

Looking local for your wildlife pictures.

by Richard Revels FRPS

As I write this article in the spring of 2011 the price of fuel is rocketing and the idea of travelling great distances to take pictures is becoming less attractive by the day. Searching locally for your wildlife pictures is likely to become a serious alternative to jumping into your car and driving for an hour or two to well known favourite destinations. Is this really such a bad thing? I think not. Getting to know your local patch will not only provide you with some great pictures, but also open your eyes to a wide range of nature that is close at hand.

Where do you start? If you don't have access to a local 'wild' area, joining your local Wildlife Trust is likely to give you access to a number of reserves that you can visit in your area. The RSPB also have many reserves spread across Britain and joining is well worth the membership fee. However any local wood and almost all uncultivated areas could be rich in wildlife of one kind or another, but remember that unless there is public access, permission to enter private land should be obtained before visiting. Some road verges can be surprisingly good, particularly for plants and insects.

Another organisation worth considering joining is your local Natural History Society. Besides having field and indoor meetings throughout the year, joining will enable you to meet local experts in various orders of wildlife and they can open your eyes to a

whole range of natural history subjects that maybe you have not noticed before. Any records of what you find will also be of interest to the county recorders.

However, the easiest and best location to undertake nature photography will in be your own garden (assuming you have one). By putting up bird feeders you can attract a range of local birds and maybe even some less common winter visitors. One big advantage in creating your own bird feeding station is that you can tailor make it for photography. Another is that in the winter after an hour or so in your hide, you can pop back into your house to warm up with a nice cup of tea whenever you fancy.

To this end, as winter starts, I remove the old dead tomato plants from my greenhouse and convert part of it into a bird hide. This I do by replacing a pane of glass at one end with a sheet of hardboard in which a hole has been cut large enough for my lens to poke through. This area of the greenhouse is then converted into a dark hide by draping black ground covering material (available from garden centres) from the greenhouse roof. This is light-weight and easily clipped up inside my greenhouse and keeps me in semi-darkness and well hidden. With a padded seat to sit on, it can be a pleasantly comfortably and warm place to spend an hour or so in the winter, even when it is freezing outside.



A Redwing thrush feeding on Cotoneaster berries in my garden.



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Although most of the birds that visit your garden will be common species, occasionally something different turns up. However the challenge should always be to produce a better Blue Tit or Goldfinch picture than you had before, rather than just adding a different species to your library of images. Various perches for them to pose on can be placed near the feeders in just the right position and distance for photography when it is your own site. These 'props' should be changed frequently to avoid repeating pictures. I hammer several stakes into the ground near the feeders and tape small branches to them. Two feeders are hung from a stand and two more are placed in a small apple tree a few feet away. I also have an old table beneath the feeders with a branch or a piece of bark on it and food is scattered around the table. The choice of providing suitable and different perches is endless and when your feeding station is in your own garden, you can position everything just as you wish. Planting berry bearing shrubs like Cotoneaster or Sorbus trees in your garden will provide food for various Thrush species every winter, and if you are lucky may even bring in rarer birds like Waxwings.

Garden flowers will bring in a range of nectar feeding insects. Almost all the flowers and shrubs in my garden are there because they are attractive to wildlife. They need not be native British plants, but I do tend to grow mostly native flower species myself. My favourites include Marjoram, Scabious, Corn Marigold, Knapweed, Buddleia, Red Valerian, and Pink Sedum, but there are many others that will also bring in nectar seeking insects.

- 1 *The trusting Robin frequently comes to my feeding station, but seldom stays for more than a minute or two. This one posed for me while I was in my greenhouse hide.*
- 2 *One of my favourite garden birds is the Goldfinch. These stunning birds come frequently to my feeding station every winter and are easy to photograph from my greenhouse hide.*
- 3 *Spring starts as far as I am concerned when the frogs in my garden ponds start spawning in March. Despite having plenty of pictures already, I cannot resist taking a few more shots each spring.*
- 4 *The larvae of the 7 spot ladybird eating black-bean Aphids on the broad bean crop in my garden.*

1 *In recent years the Silver-washed Fritillary butterfly has become established in Chicksands Wood, near Shefford, and several other woods in Bedfordshire. Although often very flighty, when feeding on bramble flowers, you can get close enough to take pictures of them.*

2 *The Raspberry Clearwing Moth (*Pennisetia hyalaeformis*) is a recent arrival to Britain but seems to be spreading rapidly. Last June I put out a pheromone lure next to my raspberry canes and several males soon appeared. Using my high-speed flash equipment I was able to get a series of in flight photos as they flew by.*

3 *My favourite flower of my local NR site is the Bee Orchid which flowers in hundreds every June.*



Some vegetables also attract insects, particularly aphids, and I set a row of Broad Beans each year just for aphids and their predators. Some years the aphids can devastate the crop, while other years the predators soon get the upper hand. Over the years I have had dozens of pictures of aphids and their predators published in books and magazines, all taken in my garden. I am also keen to record how many different species of both adult and larvae of Ladybirds, Hoverfly and Bugs come to feast on the aphids in my garden.

I have dealt with making a garden pond before (The Iris, issue No.105 pages 9 - 13), and should you have space for a pond, it will attract many wildlife subjects. Frogs and Newts are likely to breed in garden ponds, and from late April into early autumn Damselflies and Dragonflies will also visit to do some egg laying. All these creatures make great subjects for the camera. Birds also frequently use the pond to bathe in.

I am fortunate in having a small local wildlife reserve just over a mile from my home. This was created when a shallow 'levelling lake' was dug about 10 years ago to take storm water from a nearby new industrial estate. Some of the land around the lake was sown with a wild flower seed mix and trees and shrubs have been planted in other places. This location has provided me with many good wildlife pictures over the past few years. I try to take at least one slow walk around here every week during the warmer months - my Macro lens and flashgun at the ready. Usually the slower I go the more I find. For me the appearance of several hundred Bee Orchids has been one of the highlights of this site.



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- 1 The splendid Purple Emperor butterfly seems to have established itself and is now seen regularly in Chicksands Wood. This male posed well for me as it fed on honeydew on an oak leaf.
- 2 Two male Coots fighting in a town park. In the countryside these birds would be very timid, but in town parks they have no fear of people.
- 3 A Waxwing feeding on a berry on an embankment in the middle of Biggleswade. Towns are the most likely places to find this winter visitor.



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My favourite local wood is about 8 miles away. There has been some excitement there in recent years, as Purple Emperor butterflies, not recorded in Bedfordshire for several decades, are now being regularly seen in the wood. These superb insects occasionally come down from the treetops and settle on the ground along the main ride. On very hot days one may even settle on you to drink your sweat! This happened to me last year. Another large butterfly the Silver-washed Fritillary is also being frequently found in this and also in several other Bedfordshire woods. Two other butterflies, the Comma and the White-letter Hairstreak, are also common at this location and can be easy to photograph as they feed. Last year I concentrated on photographing the Bumble Bees and Hoverflies of this wood, while waiting for choice butterflies to appear and added several new species to my library of pictures of these insects.

Park areas within towns that have lakes can be very good for photographing water dependant and other birds. The birds in such places will have little fear of people, indeed some will expect to be fed when people are around. This makes it very easy to get frame filling shots of birds like Coots and Moorhens that in the countryside may be very timid. Such places are ideal locations for improving yours skills at capturing birds in flight as they come and go. In the spring fighting may occur between birds as competition for mates and nesting territories are sorted out. Waxwings were seen in record numbers last winter and flocks of over 300 were reported in some local towns, giving almost everyone a chance to photograph this spectacular bird.

Every year I find the majority of my wildlife pictures have been taken from within a few miles of home, with many coming from my own garden. One thing to remember is that time spent travelling is time wasted, so think local!

On a different note, if you are thinking of trying for an RPS Distinction in Nature, pictures taken locally could provide you with all the images you need for your Associateship or even Fellowship. It is the quality of the pictures in the panel that will be assessed, not how far you travelled to take them.

To see more of Richard's pictures visit his Website:
www.richardrevelsphotography.com