particularly aggressive predators. They inject a fluid that paralyses the victim and liquefies the internal organs. The Robberfly then literally sucks the life out of its prey. (Image 6) Here a Red-legged Robberfly (*Dioctria rufipes*) has caught an Ichneumon Wasp (*Exettastes adpressorius*).



Despite its name and fearsome appearance, the Scorpion fly (*Panorpa communis*) can't catch its own prey but is very adept at stealing from Spiders' webs (Image7).

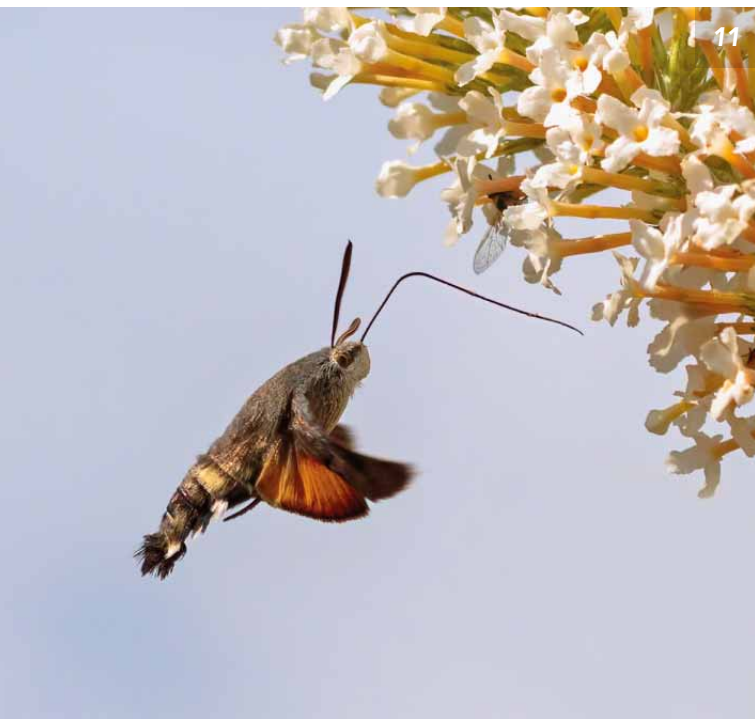




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Other insects catch prey to provision the nest chamber for their larvae to feed on. The Field Digger Wasp (*Mellinus arvensis*) (Image 8 - previous page) is shown struggling to manoeuvre a fly up a vertical sand bank into the nest entrance.

Having eaten, most insects will engage in some grooming. Another parasitic wasp, the Carrot Wasp (*Gasteruption jaculator*) (Image 9) illustrates this behaviour.

Insects often fight: usually its territorial, about mating rights or a food source. Conflict is usually over in a fraction of a second, which makes it a real challenge for the photographer. My image of Red-spotted Parasite Flies (*Eriothrix rufomaculata*) (Image 10) engaged in a territorial dispute was pure serendipity. I was taking a record shot of one when the other arrived. Not a very successful image because one of the flies is facing the "wrong" way. I hope to do better this year.

Insects in flight are a great challenge! The first problem with smaller insects is actually finding them in the viewfinder. I tend to use manual focus until the subject is roughly in focus, and then depress the shutter button halfway and hope that the continuous autofocus locks on. I had lots of practice in my garden during lockdown. I've been trying for years to get an acceptable image of a Hummingbird Hawk-moth (*Macroglossum stellatarum*) (Image 11). Last summer everything came together in my front garden (Image 9). Interestingly a shutter speed of 1/8000th didn't freeze the wing movement completely. But as the wings beat 70/80 times per second this is perhaps unsurprising.

Some insects have evolved with extraordinary camouflage to minimise the risk of predation. Others brazenly announce their presence with bright colours to indicate that they may be poisonous. The Malachite Beetle (*Malachius aeneus*) (Image 12) has an additional weapon. When it feels threatened it inflates eversible balloon-like sacs called cocardes that are normally concealed. These produce noxious odours that deter most predators.

Social insects such as Honey Bees roost communally. Solitary insects roost individually. But I discovered an interesting exception in my garden last Summer. The Furrow Bee is solitary, but when the males leave the nest they tend to roost communally each night. (Image 13) I counted about two dozen on this scabious seed head that is about 3cms. in diameter. The species is either *Lasioglossum calceatum* or *L. Albipes* and according to experts, a microscope would be needed to be able to determine which.



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I love recording symbiotic relationships in the insect world. Here are two examples. Ants tending Blackfly (Image 14). Ants stroke the Blackfly with their antennae to encourage the production of a sugary secretion called honeydew – a valuable food for ants. In return they protect the aphids from predators and sometimes move them onto more promising pastures.

The other example is Phoretic mites. They attach themselves to Carrion Beetles such as this Sexton Beetle (*Nicrophorus vespilloides*). (Image 15) They get a free ride to a food source and in return eat the eggs and larvae of flies that might otherwise compete with the beetle's progeny for food.

Identifying insects can be a challenge. There are lots of books and the internet is invaluable, but you have to know roughly what you are looking for. My starting point is usually an iPhone app called ObsIdentify. It is generally pretty good although because it is based in the Netherlands, some of the common names are not ones that we would use in the UK. Assuming I get an ID I search the internet, or my books, to confirm the ID. If I have any doubts I post an image on one of the many Facebook specialist insect groups. This is where the real experts reside!

As far as equipment is concerned, I use a Canon 7D Mk11, crop sensor body usually coupled with a Canon 100 IS macro lens, often with an extension tube. With this combination the temptation is to get in really close – but be careful! As Ian Wilson ARPS pointed out in a Nature Group Facebook post a few months ago, if you halve the working distance between lens and subject you get a quarter of the depth of field. Conversely doubling the working distance gives you four times the DOF. For static subjects focus stacking will get round this problem but generally it doesn't work for the type of macro photography I enjoy.

Occasionally, for Butterflies and Dragonflies I'll use a 100-400 IS lens. Since the advent of really good noise reduction software, I'll happily shoot at ISO 3200. For



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many years I used Topaz DeNoise, but recently I've gone over to DXO Pure Raw 3. In the early days I used fill-flash but these days I find that the disadvantages outweigh the advantages.

Finally, I would like to thank Richard Revels FRPS and Ann Miles FRPS, for their help, encouragement and friendship over many years. I am also most grateful to Ian Wilson ARPS for his willingness to share his extraordinary knowledge of photographic software. I know that many members of the Nature Group have been helped by Ian.



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The Habitat Photograph

by Peter Roworth FRPS



A habitat is an area that is inhabited by species of plants, animals and other organisms that are adapted to that specific environment; it is where these species survive in favourable conditions.

So why do we not see many photographs taken of habitats? True, some images do show the plant or animal in its surroundings and that does depict the habitat. Such photographs/images are usually composed with a wide angle lens and the main species tends to dominate the foreground whilst the surrounding area is less of a feature.

In the RPS Natural History Distinction Guidelines there is reference to the wider view where: *“an informative element is desirable to all images but not crucial. A pictorial image can be just as desirable where clear intention of the image is about setting the scene, the subjects’ environment, or conveying an atmosphere or emotion.”*

Maybe natural history photographers see the photograph of a habitat as being more suited to the landscape genre? Interestingly the RPS Landscape Distinction Guidelines includes landscape photography *“as the photographic portrayal of all elements of the land, sea and sky whether natural, or influenced by human behaviour. Examples include mountains, coasts, bodies of water, forests [and] industrial areas.”*

So possibly there is some overlap, but I think the creation of a habitat photograph is part of natural history photography. It sets the scene; it should be informative, and it should stand alone as a good image in its own right. The challenge is to get a good composition.

Throughout my career when managing land for nature conservation it was an important requirement to photograph the various habitats. Next time you are out and about with your camera have a look at your surroundings, and consider photographing the habitat as well as individual species.

"The Nature Photographer's Code of Practice" offers advice when photographing a rarity and this is just as important for the photograph of a habitat in a sensitive location. The code states:

"If an image of a rarity is to be published or exhibited, care should be taken that the site location is not accidentally given away. Take care that your photograph does not contain any clues as to the whereabouts of the specimen; this is particularly important in wide-angle photographs. Sites of rarities should never deliberately be disclosed except for conservation purposes."

Images:

- 1 Open freshwater with emergent vegetation dominated by common reed. Beyond are mature stands of crack willow.
Tetney Blow Wells Nature Reserve, Lincolnshire.
- 2 Lowland heath, dominated by heather with scattered silver birch and Scot's pine. Skipwith Common National Nature Reserve, South Yorkshire.
- 3 Ancient permanent pasture with green-winged orchids and cowslips, surrounded by mature hedgerow, oak and willow.
Heath's Meadows Nature Reserve, Lincolnshire.
- 4 Waste ground, ideal for opportunist plants including buddleia, evening primrose & common nettle. Lincoln.
- 5 Lowland peat bog with hair's-tail cotton grass and decaying birch.
Crowle Moors Nature Reserve, Lincolnshire.
- 6 Saltmarsh dominated by sea lavender and sea purslane. Lincolnshire Coast Coronation National Nature Reserve.
- 7 Mature oak/ash woodland with a shrub under-storey of hawthorn and blackthorn.
Hoplands Wood Nature Reserve, Lincolnshire.
- 8 Carboniferous limestone with flower-rich grassland and scattered scrub.
Derbyshire Dales National Nature Reserve.



Penguins of The Falkland Islands

Part 2 - Gentoo Penguins - *Aptenodytes patagonicus*

by Dawn Osborn FRPS



Continuing with my previous coverage of my love of The Falklands and Penguins. Of the five species found on the Islands - King, Gentoo, Magellanic, Rockhopper and Macaroni - it is the Gentoos I love the most. All Penguins are extremely agile in the ocean but when it comes to putting on a show the Gentoos do it best! There isn't much I enjoy more than spending time down on the beach when the Gentoos are surfing ashore. Its my favourite form of 'sports photography'.

Gentoos are 'brush-tailed' penguins, the others in this group being Chinstrap and Adelie and in common with other penguins they are torpedo shaped. Gentoo stand about 2ft tall, with a blackish back, a white belly and a white patch above the eyes that extends over the head; yellowy orange coloured feet and a red and black bill with a bright red gape. They are very sociable birds

and nest in large colonies or rookeries, making their nests out of anything to hand - pebbles, grass, tussac, diddledee, etc.

Colonies may contain 200 - 300 breeding pairs and can often be found a mile or more from shore - a long way for a penguin to walk! Egg laying usually begins in late October with young hatching from late November into early December. The young grow quickly on a diet of Lobster Krill, Squid and small fish. While they are still young, one parent will stay and the other will go to sea for food. As the young penguins grow it becomes necessary for both parents to go to sea and young gentoo will collect in creches. Depending on the season, by the end of December the chicks can be seen chasing adults to be fed and by the end of February juvenile penguins will be fully moulted and ready to go to sea.

An adult Gentoo calling.



A young Gentoo with its parent





Eggs and young penguins are vulnerable to predation from Skuas, species of Gull and Striated Caracara, often working in pairs. Care should always be taken around the colonies and nests not approached too closely to avoid causing adults to leave their nests vulnerable to these predators who are quick to take advantage of such things. Sitting quietly, curious adults will frequently come close enough for wide angle shots.

When Gentoos approach the shore they will usually be in groups, swimming to and fro inside a wave, allowing the waves to bring them in until they deem the time is right to make a burst for shore. They may be looking for a landmark or perhaps more likely, checking for predators on the beach. The 'cruising' speed of a Gentoos is about 5 miles an hour, but when approaching shore there is always the danger of predators such as





Gentoos porpoise to shore



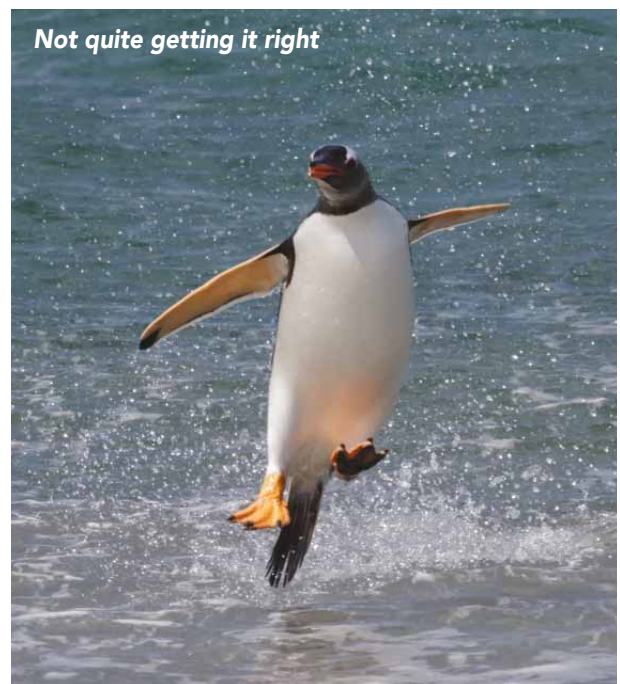
Coming ashore



Creating disruption in the water to confuse predators

Leopard Seals, Southern Sea Lion Bulls and pods of Orca that may be patrolling the waters near to the shore. The Gentoos' speed accelerates as they near shore, frequently changing direction and porpoising to avoid any lurking predators before eventually rocketing out of the sea and surfing to the beach. This is where their 'brush tail' comes in useful as it creates disruption in the water and helps to make them more difficult for predators to spot from below the surface. As they near shore its feet down for a good landing rather than a belly flop! It's challenging for the photographer to pick up on just one and track it as it approaches the shore - you never quite know where it might reappear and sometimes they'll just disappear completely. One thing is for certain though - Gentoos never disappoint!

Kit used: Canon cameras: DSLRs and Mirrorless plus lenses in range of focal length lenses including: 24-70, 70-200, 100-400, 100-500 and 300mm + 1.4X/2X extenders.



Not quite getting it right



Two Gentoos approaching from inside a wave



Arriving at the beach



Bursting from the surf



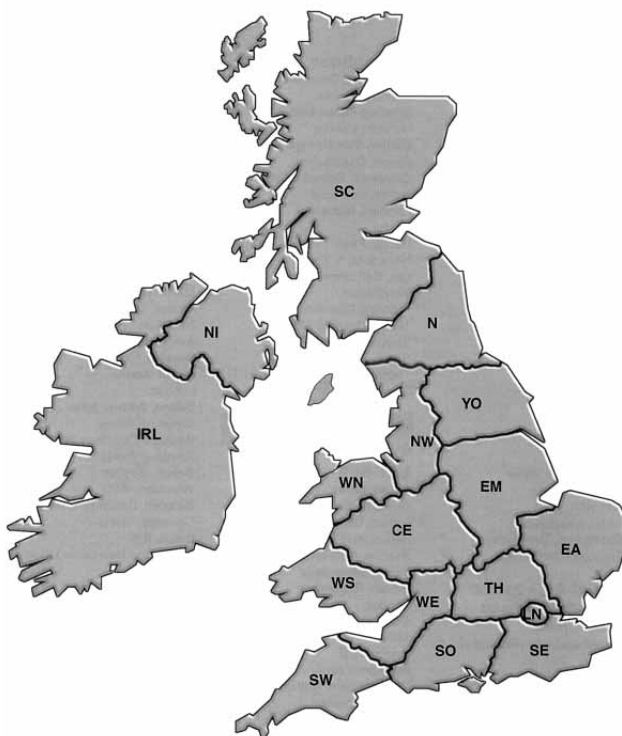
Using the tail to create disruption in the water



Surfing down a wave

Membership Statistics

Shown below are Nature Group members by RPS Region together with Regional Codes and other statistics.



Regions:	Jan 2024	Jan 2023
1 - Central	55	59
2 - East Anglia	99	93
3 - East Midlands	66	60
4 - Eire	14	8
6 - London	77	66
7 - North Wales	6	8
8 - North Western	50	51
9 - Northern	28	25
10 - Northern Ireland	3	3
11 - Scotland	69	58
12 - South Eastern	84	84
13 - South Wales	16	17
14 - South Western	40	33
15 - Southern	72	76
16 - Thames Valley	68	68
17 - Western	81	77
18 - Yorkshire	49	48
Total UK + Eire:	877	834
*Overseas:	69	65
Total Membership:	946	899
*Includes the Isle of Man and Channel Islands		
Distinctions:	Jan 2024	Jan 2023
Honorary FRPS:	3	3
FRPS:	67	66
ARPS:	252	250
LRPS:	252	239
No Distinction:	372	341
Total:	946	899



Dryad's Saddle



Vapourer Moth ovipositing

Obituary

Trevor Davenport ARPS.

It is with great sadness that I have to report the passing of a much valued member of the Nature Group.

Trevor was a superb photographer and always very supportive of both the Nature Group and The Iris. Our Past NG Chair Tony Bond FRPS told me :
"Trevor was fortunate to live close to the very distinctive habitats of the Sefton coast and was well known to the staff of Ainsdale NNR. He shared this knowledge with members of the Nature Group by leading several field meetings and introducing us to the distinctive features of the dune slacks and their orchids. In addition, I went with him on several April evenings to photograph Natterjack Toads. This relied on sound local knowledge as to whether they were active and vocalising which only occurred on warm evenings. I also have fond memories of several visits we made to Blists Hill Victorian Town, one of the Telford group of open air museums which is relatively close to where Trevor used to live. He was a keen supporter of West Bromwich Albion and attended all their home games until travelling became too much for him. His car had a number plate which began WBA! He was a stalwart of Southport Photographic Society and played a big part in their exhibition for many years. He will be sorely missed."

Glanville Fritillaries on Dandelion seed head



Hebridean Wildlife highlights.

by Richard Revels FRPS



Black Cuillin hills with fishing boat on Loch Scavaig.

In common with many Nature Group (NG) members, birds are usually high on my list of wildlife to photograph and the British Isles has (or had before Bird Flu) some outstanding bird colonies on various islands around the northern and western coast.

I have visited a number of bird islands over the years, the Farne Islands and Bass Rock being two that I have visited many times. Regrettably the birds on both these islands seem to have suffered badly from Bird Flu, with many fatalities. In the past the seabirds on those islands took little notice of visitors and provided an ideal place to photograph bird behaviour, including in flight pictures. However, with these and other island colonies now 'closed' to visitors due to Bird Flu, I expect you may be considering other species of wildlife in other locations.

Over the years I have visited a number of larger islands around Britain and Ireland that have a wider range of habitats and wildlife. If possible I always prefer to stay for (at least) several days on the islands I visit. This allows me to get to know the place much better, and discover the best places and times to photograph the wildlife. Although B&B's can work well, I prefer to hire a self-catering cottage that allows full control of meal times; so the time spent taking pictures is entirely in my hands.

One of my favourite places to explore with my camera at the ready, is a group of islands collectively known as 'The Hebrides' located in the North Atlantic off the west coast of mainland Scotland. I have visited several Hebridean islands a number of times over several decades. Although mostly lacking large colonies of breeding coastal sea birds, they will have many other species of birds on each island, some of which have

now become rather scarce in many other parts of Britain; probably mostly due to the 'industrial' methods of modern farming that have become standard on many farms on the mainland; resulting in vast areas of land growing the same or similar crops, and leaving few places where wildlife can thrive.

On some Hebridean islands there is likely to be a range of different habitats and farming, with associated wildlife including several bird species that were once far more common across many areas of mainland Britain. I was pleased to see farmland birds on the Hebrides that I remember seeing as a small lad during the early 1950's around my father's rented smallholding in Bedfordshire. Today all that land and much more has been built on, and those birds plus most other wildlife has disappeared, so it was good to see several species still thriving on the Hebridean farms and crofts.

Hopefully some NG members will consider visiting these islands, as they offer some excellent opportunities to take pictures of a wide range of wildlife species as well as birds.

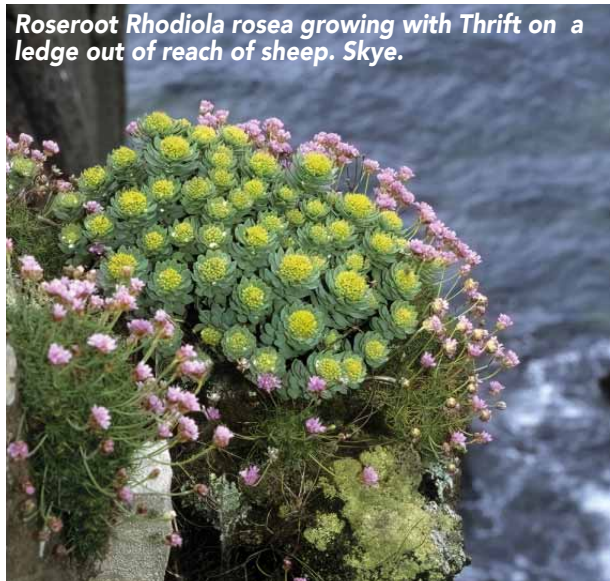
The Hebrides are made up of two island groups, the Inner and the Outer Hebrides. The largest island of the Inner Hebrides is the Isle of Skye, it is also the most



Black Cuillin hills along shore of Loch Scavaig near Elgol.



Sea Eagle flying in to take fish put out by boatman.



Roseroot *Rhodiola rosea* growing with Thrift on a ledge out of reach of sheep. Skye.



A view along a stream in Glen Brittle, with the Black Cuillin hills in background.

easily accessed being connected to mainland Scotland by a bridge. On Skye there are many varied habitats including upland hills and mountains, the most well-known being the Cuillin Hills that have a range of different upland wildlife. There are also many coastal habitats including cliffs, sandy and rocky shores and sea lochs. Inland there are freshwater lochs, rivers, heather heathlands, boggy areas and pastures, some being well grazed and others less so. Roadside habitats include a few places where rocks have been cut away through hill sides to make way for new roads; after a few years windblown soil has accumulated in crevices in the rocks and created habitats where rock specialist flora has established itself from seed blown from nearby places. Many other roadside verges have good and varied flora that includes several different orchid species. For me it's this mixture of habitats and wildlife that make Skye and the other Hebridean islands excellent places to spend a week or two exploring and photographing the varied wildlife.

Choosing which pictures to illustrate each of the islands wildlife was far from an easy task, however choosing my top bird picture of Skye, the Sea Eagle, was easy. They sometimes come down within easy camera range of a boat to take fish put out by the boatman. Being on a small rocking boat it can be challenging sometimes to find the bird in the view-finder, but I did manage to get several decent pictures, including pictures of them in flight also taking fish from the sea.

Several plants that I came across on Skye were new to me, with Roseroot flowering among Thrift on a coastal ledge being one of my favourites. This is a rather uncommon plant and I only found this plant flowering where it was out of reach of grazing sheep. Another wild flower that I have only seen on Skye is the Yellow Saxifrage that I found flowering on wet spring fed rocks beside the small road leading to Elgol.



Yellow Saxifrage *Saxifraga aizoides*, in its preferred habitat of flowing water over rocks.

Also found there and in a few other wet boggy areas were some insectivorous Sundew plants. All species of Sundew have a long sticky hair on their leaves that attracts and then traps visiting insects which the plant will then digest. The insects provide essential nutrients for these plants that only grow in waterlogged places. Although I have seen Sundew plants many times before in various boggy areas, it's always good to see them again and discover what prey they have managed to trap.

During July and August visitors to Skye are likely to find the Scotch Argus butterfly, which is a northern species most at home on rough damp grasslands and hillsides they also occur on several islands as well as lowland western and central Scotland. Although they are usually rather local, they can be plentiful in the best locations.

While exploring the coastal areas beside loch Scavaig near Elgol I found an area of partly dissolved limestone cliff overhang, which over many years had produced cavities in the limestone; this again was new to me. I have also found many other interesting plants, insects and birds on Skye, far too many to mention in this article.

The Isle of Islay is another island of the Inner Hebrides that I have stayed on several times. It has plenty of excellent wildlife to photograph. Unlike Skye a ferry is needed to get to Islay and I always book a space for my car in advance. A car can make an ideal mobile hide using a partly open window and a 'bean-bag' to rest a telephoto lens on, so is ideal for photographing roadside birds and mammals. A four wheel drive vehicle will enable better and safer access to off-road areas



Limestone cliff overhang with cavities in the limestone beside Loch Scavaig, near Elgol



On grassland habitats the Scotch Argus butterfly may be found during July and August on Skye.



A rocky shore with Thrift and Lichens on the rocks. Islay.



*The Common Sundew, *Drosera rotundifolia* or Great Sundew*



D. anglica with insect prey.



An early morning drive around the lanes rewarded me with several Roe Deer pictures.



A female Marsh Fritillary on Marsh Marigold flower.



Dippers are found along many rivers on Skye.



The Hebridean Marsh Orchid - an endemic species. North Uist .

including road verges and other rough places where two wheel drive cars may struggle or become stuck.

One of my highlights of photographing Islay's wildlife was having a pair of Marsh Fritillary butterflies pair just in front of me. This species was common in several areas of rough pasture near the coast and also in several other places I visited. A century ago this butterfly was a very local but widespread species across many parts of the UK mainland, however as land was drained, ploughed, or in other ways 'improved' by farmers to make the land more productive, it became unsuitable for this butterfly. Consequently the Marsh Fritillary has died out from most habitats in its former range. Today Islay holds one of Britain's best remaining populations of this endangered species.

Islay also holds a good population of Chough, a bird mostly found on pastures where it feeds on grubs in 'cow pats'. I have seen this species on every visit I've made to this island and I have managed to take some photographs of it. However, luck is needed to be in the right place at the right time in order to get a good close-up shot of this surprisingly attractive black bird.

On one occasion, while driving along a road beside Loch Indaal, I noticed various wading birds working the shoreline. These included a couple of Whimbrel, a bird I had not previously photographed. So I drove my car off road and parked on the stony shore area, waiting for them to come closer. My wait was rewarded with not only pictures of that rather scarce bird, but also Dunlin and several other wading species that were working their way along that same shore.

An early morning drive around the lanes often produces pictures. Most mornings I saw Roe Deer close to the road. I took several pictures of a Roe buck grazing in a pasture at just the right distance to enable photography. I took several pictures of it before it became alarmed and ran off when I turned off my car engine. In the east of the island I came across a Red Deer stag very close to the road, and I was able to take portrait images from the car. This stag had new antlers just beginning to grow and covered in velvet.

Brown Hares were frequently seen over much of the island and even when on foot they seemed fairly unconcerned by the presence of people as long as they did not approach too closely. I understand that Islay holds one of the best populations of Brown Hares in Britain. They were easy to photograph on every visit I made, both from the car window and sometimes while on foot.

I made one late winter visit to Islay, mostly to get pictures of the flocks of Barnacle Geese that overwinter

there, flying inland every morning to graze on farmland. The plan was to photograph the flocks as they fly inland against a dramatic sunrise sky, as my companion for that trip had done on a previous visit. Unfortunately it was overcast every morning of our stay, so I only managed record shots, but I suppose you cannot win them all!

Some 30 miles further west in the North Atlantic are the Outer Hebrides. I have visited a group of three islands several times during the past three decades, that are connected by a causeway road, these islands being North Uist, Benbecula and South Uist. To get there I have always taken the ferry from the harbour near Uig on Skye to Lochmaddy on North Uist. With limited accommodation on the Outer Hebrides I have always booked either a B&B or preferably a self-catering cottage well in advance.

One of the main attractions of these islands for me is the areas of shell sand known as the 'machair' that is just inland from the west coasts of both North and South Uist. Regular windblown shell sand enriches the soil producing ideal condition for many calcareous loving wild plants, together with associated insects and birds. The farms and crofts on the 'machair' are still mostly traditionally managed and includes crop rotation, where land is left fallow for a while after 3 or 4 years of cropping. Washed up seaweed after winter storms is often used to enrich the soil instead of artificial fertilizers. The Crofters use little or no weed-killer sprays so it is a fairly wildlife friendly place and still hold some species that have drastically decreased in recent times on most modern managed farms on mainland Britain. Further inland, in the central and eastern parts, sheep or cattle often graze the dryer pastures and heathland. There are also some boggy areas and freshwater lochs. In the east there are some upland areas that I have not visited.

I first visited South Uist during the mid-1990's and stayed on a farm beside Loch Aineort. While waiting for breakfast on the first morning we saw an Otter swimming in the loch about 100 yards away. It put in several more appearances during our stay and although I managed to get several pictures of it in the sea, it stayed in the water to eat the fish and crabs it caught. I was a little disappointed that I did not get pictures of it eating its prey on the rocks.

The day flying Short-eared Owl was regularly seen patrolling the countryside nearby. Eventually I managed a picture of one from the car sitting on a fence post, but it was several years later while staying on North Uist before I managed to get a picture of one in flight carrying a vole in its talons.



Machair, South Uist. A field headland with Birds-foot Trefoil Lotus corniculatus.



Red Deer stag with antlers in velvet.



Choughs were regularly seen in several areas of Islay.



Brown Hares are common on Islay. This picture taken from the car.



Marsh Marigolds in flower on a boggy area of Isle of Islay.



Whimbrel working the shore-line for food.



Skylarks are frequently seen singing from roadside posts on both North and South Uist.



Short-eared Owl sitting on a post beside the road, South Uist.

In dry weather a puddle of water will often attracts birds to come and bathe, so when a puddle was found along a farm track a wait in the car was well rewarded with several species of birds coming to bathe, including Snipe, Redshank and Ringed Plover, and some nice pictures were taken from the car window. On both North and South Uist Skylarks were commonly seen sitting on posts. In places the roads cut through areas of rough moorland and sometimes Curlews come close to the road that provided pictures. One big surprise for me on North Uist was finding a family of Whooper Swans on a loch, as I did not know they bred in Britain.

There is a small area of the dune slacks on North Uist that holds the world's only population of the Hebridean Marsh Orchid *Dactylorhiza eбудensis*, which was one of my target species, eventually I found several small colonies and I got my pictures of this great rarity. Many of those dune slacks also holds good populations of the Early Marsh Orchid *D. incarnate* including some of the red flowering subspecies *coccinea*. Although they were locally widespread in those dune slacks, none were seen flowering among or close to the patches of Hebridean Marsh Orchids; so it seems that the habitat requirements are slightly different for each species.

On South Uist the Corncrake was frequently heard but seldom seen; and it was several years later while staying on North Uist and visiting the Balranald NR during mid-May, that I managed to photograph this rather secretive and rare bird. Lapwings also seem to be a declining bird in many parts of mainland Britain but they were frequently seen on these islands, and when one circled around me in the sky as I walked along a farm road to the coast, I took the opportunity to take pictures of it in flight.

On the boggy peat wetland areas in some central and eastern parts of these islands there are populations of the *scotica* form the Large Heath Butterfly on the wing in late June and July. The *scotica* form found here and in other parts of northern Scotland have smaller spots on their wings compared to the more heavily



Corncrake calling in mid-May on North Uist.



Action shot of the Sea Eagle with fish.

spotted form *davas*, found further south in the few remaining sites for this butterfly in northern England and Wales. This butterfly is restricted to areas of the boggy peat mosses and damp moorland where the main larval foodplant Hare's-tail Cottongrass grows, together with its main nectar source Cross-leaved Heath. In the small shallow lochs there were populations of the native White Water-lily in flower that has now become scarce or has completely gone from many parts of mainland Britain.

There are of course many more species of plants, insects and birds on the islands than those mentioned here, so whatever your main wildlife interest is, the Hebridean islands are likely to provide some good opportunities to find interesting and colourful subjects for your cameras. I think it's good to keep expanding both your interests and your photographic skills.



Limestone cliff overhang with cavities in the limestone beside Loch Scavaig, near Elgol.

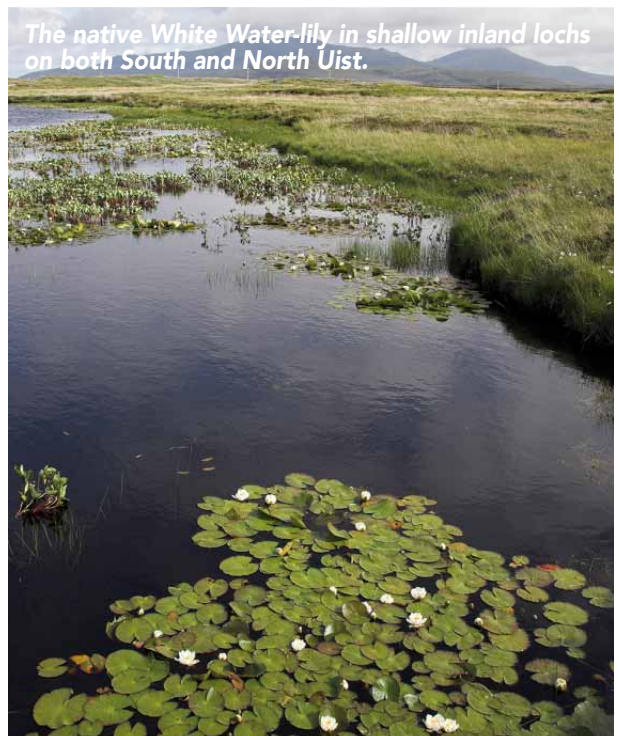
I hope this article will tempt some NG members to visit this group of wild, windy and sometimes wet islands. On days of inclement weather you can explore new areas for potential subjects to photograph when the weather settles down. The Hebrides have some excellent wildlife subjects and some pretty good landscapes too.



The red flowering form of the Early Marsh orchid.



Brown Hares are common on Islay, and often fairly approachable even when on foot.



The native White Water-lily in shallow inland lochs on both South and North Uist.



A surprise was finding a Whooper Swan family on North Uist. June 2009



A Dune Pansy and Forget-me-not - common on the machair.



Large Heath butterfly occurs on damp peaty mosses on both North and South Uist.



A Lapwing in flight on North Uist.



A puddle on a North Uist farm track provided a bathing place for this Ringed Plover.

Short-eared Owl flying with Vole prey on North Uist.

