

THE IRIS



MAGAZINE OF THE NATURE GROUP OF THE RPS

Winter 2012-13



Black-tailed Godwit calling - from a successful Fellowship panel by Kevin Elsby FRPS

The RPS Nature Group Annual Exhibition 2012



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Copy should be sent as .txt or .doc files by email or on CD. Please do not send hand written copy.

Digitally captured photographic images are preferred but scanned transparencies are also acceptable. All images should be supplied on CD as sRGB Tiff files, 1800 x 1200 pixels (6" x 4" at 300 ppi, file size approx 6.17MB). Original transparencies may be submitted, however, the Editor is unable to estimate how long they may be away from the author.

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Centre	Annual Exhibition 2013 Entry Form

The centre pages of this issue form the Entry Form for the Nature Group's own Annual Exhibition. The centre pages can be removed from this issue without removal/damage to any articles or pictures. Please use it to support your exhibition - send in an entry. There are sections for prints and projected digital images and classes for both subjects that 'do' things and subjects that don't.

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Nature Group Exhibitions

Copies of Nature Group Exhibitions dating back to 2000, are available to book for camera clubs/photographic societies. 2000 to 2007 are available in slide format. Since 2008 a CD of the Exhibition has been produced and is available for purchase. For more information please contact the Exhibition Secretary, details above or go to our website: www.rpsnaturegroup.com

Editorial

I am writing this at the end of August - for a variety of reasons it was necessary to complete *The Iris* early this year. The 'summer' if you can call it that, finally arrived in my part of the UK about a week and a half ago - too hot and too humid! Keeping up with the garden has been a struggle this year as the mild wet weather has encouraged growth but it has not been so good for flowers, especially my roses! The wild environment does not seem to have fared too much better either - some sites which last year were too dry for growth were too wet this year and again failed to put on a good display of flora.

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate committee member Kevin Elsby FRPS on his successful Fellowship submission which is reproduced in this edition of *The Iris*.

Also in this issue are interesting articles with excellent images from places both at near to home and far away. Trevor Davenport ARPS gives shares his knowledge of the Sefton Coast in Lancashire, while Bev Ward LRPS gives a personal account of the recent Residential Field Meeting at Malham Tarn. Richard Nicoll ARPS tells us of his encounters with Short-eared Owls at Wicken Fen. From further afield David Cantrille FRPS reports on his adventures in Florida, USA, while Krystyna Szulecka gives a report on Floral Treasures of the Argentinian Patagonia Steppe. Trevor Davenport ARPS also reports on the Field Meeting held at Ainsdale Dunes. Don't miss the Field Meeting announcement and the two book reviews. Finally, continuing on from the recent 'Unnatural Selection' and 'Damn the judges' are some further thoughts about our own exhibition by Kay Reeve FRPS.

Every two years the existing committee invite the membership to nominate members to join the committee. More information is on page 25 together with a proposal form which will also be available on the website. Why not become more involved in the future of the Nature Group and put yourself forward for a place on the committee?



From the chair

It seems only yesterday that I wrote my last 'From the chair' – and, looking out of my study window, the weather hasn't changed much either! It's hard to remember a summer so wet and windy.

The issue of 'focus stacking' has drawn a single response – in favour – and the Committee's decision is outlined in the 2013 Exhibition Conditions of Entry, published in this issue of 'The Iris'.

Please support the 2013 Exhibition with your prints and/or projected images – but read the Conditions of Entry and the Entry Form carefully before preparing and sending your images. Failure to comply with the conditions is likely to result in your entry being disqualified!

The RPS will be staging a Special Interest Groups exhibition, in March 2013 and Committee have been given the unenviable task of selecting just two images to represent the work of the Nature Group. Given our large membership, the very wide range of subject matter tackled by members, and the tremendously high standard of images selected for our own exhibition, this should be a real challenge.

The Exhibition will be on show at Fenton House and will then be available to Special interest Groups, Regions and camera clubs.

If you have not already set up an image portfolio on the main RPS website, please try to do so! Anyone who is a member of the RPS can set up a portfolio and update it as they wish; it is not an onerous task and I would encourage Nature group members to set up portfolios – this is a window for the world to see what we do. Please try, though, to make the content natural history based!

We have had a good range of field meetings this year. My thanks to Len Shepherd for organising a field day at Waitby Greenriggs, followed a very successful weekend at Malham Tarn Field Centre – it was good to meet up with everyone and, despite the weather (the wind was a real problem), to obtain some interesting images.

Thanks also to those who organised and supported day trips. The Ainsdale and Ryewater days were well attended (although the weather at Ainsdale left a lot to be desired, and Ryewater had suffered from the weather earlier in the year). Unfortunately the Brandon Marshes day was cancelled owing to a lack of interest.

Richard Revels' Birds of Prey day illustrated the pitfalls of wildlife photography even under controlled conditions – a wild Kestrel nested in the area set by for photography so the event had to be postponed until September. Further misfortune – the owner of the site decided to sell his birds so the day has been cancelled, and all of Richard's efforts in setting up the day have come to nothing.

Please consider organising field days in 2013. Despite the perception that health and safety issues are a problem there are documents to support you, and if the venue and subjects are interesting enough then members will attend.

The residential weekend next year will be the last one I will organise and will be held at Preston Montford Field Centre, Shrewsbury, Friday 9th to Monday 12th August, following on from my Insect Photography course. We'll be concentrating on close-up and macro work. Full booking details will be published in the Spring issue.

Once again thanks to all my Committee.



John Bebbington
August 2012

The Treasures of the Sefton Coast

by Trevor Davenport ARPS

It is a surprising fact that the largest dune complex in England lies to the west of the industrial areas of Merseyside and Lancashire between the estuaries of the Mersey and Ribble. This duneland, covering some 22 kms in a narrow, gentle curve on the edge of the Irish Sea, is one of the finest and most important dune complexes in Europe, enclosing a variety of nationally scarce habitats such as fixed dunes, mobile dunes, dune slacks and dune heathlands. As habitats of this nature are under constant threat and in decline, the area is becoming ever more important as an example of the wealth of species diversity, both botanical and animal, that these habitats maintain.

Our journey begins above the town of Bootle, which is about 6 km north of Liverpool. Here there is a man-made 'shingle beach' produced from 'war-spoil'; supposedly, rubble from the residue of demolished houses that were bombed in the second world war. The aging shingle contains a number of unusual plants including the delightful Yellow-horned Poppy (*Glaucium flavum*).

Further north, near the mouth of the River Alt is the Altcar Training Camp, where, for six days a week, our soldiers practice at the shooting ranges. This restricted area supports almost 25,000 spikes of the beautiful Green-winged Orchid (*Anacamptis morio*) in May. This is the largest count of this declining species in the northwest of England and may be visited with permission on guided walks on Fridays. The undisturbed meadows of the ranges are flushed with colour each spring with orchids of several different species and many hybrids, as well as spring flowers of many declining species. Mowing is purposefully delayed each year until late July by which time seeds for next year will have been ripened.

Many birds find refuge at the camp, and the Alt Estuary itself is part of a series of internationally important estuaries for migrating and wintering wildfowl and wading birds, holding, at times, over 50,000 birds including Pink-footed Goose (*Anser brachyrhynchus*); Redshank (*Tringa totanus*); Knot (*Calidris canutus*); Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limosa lapponica*); Sanderling (*Calidris alba*) and Grey Plover (*Pluvialis squatarola*). Wintering skeins of honking Pinkfeet containing several hundred individuals are one of the highlights of mornings and evenings throughout the area.

North of the camp lies Cabin Hill National Nature Reserve, a quiet 30ha area of former sandwinning works and borrow pits which has naturalised into seasonally flooded areas rich in wildlife.

A short distance further north is an amazing 'blow-hole' known as Devil's Hole; a huge wind scoured hollow about twice the size of Wembley Stadium and the largest in the dune system. In the damp bottom of the crater plant rarities such as Grass of Parnassus (*Parnassia palustris*); Marsh Helleborine (*Epipactis palustris*); Wintergreen (*Pyrola rotundifolia*) and Bog Pimpernel (*Anagalis tenella*) can be found, together with the Red Data listed Northern Dune Tiger Beetle (*Cicindela hybrida*) - a fast moving predator unique to this area and a small part of Cumbria.

Continuing north is an extensive area of sandhills known as Ravenmeols and Lifeboat Road. This is a remote and undisturbed network of hills and hollows clothed in Marram Grass (*Ammophila arenaria*) and a wealth of wild flowers to delight the heart of any botanist. This year, after weeks of unseasonal rain, this area has produced a flower display to equal any that might appear in the desert after the first rains. It brought to mind TV spectaculars from Namaqualand or California with swathes of bright blue Harebells (*Campanula rotundifolia*) amongst the golden grasses; Ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*) providing nectaring for Dark Green Fritillaries (*Argynnis aglaja*), and some 5000 Pyramidal Orchids (*Anacamptis pyramidalis*) on the northern slopes. (It's been an excellent year for Bee Orchid (*Ophrys apifera*) too.) On the more exposed areas the umbels of Sea Holly (*Eryngium maritimum*) are a favourite nectaring plant for Grayling butterflies (*Hipparchia semele*).

Perhaps the most famous, and the most visited, parts of the Sefton Coast, are the pinewoods and beach at Formby. Here is the central area for the Red Squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*) which, until recent outbreaks of squirrel-pox, were easy to see in good numbers. Today, they are making a slow recovery from the disease and numbers are increasing. The pinewoods at Formby and Ainsdale can be a splendid location for fungi hunting in good years with an outstanding variety of species including Earthstars (*Geastrum spp*) and many others. Recent years have been somewhat disappointing for fungi but hopefully this year may prove an exception after the rains.

Continuing towards the seaside town of Southport is a small but extremely rare habitat, recently acquired by the Lancashire Wildlife Trust, known as Freshfield Dune Heath. Now under restoration and open to the public, this tiny fragment of dune heathland is almost all that remains of this habitat in northern England, and is home to specialised species such as the endangered Sand Lizard (*Lacerta agilis*). A recent release of about 90 young lizards will, hopefully, establish a good breeding population. A number of other specialised plants and animals live here including one of my favourites - the Emperor Moth (*Saturnia pavonia*).

North from Formby lie the holiday beaches of Ainsdale, Birkdale and Southport but behind these popular beaches are excellent areas of fixed and mobile dunes. Ainsdale Sand Dunes National Nature Reserve and Ainsdale Sandhills contain some superb habitat for a number of rare and endangered species including the Natterjack Toad (*Epidalea calamita*), Northern Dune Tiger Beetle, and Sand Lizards. The dune slacks are home to a number of dragonfly species and in specific locations there can be an abundance of moth and butterfly species. Moth species in serious national decline; e.g. Goat Moth (*Cossus cossus*); Forester Moth (*Adscita statives*) and Portland Moth (*Actebia praecox*) are recorded annually here. In a small area near to the Ainsdale Discovery Centre an irruption of White Satin Moth (*Leucoma salicis*) has occurred for the past two years with up to 1000 individuals of this lovely moth species fluttering gently about during late May and early June.

North from Ainsdale, commencing at Sands Lake, is a long narrow strip of outstanding dunescape known as the Birkdale Sandhills. For me this is a special area, rich beyond measure in plants, insects and in scenic beauty. On the seaward side is an area of great scientific interest known as 'The Green Beach' - a narrow strip of newly-formed dunes, some 5 km long - containing a large number of plants (over 300 vascular plants now recorded), insects and Natterjack Toads. Each year during August, a group of hardy souls spend summer nights searching for the extremely rare and endangered Sandhill Rustic Moth (*Luperina nickerlii*, sub sp gueneei), which is known only here and in North Wales.

Finally, to Southport and beyond; to the Ribble Marshes and the R.S.P.B. reserve at Crossens and Marshside; a must for keen birders and photographers with long lenses.





The Sefton Coast is, generally, an area of benign weather; indeed, a famous weather broadcaster is reputed to have said that Formby enjoys the best weather in the entire UK. Be that as it may, it can also be annoyingly fickle, and onshore breezes on soft summer days can test the patience of even the most dedicated insect photographer trying to capture a butterfly on a flower head dancing in the wind; and, as a group of us found earlier this year, the coast can sometimes throw the fiercest of storms our way.

All along this lovely stretch of coastline access is easy and seldom restricted. On hot, sunny days, the beaches at Southport, Ainsdale and Formby may be filled with the noisy confusion of sunseekers, cars and kite-surfers; but here, just a stones throw away, in the sandy, flower-filled folds of duneland, enriched with lark song, orchids and the sweet, heady fragrance of water mint, I seldom see a soul. I think I like it that way.



Wildlife in East Anglia – a successful Fellowship panel

by Dr. Kevin Elsby FRPS

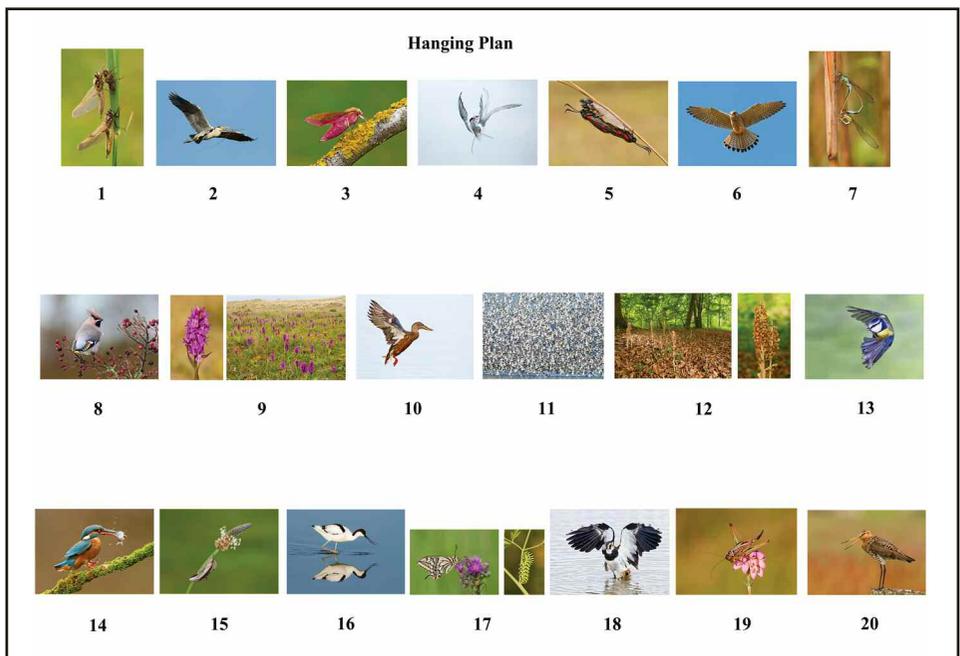
I gained my Associateship in 2008, on the theme of 'Birds in Action'. My panel depicted birds from many parts of the globe.

When I got around to thinking about submitting for my Fellowship, I was determined to include other groups of organisms in my panel. I consider myself a general naturalist, though initially I was a birder. Dragonflies, butterflies, moths, beetles, spiders, plants, mammals as well as birds are now the focus of my attention. With this new interest, my photographic skills developed and diversified and I bought the lenses, flash guns and other paraphernalia needed to photograph these subjects.

By choosing several groups for my panel, I hoped to demonstrate photographic competencies in these areas. I wanted my panel to show different photographic techniques, for example super telephoto, wide-angle, macro and multi-flash.

The theme I chose for my Fellowship submission was "Wildlife of East Anglia" and I set out to illustrate some of the wildlife to be found in my adopted county of Norfolk. I deliberately chose as many groups as I could, whilst still rendering the panel as a pleasing presentation.

Like I had done when submitting for my Associateship, I took advice from Richard Revels, who sits on the Nature panel. He made some very useful suggestions, but ultimately it was my decision which images I used. I was especially keen to submit the images with close up and environmental shots of the orchids in the same mount, and the adult and larval forms of the Swallowtail. I was uncertain how the panel may view this, but was inspired by reading something along the lines of 'pushing the envelope' in the FRPS booklet.



I submitted in the autumn of 2011. I passed the Nature panel, but when my panel of images went to the Fellowship board it failed - four images were not considered to be quite up to the standard required for Fellowship. Three were mammals, one was a flower.

Hindsight is a wonderful thing, and looking back now, I should have spotted that the mammals were indeed weaker images.

I took further advice from Richard, and one of the Fellowship board members, and the four images were replaced with four others, which I felt were stronger.

I resubmitted in June 2012 and was delighted to hear shortly afterwards that I had been successful.

Naturally, I was disappointed to have failed at the final hurdle on my first submission, but I hope that my experience may act as a stimulus to others who may fail at the first attempt (I believe I am not alone in failing first time around). Take on board the suggestions made by the Fellowship panel or board members and you may be successful the second time around.





Details of images used for my panel:-

1. Four-spotted Chaser Dragonflies emerging.
2. Grey Heron with nesting material.
3. Elephant Hawk Moth on *Xanthoria* species.
4. Arctic Terns fighting.
5. Six Spot Burnet Moths mating.
6. Kestrel hovering.
7. Blue-tailed Damselflies mating.
8. Waxwing in profile.
9. Southern Marsh Orchid
 - a) in environment. b) in close-up.
10. Shoveler taking flight.
11. Red Knot in flight.
12. Birds Nest Orchid
 - a) in environment. b) in close-up.
13. Blue Tit in flight.
14. Kingfisher with prey.
15. Lesser Swallow Prominent on Ribwort Plantain.
16. Avocet feeding.
17. Swallowtail butterfly adult and larva.
 - a) adult. b) larva.
18. Lapwing bathing.
19. Female Bog Bush-cricket on Cross-leaved Heath.
20. Black-tailed Godwit calling.

**Statement of Intent:-
Wildlife of East Anglia.**

There is a rich diversity of wildlife to be encountered near my home in East Anglia. My panel is intended to illustrate a selection of this variety. I have chosen several groups of species and, where possible, have attempted to illustrate some aspect of behaviour.

The subjects were chosen because they are among my favourite species and because they are good representatives of nature in the region. I visited many different habitats in order to take my photographs, including marsh, heathland, broads, woodland and coast, all environments typical of the area.

I have used various lenses to obtain the images displayed, including wide-angle, macro and telephoto. The composition is intended to be easy on the eye, leading to a coherent, bright panel, which reveals why East Anglia is such an attractive region for the wildlife photographer.





Macro and Landscape Photography at Malham, June 2012

by Bev Ward LRPS

I recently attended my first residential weekend at Malham with the Nature Group it won't be my last! I wanted to make more of my RPS membership so that was one of the reasons why I went and I wanted to get more involved. I am really glad I did.

I had a go at macro. I have the kit and I have the theory but very little practical experience, so a weekend dedicated to it was an ideal opportunity! Pure photography. Nothing better!

The weekend was well planned and we had access to a minibus at the centre where we were staying and which John Bebbington thankfully volunteered to drive, so we attended several locations all of which had much interest and variety. The Field Studies Centre where we stayed was also very pleasant and excellent value for money. The accommodation was warm (after a slight hiccup with the heating!) and spacious, lots of space for kit which was a boon. The onsite bar was also very welcoming after a day in the Dales particularly the bottled real ale! It was also very reasonably priced and the staff were friendly, approachable and knowledgeable.

Three days in the Dales gave me plenty of opportunities to put my macro theory to the test as a relative novice while still following my penchant for landscape - I took advantage of the opportunities to continue with that genre. I am pleased with results.

It is a rugged landscape and I hope my images are a demonstration of that with hard morning sunlight on limestone rocks but there was also a gentleness, as can be seen on Meadow-Framed Hill. Here the rocky, hard hill was approached by a meadow of colourful flowers receding towards the gentle slopes as the hill took shape and seemed to me like a rock surrounded by a colourful frame.

As for macro, I did encounter some challenges. My kit is good but I struggled with my Manfrotto 190X ProB. It has served me well for landscapes and events but left me wanting with macro. I don't think the 460MG 3 way magnesium head helped either - it was difficult to use under the circumstances, by which I mean low and close. As my tripod kit wasn't that accommodating I took a few images without it relying on my Sony Alpha's internal image stabilisation and it worked well. In fact, I tried taking images of bees yesterday and the tripod was definitely a hindrance, a monopod offered me much more choice, freedom and flexibility. One of the members had a Velbon tripod which seemed extremely well suited to macro work but I'm not sure which model it was. Either way, it was impressive.

I love the pastel out of focus background macro gives and the fact that this aspect of it causes the background to disperse into a blur causing the eye

to focus on the main subject which is sharp. I used extension tubes of various lengths and a 50mm prime Minolta lens. Needless to say, with windy conditions changing lenses/extension tubes gave rise to a dirty sensor which needed cleaning on my return home.

The wind was quite a challenge. It blew quite a bit on the hills. Where macro is concerned even a slight breeze seems like a gale at magnification, so it was a case of tuning in to my surroundings and feeling for the breeze noting a lapse so as to take a shot. One of the days it rained virtually all day, that's where I got 'In The Middle Of Nowhere' from, it wasn't far from our base, on the same land in fact. We stayed close to base in case the weather deteriorated further or in case it improved in which case we may have gone somewhere else. But for me it was a case of risking wet kit or going back to my room to process images which is what I decided to do. I was thankful of some time to do that as it was an action packed weekend.

I am aware that the Nature Group have quite stringent rules regarding processing. Being a relative novice in this area I am still not sure as to the specifics of that so my images have been processed in Lightroom 3.6 and have involved basic image editing such as crops, brightness, saturation, exposure adjustments, some sharpening and spot removal of dust spots on the sensor.

The amount of experience and knowledge amassed by the group was substantial and was tapped successfully throughout the weekend. Kit was demonstrated and explained, images and prints were shown, new friends were made and a good time was had certainly by me! I am looking forward to the residential weekend next year where I hope to gain more experience in the macro genre.



Book review

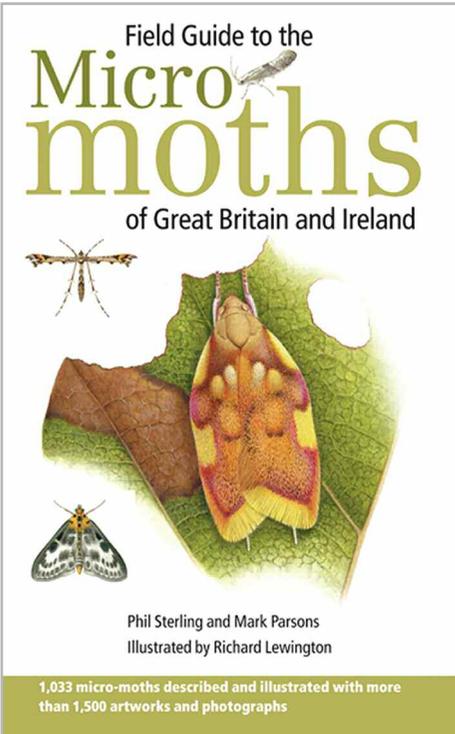
Field Guide to the Micro Moths of Great Britain and Ireland

Phil Sterling and Mark Parsons, illustrated by Richard Lewington

British Wildlife Publishing 2012
ISBN 978-0-9564902-1-6 (paperback),
978-0-9564902-2-3 (hardback).

Cover price £29.95

Available from British Wildlife Publishing and from Atropos Books



Over 1600 species of 'micros' occur in the British Isles and this book covers 1033 of them.

Detailed notes on flight periods, larval foodplants and (for most species) distribution maps are supported by Richard Lewington's superb illustrations of the moths at rest (resting posture is often diagnostic) and many excellent photographs of early stages and diagnostic feeding damage.

Although many species are quite distinctive and therefore reliably identifiable, there are others which are easily confused or misidentified, needing either voucher specimens or breeding out from larvae; the

authors have made it quite clear where this is necessary. County recorders need to have confidence in the accuracy of data submitted to them and may reject records which cannot be verified.

All in all this is a superb book, successfully tackling an almost impossible task with great skill and attention to detail and I cannot recommend it highly enough. Buy it and enter a world of tiny and fascinating moths, often of exquisite beauty!

Footnote: the photographic challenge!

Some 'micro' species are exquisitely patterned or spectacularly coloured and can be eye-catching when seen as a good print or projected image. However the smaller species present a challenge to the macro photographer, especially in the field, as they can be very 'twitchy' and may require image capture at high magnifications. If caught in a moth trap they can be photographed in controlled surroundings, but again twitchiness can be a problem.

In many closely related species colour and size may be critical identification factors and it is necessary to set the correct white balance and to include a scale bar in the image. It is virtually impossible to do this in the field, and difficult even in controlled surroundings, and a way of overcoming the problem is to photograph the edge of a ruler immediately after the specimen, ensuring that the magnification ratio is not altered. A section of the ruler can then be cut and pasted into the moth image, before any resizing is done, and the resulting image saved separately. My colleagues in Somerset have found this very helpful in confirming identification from photographs.

Finally never forget that the welfare of the subject is of prime concern. Many micro moths are short-lived and will die very quickly if 'tubed', so quick photography and early careful release are essential!

John Bebbington FRPS

Florida

by David Cantrille FRPS



Florida is a wonderful place for bird photography, as many wildlife photographers have discovered. The birds are more plentiful there than in the UK and they are also less wary of humans. There can be few more enjoyable wildlife experiences than kneeling on a beach with tripod, camera and long lens amongst a flock of Skimmers, or standing in shallow water whilst a Reddish Egret prances in front of your camera lens.

Over a number of winter visits to Florida, we have selected favourite places where the photography is almost always rewarding. One of these is near St Petersburg. Early mornings and late evenings should produce Great Blue Heron, Great Egret, Snowy Egret, White Ibis as well as many other shore-wading birds. The images of 'Skimmer landing' (above) and 'Snowy Egret running on water' (opposite) were taken here. Fishing piers also attract many Egrets and head shots of these birds are possible as they concentrate on the fishermen's catch. Brown Pelican (opposite) occasionally dive for fish and Cormorants forage below.

Our next port of call is usually the Venice Rookery. By 8 o'clock in the morning there is often a line of photographers waiting for the sun to come up over the surrounding buildings. The rookery is in a small lake in the middle of the coastal town of Venice





and one central island in the lake supports hundreds of Anhinga, Great Egret, Great Blue Heron, Cattle Egret, Night Heron and Double-crested Cormorant. As the sun comes up to warm the birds, the day begins with nest building activity, chick-feeding and fishing in the lake. The images of the Great Egret returning to its nest (top left) and Cormorant with fish (bottom left) were taken here.

Perhaps our favourite place of all is Estero Lagoon, near Fort Myers Beach. During the day this lagoon is full of people sunning themselves on the beach or wading through the surf, with hardly a bird in sight. However, if you arrive just after dawn, before people are up and about, the birds will be foraging for food. Reddish Egrets are the most amazing fishermen. They dance, jump, run in all directions, shade the water with their wings – all designed to confuse the fish and make them easier to catch. The images of Reddish Egrets were taken here. Roseate Spoonbills often roost in the trees around the lagoon but generally disappear at first light. Once however, we were lucky that two flew in to forage for food just near where we had set up our tripods. They were so close that we had to keep backing away to get them in our long lenses.

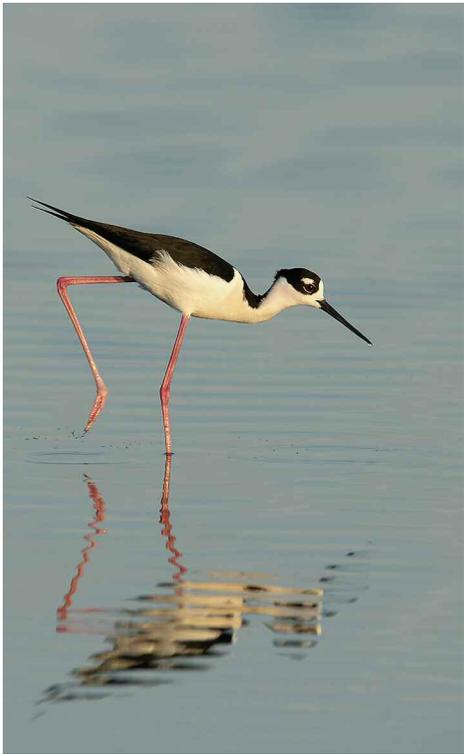
Another site worth a visit is Ding Darling Reserve on Sanibel Island, though this is variable in what bird life it produces and often the birds are too far away to photograph. There is a one-way four mile loop road around the reserve and one ticket will buy you a whole day so you can drive round as many times as you like. Sometimes a group of White Pelican may be feeding close to the road or a Raccoon family may pass nearby; on some visits we may see nothing worth photographing.

Our trip of April 2011 included some time at Merritt Island Nature Reserve on the Atlantic coast. It produced the shot of the Stilt (opposite) but not very much else in the way of birds. However, we were lucky enough to spot a Bobcat (opposite) who seemed unperturbed by our stopping the car and kindly posed for some shots.

A visit to Gatorland in Orlando was not productive - we were unable to enter until the sun was high and there were crowds of people around. I did get some shots of amorous Alligators though. We will certainly be back on the Gulf coast again next year, particularly in the areas where we have had the most success in past years.

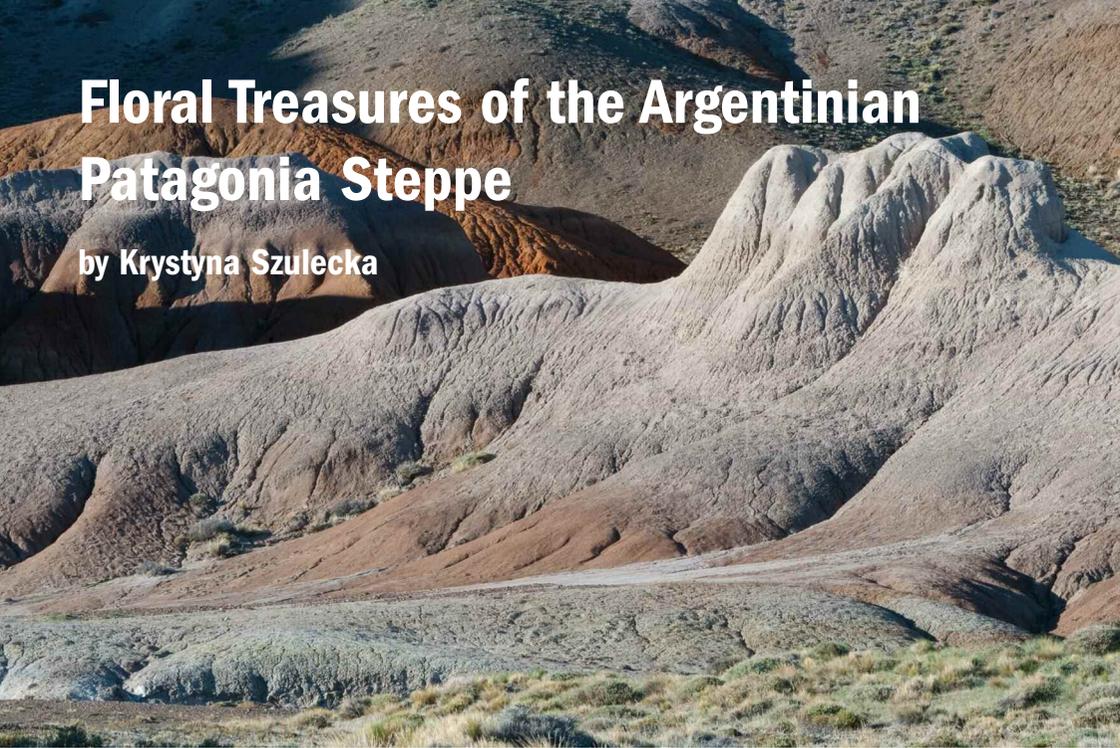
However many shots I get of a Great Blue Heron or White Ibis, I am convinced there is an even better one round the corner!

www.cantrillephotography.co.uk



Floral Treasures of the Argentinian Patagonia Steppe

by Krystyna Szulecka



Geographical location and climate

Patagonia lies in Chile and Argentina, between latitude 39°S and 55°S, and covers an area of more than 900,000 km². Politically, the boundary in the Southern Patagonian ice field remains to be settled. It has five distinctive habitats: ice fields, high Andes, forest, scrub and steppe. The steppe of Argentina is one of the largest single habitats in the world and its environment is shaped by low humidity, relentless winds and impoverished soil.

In the west and south the Andes shadow the steppe from the rain, resulting in a desiccated plateau that gives way towards the Atlantic Ocean to low, flat or gently undulating plains. The annual precipitation of 4m at the eastern foothills of the Andes (at about 42°S) drops over a distance of 180 km to the east to 15 cm. The moist Atlantic air increases the annual rainfall on the east coast to 24cm, allowing for lush vegetation.

Although the average annual wind intensity varies between 15 and 22 km/h, in spring and summer dry, dust laden, gusts of over 100 km/h are frequent. It takes the breath away of those who experience it.

Over 70% of the topsoil is coarse-textured sand or sandy-loam, poor in minerals and organic matter. In the hollows of the plains are freshwater lakes, ponds with brackish water or salt pans, intersected by the streams and rivers flowing into the Atlantic Ocean.

In pre-Columbian Argentina the Puelche and Tehuelche nomadic hunters lived off guanacos, foxes and rheas. Today only about 100 Tehuelche remain. Patagonia is still one of the most sparsely populated areas on Earth (1 person/square km). Over 95% of Argentinian Patagonia are under private ownership and only about 1% of the steppe and scrub habitats enjoy strict protection. Monte León National Park (Spanish: Parque Nacional Monte León), established in 2004 on a former 165,000 acre (~ 67,000 ha) sheep ranch in the east of Santa Cruz Province, is the latest and most significant attempt to preserve the region's unique flora and fauna. It's arid grassland is beautified by 40 km of Atlantic coast with breeding colonies of 60,000 pairs of Magellanic Penguins *Spheniscus magellanicus* and numerous marine Rock Cormorants *Phalacrocorax magellanicus*. With the declining sheep industry and increase in tourism two further ranches (estancias) have been purchased and their habitat protected by the provincial administration: Estancia la Esperanza (Ranch of Hope) located on the buffer zone of the Valdes Peninsula with a total size of over 15,000 acres (6,000 ha) and supported by the World Land Trust; and the Esperanza Reserve covering 17,000 acre (7,000 ha) with more than 12 km of coastline.

Biodiversity of the steppe flora

The whole of Argentina has an estimated 10,000 species of vascular plants (Zuloaga & Morrone, 1994-1999), while Argentinian Patagonia has about 2,400 (Correa, 1998), about half of which ~1000 species are from the Patagonian steppe (verbal communication from biologist Claudia Guerrido). Asteraceae (daisies) and Poaceae (grasses) families are the most numerous. There is a high number of endemic genera (~15) and species (~300). Endemism reaches 60% in the Leguminosae genus and 33% in Compositae. Other endemic species are in the genera *Benthamiella*, *Duseniella*, *Eriachaenium*, *Larrea*, *Llepidophyllum*, *Lycium*, *Neobaclea*, *Pantacantha*, *Philipiella*, *Prosopis*, *Saccardophyton*, *Schinus* and *Xerodraba*.

There are three main types of vegetative communities with varied proportions of plant coverage: semi-desert - 45%; shrub-steppe - 30%; and grass-steppe - 20%. The rest are near desert-like with sparse vegetation and small areas associated with rivers or permanent water sources, with more mesic plant communities, comprising mostly grasses, sedges and rushes, referred to as riparian meadows. The latter are generously covered with plants but also suffer most severely from land mismanagement.

Summer droughts, sandy soil and persistent winds, result in grassland plains too dry to support a forest but not parched enough to be classified as a desert. The plants are xeromorphic, morphologically adapted to cope with severe water deficits. Shrubs, like *Junellia tridens* and *Nassauvia glomerulosa*, have very small sclerophyllous leaves. Other plants are adapted to these adverse climatic conditions with a covering of glandular hairs or a waxy layer over the surface of their leaves. The dwarf cushion growth habit of the *Acantholippia*, *Benthamiella*, *Nassauvia* and *Verbena* genera, *Mulinum spinosum*, and *Brachyclados caespitosus* is another useful adaptation. The tuft grasses of *Poa* and *Stipa* have leaves with a thick cuticle, convoluted laminae and bunch growth habits. *Anarthrophyllum*, *Berberis* and *Schinus* represent shrubs growing up to 3m high. Valleys and lowlands with higher water levels provide habitats suitable for sedges *Eleocharis*, rushes *Juncus* and grasses *Agrostis*, *Hordeum*, *Polypogon*, while halophytic plants *Distichlis*, *Nitrophila*, *Puccinellin*, *Sarcocornia* inhabit the saline areas.

Many steppe plants are armed with spines to protect them from grazing herbivores. Their flowers are conspicuous to attract pollinators and in spring draw the eye of the observant visitor.





Conservation

The steppe is a fragile environment and does not easily recover when disturbed. Such areas are easily taken over by invasive, introduced, species, as is painfully evident along the side of newly built roads. The future of the region depends on conservation measures that will protect its remaining wilderness and wildlife. Animals in danger of extinction are always given priority and the Patagonian list is long: Ruddy-headed Goose *Chloephaga rubidiceps*, South Andean Deer *Hippocamelus bisculus*, Darwin's Rhea *Pterocnemia pennata*, Hooded Grebe *Podiceps gallardoi*, Patagonian Mara *Dolichotis patagonum*, Wolffsohn's Viscacha *Lagidium wolffsohni*, Guanaco *Lama guanicoe*, Grey Zorro *Dusicyon griseus* and the Southern Right Whale *Eubalaena australis*. However, even today Guanaco are openly shot by Estancia owners as they are deemed to compete with domestic animals for pasture while Rhea and other protected animals are also hunted.

Plants existence is link to the survival of all animals depending on them. Although trees like the *Araucaria araucana* from the higher Andean altitudes have found their way on to the Red List, there is no evidence that the precarious fate of many species of small plants of the steppe has even been noticed. Up to date the plants of the Patagonian steppe have also been given low priority in research and environmental campaigns. Keeping in mind that 'plants made us and the world we live in' (Iain Simpson Stewart, How to Grow a Planet), with this account I hope to make a small contribution and to draw public attention to the vulnerability and beauty of the treasures of the Patagonian steppe.



Advice for visitors to Patagonia

1. Plan ahead and research the trip.
2. Be prepared for cold and windy conditions. Take appropriate clothing; layers regulate heat and provide enough warmth not to have to light a fire.
3. Take high calorie food to reduce waste volume.
6. Carry a container of water.
7. Carry a small spade to bury human waste and a bag to take your rubbish back with you.
8. Avoid damage to fragile flora by using marked trails. If there are no trails walk on gravel, rocks, dry riverbeds/streams and/or hardy vegetation.
9. Avoid contaminating the water of lakes, rivers and streams.

Follow the motto:

Leave no trace.

Take only pictures away with you.

After M. Ferreyra, C. Ezcurra & S. Clayton: High Mountain Flowers of the Patagonian Andes (2006)

Short-eared Owl Invasion at Wicken Fen



by Richard Nicoll ARPS

Large numbers of Short-eared Owls (*Asio flammeus*) migrated to East Anglia during the autumn of 2011. At Burwell Fen, which forms part of the National Trust's Wicken Fen reserve in Cambridgeshire, up to 15 were recorded flying at the same time. By comparison during the previous winter I only counted 3 of these and subsequently there were far fewer opportunities to photograph them. The images I took that winter were all rather disappointing and distant but some of the behaviours I witnessed indicated that this species was well worth persevering with. A year later with better equipment, a lot of patience and enthusiasm I set out to see if I could do better.

Reports of large numbers of owls started to appear in mid to late October 2011, 50 were reported flying off the Norfolk coast, so I decided to go and see if any had turned up where they had been the previous year. The very first morning looked like it would be very disappointing as it was foggy. A brief glimpse of a Hen Harrier later and four owls were circling up into the blue sky above the gloom. What followed were weeks of patiently waiting, trying to find the 'best' locations, seeing what worked and didn't in terms of camouflage, hiding or simply sitting still.

During the time leading up to this I was also learning a lot about wildlife photography, having taken it up seriously the previous autumn. I was determined to learn as much as possible in order to improve my chances of getting some good images. It took me several weeks to get the camera set up correctly to get good images of both still and moving subjects while waiting for the right lighting conditions.





The hours spent observing this species led me to be able to identify individual territories. These seemed to be marked out by fences, ditches and other geographic features. One owl in particular made this job easier as it had some broken flight feathers which may have been caused by an encounter with a barbed wire fence. One day I came across one of the owls, dead, hanging from a barbed wire fence. A sad end for such a magnificent creature.

The owls would be most active after first light and late afternoon before sunset, although you could see them at any time of day, these seemed to be the best times. They would hunt for a while and

then vanish into the rough grassland. Their camouflage made them almost impossible to see after landing if you had not made a mental note of the exact location. After catching a rodent the owl would look around then immediately fly a short distance to eat it. This behaviour is unlike my observations of Barn Owls (*Tyto alba*) that seem to eat prey where they catch it, unless carrying back to feed their young.

When the owls first appeared there seemed to be so many that it was hard to know where to point the camera as they would suddenly appear, hunt for a while and then disappear back into the grasses. This number of owls led to many mid-air fights which I assume was territorial. An owl would see another and fly straight at it whilst screeching and with talons outstretched, sometimes interlocking in mid-air. I had seen similar behaviour the previous winter but between a Short-eared Owl and a Barn Owl. At first they did not seem to associate the clicking sound of the camera shutter with any danger. One owl in particular flew straight at the camera leading to a memorable image shown on BBC 'Autumnwatch Unsprung' on 2011-11-11.

News of all these owls soon spread and more and more people were turning up to see and photograph them. At times there were more photographers than owls. This led to the National Trust having to put up some very polite signs asking people not to



invade the wildlife areas in pursuit of their 'better' photographs. I witnessed many photographers in full camouflage gear and with very expensive equipment, who simply ignored these requests and headed right into the middle of the reserve. The silly thing about this situation was that one of the 'best' spots I found was in a small field surrounded by fencing and ditches with a convenient picnic table where you could sit in a bag hide and have the owls fly by at very close quarters. No need to disturb all that wild area at all.

It was from this location that I gained some very memorable images of a kestrel attempting to steal a rodent which one of the owls had caught. I had observed the previous year a barn owl being mobbed by a kestrel trying to steal its prey but all those images were too far away or not sufficiently sharp. This time they were a lot closer (but they are never as close as you want!) and had a fight for long enough to take of a sequence of images, not perfect but far better than previously. This image won a PAGB Gold Medal at the Rushden National Exhibition 2012 and was also a finalist in Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2012.

Over the coming months the number of owls declined dispersing into the surrounding areas. Perhaps in search of other habitats where the competition for prey species was not so intense. The folks at Wicken Fen are hoping that they will breed this year but there are no reports of this to date. Lets hope that we have another influx of these magnificent owls again this coming winter. I for one will be trying to improve on last winter's images.

Equipment used: Canon 7D; Canon EF 300mm f2.8 with 1.4 x converter; Gitzo tripod with Wimberley Head; Bag hide; Camouflage Clothing.



Field Meeting Report

Report on Field Trip to the Ainsdale Dunes, Saturday, June 9th, 2012 Trevor Davenport ARPS DPAGB

The front pages headlines on a national newspaper said it all: "Worst Storms for a Decade"! Welsh towns and villages flooded and dams at bursting point! Northern coasts battered by freak gales! Flaming June?! Flaming disaster more like! But nature photographers are a hardy species and eighteen brave souls assembled in the teeth of a howling storm at the Ainsdale Discovery Centre in the hope of seeing some of the treasures this locality has to offer. Predictably, the morning was a washout; however, the kindly folk of the Sefton Coast and Countryside Service gave us shelter in their meeting room, and, as the building was buffeted, Dr Phil Smith very kindly gave us a beautifully illustrated talk on the dragonflies of Britain and Europe.

The rain eased off after lunch and although the wind remained wicked the group set off to look at the area immediately close to the centre. Within the first 200 metres we had encountered numerous dune plants in flower and some *Asparagus* beetles (*Crioceris asparagi*) on the asparagus that grows happily here.



White Satin Caterpillar

In the first dune slack we marvelled at the first of the many hundreds of White Satin moths (*Leucoma salicis*) in all stages of development: eggs, caterpillars, (very photogenic), pupae and flying adults. These lovely moths are nationally uncommon but have irrupted here for the past two years in a spectacle to delight entomologists and photographers alike.

In the same dune slack we found good numbers of Bee Orchid (*Ophrys apifera*), Southern Marsh Orchid (*Dactylorhiza praetermissa*), Northern Marsh Orchid (*Dactylorhiza purpurella*) and a number of hybrids which Phil Smith kindly identified for us. Phil was also able to identify many of the rare grasses, rushes and sedges that grow here, and showed us many dune specialities such as Dune Helleborine (*Epipactis dunensis*), Marsh Helleborine (*Epipactis palustris*) and Grass of Parnassus (*Parnassia palustris*), which were not yet in flower.

Due to the severe weather, insects (other than White Satins), were in short supply, and although these dunes are home to many butterflies, moths and dragonflies we saw very few; but we found and photographed caterpillars of Drinker Moth (*Euthrix potatoria*), Grass Eggar (*Lasiocampa trifolii trifolii*) and Six-spot Burnet (*Zygaena filipendulae*). In one of the slacks there were good numbers of tadpoles of the endangered Natterjack Toad (*Epidalea calanita*).

We could not have picked a worse day weather-wise, but, despite this, everyone agreed that this is a truly special place and certainly worthy of another visit. Accordingly, if enough interest is shown, we should consider doing it again next year and pray for better weather.

My sincere thanks to Dr Phil Smith and the staff of the Sefton Coast and Countryside Service.



Grass Eggar Caterpillar

Elections 2013

New Committee Members required to perform a variety of tasks for the Nature Group.

Every two years at our AGM we elect the committee for the following two years. The Nature Group committee welcomes nominations from any member who feels they could assist in the running of the group by performing a role or because they have a special skill to offer.

What is involved

Being a Committee Member requires a willingness to assist with a variety of events and or tasks plus attendance at Committee Meetings - these are held two or three times a year, usually but not exclusively at Smethwick PS Clubrooms, nr Junction 2 of the M5.

If you feel that you would like to be more involved in the running of your group, or if you would like to nominate someone, please complete the nomination form opposite and return to Nature Group Secretary, Margaret Johnson LRPS by the end of November.

This form is also available at: www.rpsnaturegroup.com go to the 'Who We Are' page.

Nomination Form for Elections 2013

Please complete and return before
30th November 2012

I wish to propose

for the Office of

or - as a Committee Member
(Please delete as appropriate)

Name of Proposer (Capitals)

Proposer's signature

Name of Seconder (Capitals)

Secunder's signature

I agree to accept this nomination (Signed)

After completion by all three parties please post to:

**Nature Group Secretary
Margaret Johnson LRPS
53 Mapperley Orchard,
Arnold,
Nottingham,
NG5 8AH**

Book review

Collins Fungi Guide

Stefan Buczaccki, Chris Shield & Denys Overden

Published by HarperCollins. 640 pages first published 2012. £35

ISBN 9780 00724290 0 (hardback) ISBN 9780 007466481 (paperback)

I pre-ordered the Collins Fungi Guide book back in December 2011. After some delays the book was finally released in May 2012. The book is available in paperback, hardback and Kindle Edition.

Key features (from the back cover)

- * Over 2,400 species described – the largest number ever included in a single-volume
- * Key features highlighted for quick and accurate identification
- * Highly detailed colour illustrations

The book's introduction contains very useful keys to enable you to quickly identify the fungi.

Key 1: Contains the major fungi groups. This will give you the next key number and page.

Keys 2 – 10: These keys are the fungi groups broken down by the fungi key features. i.e. gilled, spores, spore colour and brackets. The key will give you the page number of the types of fungi.

Each fungus in the book gives the scientific name (Latin) and common name (if available). Then a brief description of the fungus which includes; soil type & habitat, tree the fungi prefers, colour, size of the cap, the stem and gills & spores. On the opposite page contains up to six illustrations of the fungus.

The illustrations are excellent with plenty of detail, with accurate colour. Some illustrations contain intersections and habitat. The bracket illustrations are not as detailed as the other fungi groups, which is a disappointment.

The book also contains a bibliography, a useful glossary, appendixes and an index of both scientific and common names.

Mark Monckton ARPS www.markmonckton.co.uk

Field Meeting Announcement

Day & date: **Sunday 21st October 2012 or
Sunday 18th November 2012**
(but not both*)

Location: **Nap Wood**, Near: Heathfield,
East Sussex on the A267

Meeting Place: Parking is in a lay by opposite the
entrance to Nap Wood.

Grid Reference: TQ586329

Leader: James Foad

Cost: None

Subjects: **Fungi**

Items to bring: Stout Shoes/Wellingtons,
Waterproofs, Packed Lunch

***Other:** This meeting will be on either Sunday 21st
October or Sunday 18th November 2012
but not both.

If you are interested in attending, please
telephone or email the week before to
register your interest and check dates!

Name: James Foad

Tel No: 07850-368797

E-mail: james_foad@hotmail.com

Please put 'Nap Wood' in the subject line.

Unnatural Selection? Damn The Judges!

Further thoughts

by Kay Reeve FRPS

I read with interest the articles by Fiona MacKay ARPS ('Unnatural Selection?') in the Spring 2012 edition of the Iris and by Tony Bond FRPS ('Damn the Judges revisited') in the Summer edition. Apart from saying how much I agreed with them, I did not feel until now that I had anything to add to the debate.

However I have just re-read Tony's article, and the final paragraph has caught my eye:

"You can be certain that our own exhibition will never succumb to these practices. If we do not maintain standards, who will?"

Can I say, in an entirely positive rather than a negative way, that I do have some concerns about our exhibition? It seems to me that the Annual Exhibition of the Nature Group of the Royal Photographic Society should be a show-case for the general public to see the best of British nature photography. At present that does not happen. I believe there are two reasons for this.

The first concerns Digital Projected Images (DPIs). Neither Fiona nor Tony spell it out, and I hesitate to put words in their mouths, but I feel fairly sure that the problems they discuss affect the DPI sections of exhibitions, not the print sections. They have expressed the difficulties clearly and I will not repeat them. However, if these difficulties do not already affect the DPI section of our exhibition, I am afraid they soon will.

I do not support the DPI sections of exhibitions, and it may be worthwhile my saying why not. I am not willing to hand over to the person who sets up the projector, decisions about how my images will appear. Colour balance should not be a problem these days. My screen is properly calibrated for colour balance and it will be a given (won't it?) that the projector is also. The problem comes with brightness and contrast. Subtle highlights are blown out, deep rich blacks become dull dark greys. The sad thing is that no one seems to think it matters very much. It matters very much to me. Secondly, I do not do 'doing things'. I principally photograph fungi, flowers and insects and among the great mass of birds in flight and cheetahs on kills I have no means of making my images stand out. Fiona set out the problem clearly. Judges are only human.

The second problem with our exhibition is when and where it takes place - basically that is one day a year in a back street in a suburb of Birmingham. Please be assured that I do not mean any adverse criticism at all of Smethwick Photographic Society. We are very grateful to them for the use of their excellent facilities. But the only people who see our exhibition in the form in which it is meant to be seen, are other photographers, probably mostly group members who sent in an entry, are free on the day, and are motivated to make the journey.

May I tentatively suggest the following:

1. Scrap the DPI section entirely.

I can already hear cries of 'We cannot exclude those who do not print'. But why don't they print? If they have means to produce digital images for projection it is a safe bet they also have the means to produce a photographic quality print. So it is a question of laziness - or is printing too unforgiving for a poor image? Do we want to encourage either? I know of two well respected exhibitions which do not have DPI sections - one being that of our colleagues the RPS Visual Art Group, and the other being the Cotswold Salon, one of the most high profile monochrome exhibitions in the country. There may well be others.

2. Find venues for a print only exhibition where it can be seen by members of the general public with an interest in natural history. Venues such as Visitors Centres on Nature Reserves belonging to the Wildlife Trusts, RSPB, Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust etc., Natural History Museums or galleries. Many naturalists use a camera to record what they see for identification purposes, many might be interested in taking better pictures, if only they knew what makes a good picture and why. Perhaps a simple leaflet could be produced explaining the artistic aspects of nature photography, such as lighting, angle of view, what represents a good foreground/background, etc. In this way we might help to increase standards generally.

Volunteers needed to host Field Meetings

Every year, we ask members to volunteer to host a field meeting in their region of the country. A genuine interest in nature and a desire to meet and share ideas with like minded individuals are the main criteria required. No special knowledge is necessary, just a familiarity of the area and the subjects of interest to be found there. Leaders are not expected to instruct in photography, be experts at identification or be experienced naturalists.

If you are familiar with a nature reserve or woodland near to you, please consider volunteering. The meeting does not have to be held on a weekend - weekday meetings are very popular with retired Nature Group members.

If you are unsure about the suitability of your venue, please contact the Programme Co-ordinator, Richard Revels FRPS, who will be pleased to discuss your idea with you.

RPS Nature Group - Field Meetings 2013

Location _____

Meeting Place _____

Grid Reference _____

Leader _____

Day & date _____

Cost (eg car parking) _____

Subjects of interest _____

Items to bring (tick as applicable and add any other necessary items below).

Stout Shoes Wellingtons

Waterproofs Packed Lunch

Additional information _____

Name _____

Address _____

Tel No: _____ E mail: _____

Please return this form before 31st January 2013

Richard Revels FRPS,
73 London Road, Biggleswade,
Bedfordshire, SG18 8EE
Tel: 01767 313065 E-mail: richard.revels@talktalk.net

The custom of having both prints and projected image sections in exhibitions goes back to the time when photographers had to choose between slide film (for projection) and negative film (for prints). Actually the logic of it began to break down when processes like Cibachrome became available whereby good prints could be made from slides. Now there is no logic to it at all, as both prints and projected images derive equally well from the same capture (or scan). So exhibition organisers have to rethink what their exhibition is about, and question whether there is any reason for continuing with both sections.

If the aim is to get as many entries as you possibly can, particularly if you are aiming at overseas entrants, then I guess you will go for DPls. But you do this at the cost of image quality, and huge numbers of entries will inevitably lead to a certain type of image only being successful - the 'doing things' problem in our discipline. In general sections this type of image is called 'exciting' - but this seems to me only to mean manipulated in an eye-catching way. All this is at the cost of true photography - the seeing eye, the decisive moment, a true understanding of light - and means that exhibition photography is only for other photographers. Photography is probably the greatest means of communication of our age, and it is a crying shame that it has become so introspective.

If you want to aim for quality, and if you do want to show your work to the world at large, then you need to choose prints, and take them to the public. I would love to see the Nature Group do this.

I can offer an example of a 'travelling' print-only exhibition. I belong to the East Midlands Monochrome Group. Every year it holds an exhibition which is shown at libraries, galleries, and other public buildings in the East Midlands. All members are entitled to exhibit up to six prints. Members submit their prints stuck to a backing card, which has to extend outside the print itself by half an inch or so. The committee then cut the card overlays. This is a counsel of perfection - they want all the overlays to be exactly the same colour. I don't think it would be necessary for predominately colour images, and Nature Group members could submit prints to the Nature Group exhibition in exactly the same form as we do now. The Nature Group would have to acquire some frames. Framed prints (the EMMG exhibition is framed) do look excellent. Then it would just be a case of finding some venues. And remember - everyone who runs a visitor centre, gallery etc. wants to have something that will attract people in.



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Tour programme

March 2013 - Bird Photography in Florida

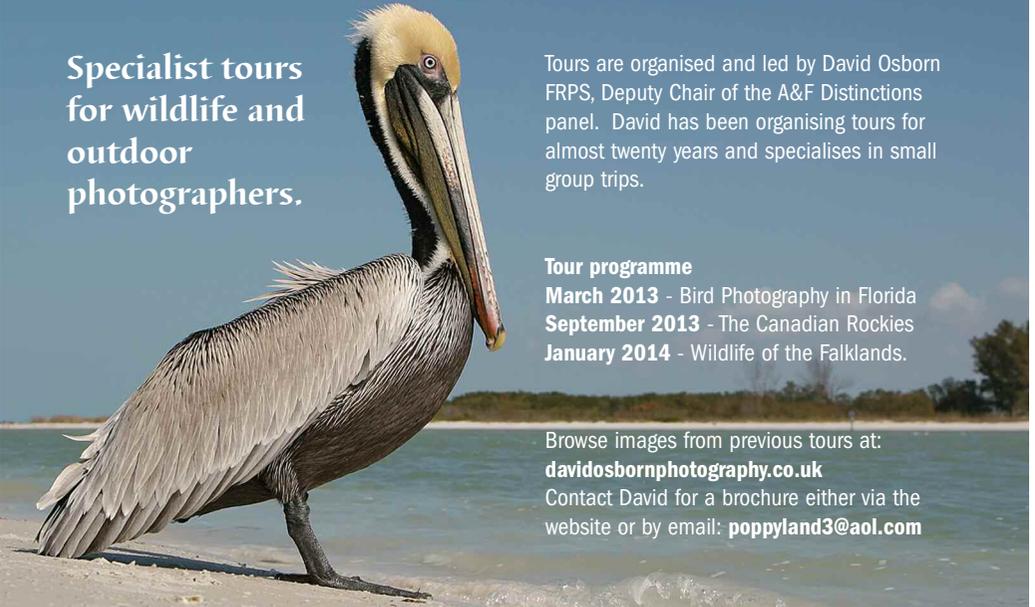
September 2013 - The Canadian Rockies

January 2014 - Wildlife of the Falklands.

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davidosbornphotography.co.uk

Contact David for a brochure either via the website or by email: poppyland3@aol.com





**'Wildlife in East Anglia' -
a successful
Fellowship panel by
Kevin Elsby FRPS**

