

# THE IRIS

MAGAZINE OF THE NATURE GROUP OF THE RPS

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THE **RPS**  
ROYAL  
PHOTOGRAPHIC  
SOCIETY



# **RPS Nature Group Summer Residential weekend**

## **Skomer Island and Margam Discovery Centre**

**Wednesday 24th June to Monday 29th June 2020**



James Foad LRPS, the organiser of this event, is now accepting bookings for the 2020 Summer Residential weekend which is going to be slightly different to previous years!

Participants should book their own accommodation for the nights of 24th and 25th June in the Martin Haven area.

On 26th June there is a visit to Skomer Island at a cost of £11.00 per person.  
However the boat trip to the island is weather dependent.

After visiting Skomer we move on to Margam Discovery Centre for the rest of the weekend.

16 places are available on a first come first served basis.  
Once the places are filled a waiting list will be opened.

Cost for the weekend is: £175.77 for Margam, plus £11.00 for the boat plus your accommodation and meals for the first two days.  
A deposit of £75.77 is required to secure your booking.

For further details and to book call James Foad LRPS on 07834 810430  
or email: [jamesfoadlrps@inbox.com](mailto:jamesfoadlrps@inbox.com).

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## Cover image

Wasp Spider by Ann Miles FRPS

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## 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

In early December I visited the Wildlife Photographer of The Year exhibition 2019 at The Science Museum in London. The pictures were absolutely stunning.

Why did I find the photographs so appealing?


Firstly many of them had been very patiently and carefully planned. The narrative on each exhibit tells how entrants had often observed something unusual in the wild and wanted to photograph it. This is brilliantly illustrated by David Doubilet, who found that a swaying colony of garden eels vanished into their burrows as soon as he arrived at this underwater scene. So as not to disturb them again, he set up his camera and hid behind a shipwreck where he could trigger the system remotely. It was several hours before the eels re-emerged and several days before David got his perfect shot. The result, 'A garden of eels' deservedly won the Underwater category.

Secondly, technical perfection. The photographs were all beautifully composed and had the correct bits as sharp as they needed to be. Even those taken in low light, on long exposures or using high ISOs showed no loss of image quality. Two pictures especially caught my eye in this respect, 'Bee Line' by Frank Deschandol and 'The Soaring Eagle' by Audun Rikardsen.

It was pointed out to me that some of the entrants were game park managers or members of long term expeditions to remote areas that means they will easily come into regular daily contact with wildlife. But don't we all; in our gardens, parks, local nature reserves and so on? This familiarity does not guarantee winning pictures as there is a third element that comes into play: some old fashioned good luck. Being in the right place at the right time to get that perfect shot! Eduardo Del Álamo with his photograph of 'A penguin fleeing from a Leopard Seal' and Yongqing Bao with his overall winning picture, 'A fight between a fox and a Marmot' both took full advantage of the good luck that came their way. Do look at these pictures (and the others too) on the web and see if you agree with me. The exhibition is open until 31st May 2020.

So let us all hope for plenty of good luck this year with our Natural History Photography.

Thank you to all of the contributors to this edition and to my wife Sally and our Chairman Thom for their help in its production.



## From the chair

# CARRYING BIG TELEPHOTO LENSES

It is December and short eared owls are about. Along with others I wait with my camera gear all set up and ready for action as the birds start to quarter the rough heathland. Although it is not a long walk from the car park to the field, carrying a heavy camera rig is a challenge. And as I get older, my gear seems to get heavier!

I know a number of photographers who have switched from heavy DSLR cameras to the smaller micro four-thirds mirrorless type and their associated lighter lenses. However, while these rigs are really good, I have not as yet been fully convinced that they have the top notch quality of the more traditional DSLR camera attached to large F4 telephoto glass.

I use Canon lenses with full frame cameras and my default combination is the Canon EF 500mm f/4L IS II USM lens with a 1.4x converter attached and paired with a Canon 1DX Mk II camera. This usually sits on a Gitzo tripod with a Wimberley gimbal head.

The outfit weighs about 8kg. This is a significant and unwieldy load to lug for long periods of time; sometimes made heavier by a camera backpack with additional gear.

For a number of years my *modus operandi* was to carry the outfit as a single unit with the extended tripod over my shoulder so that the camera and lens hung behind me readily available for action. (Since the gear is very expensive I do this carefully!) However, shuffling was frequently required to shift the discomfort.

Recently I decided change was in order. I bought a long strap to attach to my lens/camera combination. This has enabled me to remove the camera/lens combination from the tripod and to carry it strapped diagonally from my left shoulder so that it rests against my right hip with the lens tripod mount supported in my right hand. The strap has a thick shoulder pad which spreads the burden and some of



*Canon EF 500mm f/4L IS II USM lens with a 1.4 Converter attached and paired with a Canon 1DX Mk II camera. The combination also has a Black Rapid Sport Breathe strap attached to both the camera and the lens via a Kirk QRC-1 Quick Release 1 inch Clamp.*





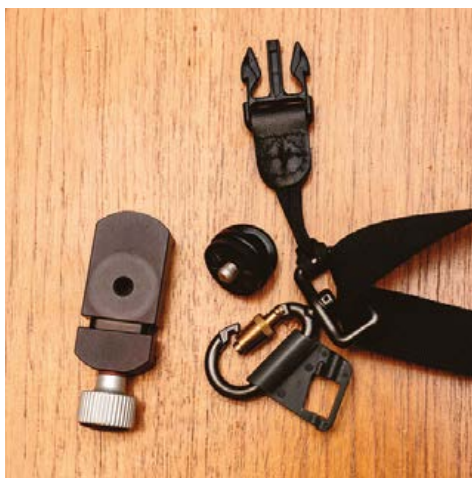
*Kirk QRC-1 Quick Release 1 inch clamp with Black Rapid Sport Breathe strap and fastener.*

the weight is carried in my hand. I carry the folded tripod with gimbal head separately in my left hand. For me this works well.

The strap attaches to my camera via a fastener which screws into the tripod socket on the bottom of the camera. Consequently, it is not possible to use both the strap and a tripod plate at the same time. However, this difficulty is overcome by attaching a quick release clamp to the screw fastener. The tripod plate is then left on my camera permanently and the strap is attached to the camera tripod plate via the quick release clamp. In addition, the strap may also be attached separately to my lens, as well as to my camera. The picture above shows this belt and braces arrangement.

The picture to the right shows the details. The carabiner attaches to the black circular screw fastener which then screws into the quick release plate. The quick release clamp attaches to the tripod plate on the camera base. The extra strap with the male clip attaches to a female counterpart which is permanently fixed to the lens.

For me, this method is more efficient than my previous arrangement of carrying the outfit on my shoulder and, even though it takes a little longer to set up, this is a price I am prepared to pay. An additional benefit is that when I am in a wildlife hide with the lens resting on a window ledge the strap is around my neck and secures the outfit without causing restriction.



*Camera, lens & strap: the strap is securely attached to both camera and lens with a quick release plate.*

Undoubtedly, the mirrorless camera market is now developing rapidly and will result in the design and manufacture of new lighter, fast telephoto lenses. No doubt, in due course I shall consider this approach. However, for the present, I shall stay with my relatively heavy DSLR rig supported by a shoulder strap.

*Thom*

# SVALBARD: LIFE IN THE NORWEGIAN ARCTIC

**Nigel Symington ARPS**



Nothing can quite prepare you for your first sight of a Polar Bear in the wild. In a cold, desolate landscape of grey seas and drifting ice floes, there in the distance something moves – slow, confident, unhurried, lord of all it surveys. Ignoring the cold, it slips in and out of the sea, then, just as you think it's coming within range of a long lens, sits down on the ice, curls up and goes to sleep!

Longyearbyen, a small settlement of about 2,200 people, is the capital of Svalbard, a Norwegian archipelago a few hundred miles from the North Pole. Once a coal mining town, it is now the centre for the region – a seemingly random collection of painted wooden houses. Little grows here, apart from a few different species of Saxifragethat peep out from the rocks. Other than a mining town at Barentsburg and a research station at Ny-Ålesund, there is no other habitation. Outside the town limits it is compulsory to carry a weapon in case of a surprise

attack by a Polar Bear. They are cunning, intelligent and curious animals with a well-documented ability to stalk their prey and surprise it. Their preferred diet is seals – particularly the Bearded Seal, one of the larger seals, which can weigh up to 300kg. These are handsome creatures. When they lie hauled out, their beards curl as they dry, giving them a raffish appearance. Harbour Seals are about half this weight. We spent an entertaining evening drifting in and out of the ice floes in a Zodiac (a small inflatable boat) in Kongsfjorden with seals popping up all round us, as curious to see us as we were to see them.

We travelled with Wildphoto, a company run by two award-winning photographers, and sailed on MS Origo, with 13 passengers and 8 crew. Several other companies offer tours here, but on a small ship it is possible to visit areas out of bounds to larger vessels. Being photographer-led, wildlife took precedence over creature comforts: mealtimes were occasionally



## The photographs

*Previous page:* Polar Bear yawning.

*This page top:* Arctic Fox near Longyearbyen.

*Middle:* Walrus family on Torellneset.

*Bottom:* Tufted Saxifrage near Longyearbyen.

*Opposite:* Polar bear near Lågøya.

adjusted as animals presented themselves. It was not unknown to have a knock on the cabin door in the middle of the night if there was a possible picture. Not that we actually had nights; in the summer the sun never goes below the horizon.

One evening we were alerted to bears on the rotting carcass of a Walrus in Freemansundet. We found a mother and two cubs feasting. Eventually, they turned and made their dignified way out of sight up a steep cliff. They were soon replaced by a couple of Arctic Foxes. One of the pleasant surprises here was that the wildlife seemed much less cautious of humans than is the case in England. On a day out near Longyearbyen our guide called down some foxes by making a squeaking noise on his hand. As one appeared, I froze, only to receive an urgent shout, "Come, quick, there's a fox. Run!" Throwing caution to the wind I ran, expecting to see the fox high-tail it out of sight. But the fox seemed undeterred. Not that it stayed for long; once it determined that there was no food there, it was soon gone. Arctic Foxes here turn completely white in winter. We saw one white fox but too far away for even an 800mm lens. Others were in their attractive summer pelage.

Foxes are too small for bears to regard as prey. The Svalbard Reindeer, a unique, relatively small endemic subspecies, also coexist. They rarely come in herds, living singly or in small groups. Both sexes have antlers. But their defence is to run away. Although bears can run fast for a short distance, their thick layer of fat and insulating fur means that they quickly overheat, and have to stop, so the reindeer escape. One evening we watched a bear swim across to an island, and follow a reindeer for about 15 minutes. It then gave up and came down to the shoreline, where we moved our Zodiac so as to keep ahead of it. Our guides said that its gestures and pose meant that it was still in hunting mode—probably us! Occasionally it sat down and gave a large, silent yawn, showing a mouth with a very black tongue and an impressive set of teeth. The meaning of this behaviour is not known – it may be a sign of stress or simply frustration. Eventually the bear gave up and made off over several more islands. We followed it for about 4 hours.

Walrus are rarely killed. They are too large, their tusks are too threatening and their skin is too tough for the bears to be able to penetrate. We landed one evening on Torellneset, on Gustav Adolf Land, where a herd was hauled out on the beach. We were advised to approach them cautiously so as not to panic them, in which case they might have stampeded into the sea and risked crushing any calves in the group – a technique sometimes



employed by bears. But with a slow approach they took no notice of us, grunting contentedly and scratching themselves with their flippers.

Bird life is plentiful here. We stopped one morning by some high cliffs on the Lomfjord Halvøya. Fulmars, Kittiwakes, Little Auks, Black and Brünnich's Guillemots filled the air with noise. The Guillemots lay their eggs on ledges on the cliff. Once their chick is fledged, it is unceremoniously shoved off the ledge to land in the sea below. Miraculously, most seem to survive this but we watched as one which had made an awkward landing was finished off with great gusto by a Glaucous Gull. The Brünnich's Guillemot is distinguished from the Common Guillemot by a short thick bill with a white line along the sides of the upper mandible. The adult Black Guillemot is a handsome bird, jet black with a bright red gape and feet: the juvenile has mottled black and white plumage. Fulmars followed our boat for most of the expedition. When we were out of sight of land

with only ice floes between us and the horizon, Fulmars were a welcome sign of life.

Many whales in the area gave us an interesting diversion from land mammals. A Fin Whale gave a good display one evening, blowing and diving off Ny-Friesland. We also saw Blue, Bowhead and Beluga Whales, the latter coming very close to us in our Zodiac.

What does the future hold in store? We have a great responsibility to ensure that the natural environments we visit are not disturbed by our presence. But global warming is particularly evident here in the Arctic. Records show that not only is the extent of sea ice decreasing year on years, but earlier ice break-up and later ice freeze-up has increased the total ice-free period to between 6 and 7 months during the year, leaving Polar Bears without food for most of the year. As a result, more of the Arctic Ocean is available for human activities such as shipping, oil drilling, fishing, research and tourism. All this presents challenges. If you wish to visit this magical place, do not leave it too long.





### The photographs

*This page, Clockwise from top left: Main Street, Longyearbyen, Arctic Fox, Polar Bear feeding on blubber, Walrus on Torellneset, Brünnich's Guillemots and other Auks on the cliffs at Lomfjord halvøya and Glaucous Gull eating a Brünnich's Guillemot chick. Opposite: Fulmar at 810° North and a Polar Bear hunting.*









### The photographs

*This page, clockwise from top left:*  
 Fin Whale blowing and Guillemots flying off Valhalfonna  
 Juvenile Black Guillemot  
 Common or Harbour Seal  
 Svalbard Reindeer  
 Common or Harbour Seal  
 Zodiac in Kongsfjorden.

*Opposite:*  
 MS Origo in Freemansundet  
 Bearded Seal.





# LOW CARBON WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY

## Martin Hancock LRPS



*"What is this life if, full of care, we have no time to stand and stare",* and so begins that seminal poem by the Welsh poet William Henry Davies (reproduced at the end of this article). For me, this poem represents a particular dilemma in wildlife photography - the desire to get an image, but invariably not enough time to linger and fully appreciate the natural environment in which it is taken. As such, the possibility of capturing an image that represents some of the more intimate behaviour of the fauna in question can be missed.

I have been very fortunate over the last 30 years to acquire some seven acres of previously intensively cultivated land next to my home and 'rewild' it. This has involved creating habitat by planting trees, hedgerow and pasture, adding wildlife ponds and nesting boxes. It is only since I took up photography a few years ago that I found the inspiration to set myself the challenge of documenting some its residents and visitors. With no travelling involved this meant even more time to improve my field craft and time to stare.

One of my passions is Mustelids and I have managed to capture images of Badgers, Stoats and Weasels. With a high resident rabbit population as prey, I have been waiting to see signs of a Polecat, which have been extinct in England for over 100 years and are now making a comeback. I captured one on

my trail camera recently which has given me a real photographic challenge for the future.

Badgers frequently visit the garden. In the autumn the fallen fruit on the ground provides an abundant food source to fatten themselves up for the winter. This seemed an ideal opportunity to try some flash photography. I appreciate there are debates about this type of photography, but as the Badgers were accustomed to the house floodlights, I believed using flash was not going to be a major problem. In fact, it was only the noise of the shutter release that slightly startled them. Another good reason to go mirrorless I suppose. The Badgers certainly have a preference order when it comes to fruit foraging, first Greengages, then Victoria plums and finally Cherry plums. Teeth on the Badger, which have evolved to have an extremely powerful bite with a lower jaw that locks into the skull, quite well developed for an omnivore whose main diet consists of earthworms, I remember once getting a phone call from someone who had hit a Badger with their car and that it was unconscious and wanted to know what to do. Upon asking where the Badger was they replied they were holding it! You can probably guess what my response was.

Both Stoats and Weasels tend to stay close to hedgerow as they move about to avoid predators. Once seen, it is then a matter of patiently waiting for

them to break cover. In terms of predatory powers, Stoats rival any of the big cats; gram for gram they are much stronger than any lion. They do like crevices such as dry stone walls to both hide in and stash away surplus food. I keep a small flock of rare breed sheep (Soays) which originate from St Kilda and my wife suggested we dig up the old rockery and create a mock Cleit - a stone structure found all over St Kilda. It was not long before both Stoats and Weasels were exploring the Cleit. On one occasion, after quite a bit of activity, a Stoat reclined in the sun on a plinth above the entrance - quite an unusual image! I was somewhat disappointed when I entered the image in one of my local club competitions only to have the judge comment that it was obviously taken in a zoo or wildlife park and marked it down accordingly. If anyone has ever seen a captive Stoat behaving in this manner please let me know.

The nest boxes have also attracted a wide variety of birds. Last year a pair of Kestrels appeared in my bottom field and settled in an owl box. I spent many hours watching them from a sheep shelter flying and hovering around the field. One morning I noticed a distinct change in their behaviour. The female came to rest on a post and began lifting her tail. I suddenly realised what might be about to happen and my heart began racing. Suddenly the male came out of the trees and mounted her. To say I was excited would be an massive understatement. I can't think of any other time when I have filled the camera's buffer.

Barn owls have also nested and reared young. I have never been successful, however, in taking images with

sufficient ambient light at home. On one occasion an owl came out of the nest box and flew into a clearing with plenty of backlight. The resultant image is quite different to the ones normally seen and for me adds quite a surreal effect. This year was another successful breeding season and I was amazed one afternoon when the parent birds suddenly came out of the nest box and followed shortly by a young chick which appeared between them. Sounds rather anthropomorphic, but I was wondering if they considered this was my consolation image? The background is not very good but sometimes you just do not have any alternatives and grab the shot while you can.

Last year the Barn Owls left the nest box for a while but it wasn't long before it was occupied again. This time a Little Owl took up residence and seemed



### The photographs

*Opposite:* Stoat breaking cover.

*This page:* Green Woodpecker, Kestrels mating, Kestrel alighting and European Badgers foraging.







### **The photographs**

Kestrel face to face, Barn Owl in flight and Goldfinch in flight.

quite at ease just staring out of the opening.

Other bird life has also flourished over the years. A supply of Niger seed and sunflower hearts has led to a healthy population of Goldfinches, one of our most colourful birds. Having taken many portrait images, the challenge then became catching one in flight, much easier said than done. Watching and noting their flight paths over an extended period

provided the baseline and after many attempts I finally got the image I was hoping for.

The arrival of the Fieldfares is a special time in nature's calendar. They are somewhat unpredictable as to when they might appear, so I tend to just sit myself in the sheep shelter and wait to see what happens. The image of the Fieldfare feeding on a worm was another special moment.



Woodpeckers are also resident. Greater Spotted frequent the bird feeders for peanuts but will also take to grubs from tree trunks. The speed with which they feed is quite remarkable. Green Woodpeckers are constantly giving their alarm calls but present a greater challenge to photograph because they tend to do most of their feeding on the ground. That said, I have managed to get a few images through the vegetation.

Other garden birds can also provide interesting opportunities to photograph. On one occasion I had been watching a Blackbird collecting food for its young. It would perch on a piece of garden furniture, look around to see if all was clear before diving into the hedge. I had my camera at the ready and could not believe the amount and variety of food it had collected on one trip. I thought Puffins were the masters of this type of feeding strategy.

Whenever I look through the lens at wildlife I am constantly in awe of the evolutionary aspects of what I see. To capture an image in less than a second puts it all in perspective and reminds me how important it is that we protect, enhance and expand our natural environment.

### The photographs

Goldfinch portrait, Stoat close encounter, Weasel leaping and European Badger gorging on Greengages.



### Leisure by W H Davies (1871 - 1940)

*What is this life if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare,  
No time to stand beneath the boughs,  
And stare as long as sheep or cows,  
No time to see, when woods we pass,  
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass,  
No time to see, in broad daylight,  
Streams full of stars, like skies at night,  
No time to turn at Beauty's glance,  
And watch her feet, how they can dance,  
No time to wait till her mouth can,  
Enrich that smile her eyes began,  
A poor life this is if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare.*





# **The photographs**

*This page: Robin with nest material, Weasel portrait, Fieldfare feeding and Greater Spotted Woodpecker feeding.*

*Opposite: Blackbird feeding, Little Owl portrait, Barn Owls family portrait and Stoat resting on cleit.*







# AN AFRICAN ARPS

## Roger Taylor ARPS



As I write this article I am reminded of the saying, “*I used to be bigheaded but now I am perfect.*”

“Bigheaded” in that having achieved my Licentiate ship I thought Associateship would be a doddle, as only five extra photos are required for the panel! In fact, unless you are a ‘perfect’ photographer in the first place, there is indeed a steep learning curve from LRPS to ARPS. I hate to think how steep that curve is to FRPS.

Two of the aspects I like about the RPS and its distinctions is that it does not lower its standards for each award but they, its members and staff, will do all they can to assist in achieving the standard. I doubt very much whether I would have achieved my Associateship without that support.

So take advantage of all that help. Another pair of eyes and knowledge will make your journey easier. Others, not having your emotional attachment, will pick out unsuitable photos or even select ones you had rejected. Attend advisory days

early as not only will you be given expert advice but you will also gain a great deal from seeing the work of other candidates.

Sometimes you have photographs which are almost distinction quality but need a little tweak and this is where Photoshop comes to the fore enabling you to make subtle changes to photos without changing its context. The purist in me asks if this is okay but didn’t we do this in the darkroom with dodging, burning-in or by changing the type of paper? So, find someone who has expertise in Lightroom or Photoshop but who specializes in photography.

If you are not sure where to go to get help then check out the RPS website.

Putting the panel together was a struggle. Did I go for birds or mammals or a mixture of both? In the end, with welcome advice, I choose mammals as I felt I had appropriate good photos from which to select and as I had decided to project rather than print, the



tonal changes were easier to manage.

Many of the advisory days I attended suggested printing as they appear to be the more successful route but if your photographs are good then it should not matter and you save the expense of printing. I would highly recommend going to the RPS in Bristol to see how your photographs project on their system.

My panel reflects my interest in and love of African wildlife. I even trained as a Safari Guide when I was 60 to enable me to approach animals more safely and photograph them when they are more relaxed.

I often question whether I am a wildlife photographer or just love being in the bush with wildlife around me. Fortunately the two complement each other. I will say that the best photographs evoke the best memories.

My interest in photography started when I was an Instrument Technician in the Army repairing complex mechanical and optical equipment including, of course, cameras. The first camera I repaired came to

me in Cyprus and was a Leica. Naturally I had to field test it over the weekend! This set was the start of a lifelong hobby.

Although I had always had an interest in wildlife my love affair with African animals started on a package safari to Kenya. What an experience and it took me a while at the end to think how I could improve it.

What was missing was the freedom to stay at a viewing as long as I wanted as the guide had to take into account the needs of everyone on the game vehicle. The only answer was to book a guide and vehicle for my sole use and the following year I spent the most fabulous time with Jethro, a Kenyan guide, who despite years of guiding still had a passion for wildlife and a love of his country. Every morning at about eleven o'clock he would switch off his vehicle and we would have half an hour of 'African Time', where we would just soak up the smells and sounds of the bush.

Tacked on to the end of this trip was a stay in Cape Town and another love had started; South Africa. But that is another story!



### Hanging Plan



### Statement of Intent

I enjoy observing and photographing wildlife in their natural environment where they are free and wild. I have visited regions of Sub-Saharan Africa including South Africa, Kenya, Botswana and Namibia many times over the years to capture the subjects contained in the panel. Knowledge of the subject, the local area and field craft are very important skills, which I hope, are demonstrated in these images. Sixteen different mammal species are included showing habitat, action, inter-action and behaviour.



**The photographs**

*Title page: Hippopotamus. This page: Chacha Baboon and White Rhino. Opposite: Plains Zebra, Buffalo and Ground Squirrel.*













**The photographs**

*Opposite: Eland and Giraffe and Elephant.*

*This page: Impala and Black-Backed Jackal.*









### The photographs

*Opposite:* Springbok and Leopard.

*This page:* Cheetah, Spotted Hyena, and Vervet Monkey.





# NATURAL WONDERS OF ETHIOPIA

Julia Wainwright ARPS



Formerly known as Abyssinia, Ethiopia is one of the world's oldest countries and the largest and most populated country in the Horn of Africa. For many, the first thing that comes to mind when someone mentions Ethiopia is the famine and hunger crisis of the 1980's, caused by a wide range of simultaneously occurring factors: recurring drought, failed harvests, food scarcity and conflict.

Today Ethiopia's economy is booming and ranked as the fifth largest in Africa. The government are committed to promoting tourism and there is significant investment in infrastructure in major cities such as Addis Ababa. Outside of the major cities the economy is still dominated by rain-fed agriculture, the primary activity of 80% of the labour force. On our travels we saw extensive deforestation, overgrazed lands and vast plantations of introduced Eucalyptus competing for resources with native flora.

Our photographic journey in the spring of 2019 took us across the highlands of the country and down

through the Eastern Rift Valley that divides the highlands into two distinct parts, Western and Eastern.

The Western Highlands include the Simien Mountains National Park, one of the first four natural sites to be included on the World Heritage list and the first for Africa. Travelling over them at elevations of between 2000 - 4500m we were rewarded with stunning vistas of rugged mountains, precipitous gorges and deep valleys. Massive erosion over millennia has created one of the most spectacular landscapes in the world.

The topography of the Simien Mountains National Park offers a varied habitat for a wide range of animals and plants and our first target species here was the Gelada Monkey. Long considered to be a baboon, they are the last surviving species of grass-grazing primates. Their most recognizable feature is a crimson hourglass-shaped patch of skin on their chests which has led to their common name, the 'bleeding heart' monkey. We found them to be

surprisingly approachable and as long as we avoided any sudden movements, we were able to sit amongst them observing their behaviour.

After leaving the Gelada Monkeys we spent the next 3 hours travelling further up into the mountains, along winding, gravel roads, in search of the endemic Walia Ibex a species of wild goat found exclusively on the steep slopes of the Simien Mountains. Only around 500 individuals remain and they are classified as Endangered. Habitat loss poses a major threat as grazing areas are lost to human settlement, livestock and cultivation. Illegal poaching for the meat, hides and horns of the Ibex is also an ongoing problem. They are hard to find but luckily, thanks to directions given by local people, our search was not in vain.

This area also has abundant birdlife. More than 180 bird species are found in the Simien Mountains of which 6 are endemic. Among the most spectacular we saw were Bearded Vulture, Tawny eagle and Thick-billed Raven.

In addition to varied fauna, the Simien Mountains boast a unique flora and over 250 types of plant exist in the park. Three different vegetation belts exist: Afro-alpine Steppe, Ericaceous and Forest. In the Forest Belt (below 3,000m) much plant diversity has been lost as trees have been extensively felled for firewood and land turned over to farming but in the higher afro-alpine steppe the endemic Giant Lobelia, growing up to 10m in height, makes for a spectacular sight.

In the Eastern Highlands we travelled to the Bale Mountains and the Sanetti Plateau. Sitting at an average altitude of 4000m this is the highest plateau on the continent and as you travel through the lunar like landscape it feels like you've been transported to another planet. The Bale Mountains National Park is known for abundant rainfall and thick clouds followed by periods of sunshine and we experienced all of these. Mammalian wildlife there includes Ethiopian Wolf, numerous Rodents and Colobus Monkeys.

The Ethiopian Wolf is endemic to Ethiopia, it is the world's rarest canid and Africa's most endangered carnivore. The Plateau is home to around 150 of the remaining 500 wolves, none are held anywhere in captivity. The main challenges facing the survival of the species are habitat loss, infectious diseases transmitted by domestic dogs and wolf-dog hybridisation. In the Bale Mountains they feed almost exclusively on small mammals - mainly Giant Mole Rats.

### The photographs

*Title page: Simien Mountains View.*

*This page: Walia Ibex, Arabian Bustard, Yellow-breasted Barbet and Chestnut-naped Francolin.*





As our eyes adjusted to the vastness of the Sanetti Plateau we became aware of things moving. Almost one third of the 47 mammals found in the National Park are rodents and these can be seen flitting from burrow to burrow. One of these, the endangered giant mole rat, is endemic to the area. Also known as 'Big-headed' mole-rats they spend very limited time above ground so photographing them is a game of chance. Again, their main survival risk comes from habitat loss through overgrazing by domestic livestock. Unfortunately for the mole rat, it is also a favoured diet of the many birds of prey seen on the mountain plateau.

Nearly 300 species of birds are found in the Bale Mountains making it one of the top birding spots in Africa. Forests harbour woodland species such as the yellow-fronted parrot, black-winged lovebird and white-cheeked turaco whilst the Sanetti Plateau has rare birds such as the Blue-winged Goose and Rouget's Rail. Along the muddy roadsides we often spotted the colourful Chestnut-naped Francolin.

Thanks to its altitudinal range, the Bale Mountains National Park supports many niche species of flora across its various vegetation belts. There are over 1,300 species of flowering plants, of which about 14% are endemic to the National Park.

Bisecting the Highlands is the Ethiopian Rift Valley, part of the East African Rift System. Its passage

through Ethiopia is marked by a string of seven lakes providing habitats for a variety of flora and fauna. Our trip took us to several of these lakes including Lake Awassa where hundreds of Marabou Storks gathered on the shoreline waiting for leftovers from the local fishmarket and Lake Langano, the valley's only bilharzia-free lake. Wildlife flourishes around the lakes with many woodland and water birds, monkeys, Baboons, Warthogs and even Hippopotami that feed around the lodges at nightfall.

Further north along the rift valley we visited Awash National Park where the savannah landscape is more typical of East Africa. Here the safari experience is very different to that of Kenya and Tanzania as the absence of big cats and other large mammals meant we could walk through the bush and grasslands in search of mammals such as Oryx, Kudu and Dik-dik; enjoy close encounters with Leopard tortoises and see a large diversity of birds including the Arabian bustard and dark-chanting goshawk.

Travelling around Ethiopia is not for the fainthearted. Towns are busy, noisy and polluted, pockets of unrest still exist around the country and environmental challenges abound but things are slowly improving. If you can look past the negatives and go with an open mind you will experience amazing scenery and extensive wildlife on a trip to remember.





The photographs Opposite: Marabou Stork. This page: Thick-billed Raven and Male Gelada Monkey.





### The photographs

*This page, clockwise from top right::*

Leopard Tortoise

Giant Lobelia

Bale Mountains View

Giant Mole Rat.

*Opposite page:*

Colobus Monkey

Ethiopian Wolf.









# NATURE GROUP MEETINGS

## Ann Miles FRPS, Programme Coordinator

This year the response of Members to the organised field trips and indoor meetings has been excellent with events filling up within days of being advertised in some cases. It would be great to be able to offer events in all parts of Britain so please do offer to host an event. Email [annmiles70@gmail.com](mailto:annmiles70@gmail.com) with your ideas for field meetings and I will deal with the paperwork and advertising.

### Future Field Meetings

By the time you read this item, we will have had our outing to the Norfolk Coast to celebrate New Year's Day at RSPB Titchwell.

#### January 8th

Annette Beardsley has arranged a visit to Ham Wall RSPB in Somerset, which is one of the prime areas in the UK for Starling murmurations.

#### February 15th

We will visit the Ouse Washes at Welney WWT in Norfolk, which is Britain's largest area of seasonally flooded land and provides habitat for the winter gatherings of many thousands of wild ducks, geese and swans.

#### March 21st

We are visiting Stour Wood and Estuary and Mistley Walls in the Manningtree area of Essex for Spring Flowers and Wading birds etc. There is the option to join a public Birdwatching Sail and Walk on the 22nd March – early booking with the Thames Barge company is essential.

#### April 18th

This is our Flagship event, a Distinctions Advisory Day at Smethwick Photographic Society venue when you will see many ARPS and FRPS panels commented on by members of the Natural History Panel. All the available ARPS and FRPS Advice places have been taken but please do consider attending the day as an Observer as there will be a lot of information concerning the standard of work required and tips on topics and laying out panels etc.

#### June 6th

I am delighted that Trevor Davenport has arranged a field meeting to the Ainsdale dunes, near Southport, Lancashire. The meeting is timed for early summer orchids, other dune flowers and insects. We will be led by Dr. Phil Smith, MBE, an expert on the Sefton Coast.

## Field Meeting Reports

### September 28th, Macro Workshop at Paxton Pits

25 members spent a very full-on day being shown various techniques for macrophotography. Richard Revels showed us wonderful images of insects in flight and close-up insects. He also brought along all the gear he used for doing this so people could see what was involved. It is hoped next year that we can have a field session for a few Members to try his techniques for themselves. Duncan Locke demonstrated his electronic focus bracketing equipment very clearly and did a live stacking example. Ian Wilson went through the theory of normal and high-speed flash (and many other things!) while Ann, Shelagh, Chris and Phil all gave advice on their particular camera systems and helped folk photograph the caterpillars and other set ups or go out onto the reserve to find damselflies etc. The weather was not that kind to us being very windy with occasional short showers so working with set ups

outside proved very difficult and not many insects visited the flowers or ponds.

On the Sunday, three of the group returned for a guided walk round the reserve, where we saw Migrant Hawker and Common Darter.

### November 24th, Fungi in Epping Forest

A group of around 12 Members from the Nature Group and East Anglia Region RPS explored Epping forest for its trees and fungi. The wet conditions in recent weeks have been very beneficial for fungi and there were still a good number around. The promised sunshine never quite made it but the light was perfect for macro work. The wonderful root systems and shapes of the Beech trees and Hornbeam completed our subjects for the day. Species photographed and identified included *Mycena inclinata*, *Mycena haematopus*, *Mycena radicata*, *Lycoperdon pyriforme*, *Helvella crispa* and *Xylaria hypoxylon*.

## December 8th, Macro Workshop at Scotsdales Garden Centre

15 Members of the Nature Group and EARPS gathered at Scotsdales Garden Centre for a hands-on session on focus stacking. Unfortunately, the main demonstrator for the software side of Focus stacking was unable to attend due to sickness. However, everyone joined in helping each other to master both the taking of the images on focus rails or with in-camera focus bracketing. Jonathan helped many people with the stacking in Photoshop so it is hoped everyone got a good introduction to the subject. A Brass Band entertained us with Carols during lunch and then it was an opportunity to try double exposures or continue with the macro work.



### The Photographs

Focus stacked Long Leaved Sundew by Ann Miles and Common Bonnet by Mark Gillett.

To keep up to date with Nature Group events and book a place, please follow this link <https://rps.org/groups/nature/> and go to Events







#### The Photographs

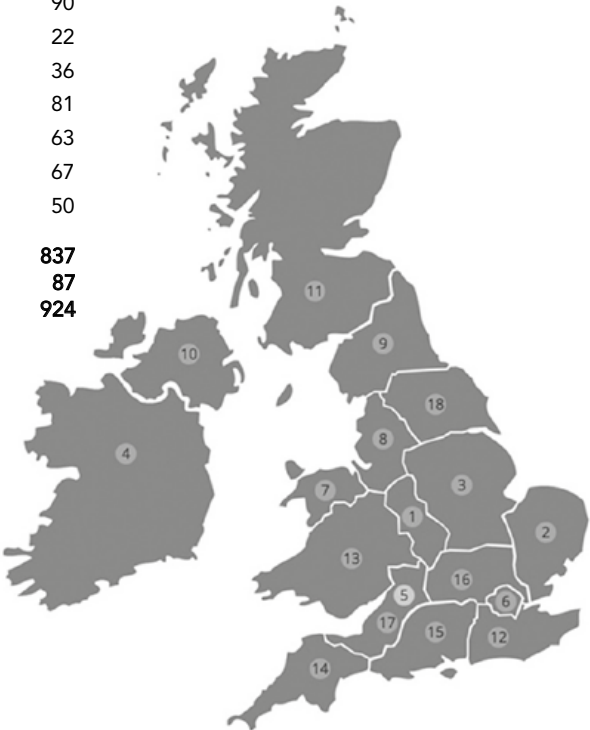
Opposite page, top to bottom: *Xylaria hypoxylon* by Ann Miles, Eyed Hawkmoth by Ann Miles and *Helvella crispa* by Matthew Clarke.

This page: Focus stacked Round Leaved Sundew by Ann Miles, Rosemary Beetle by Jane Moore and *Lycoperdon pyriforme* by Ann Miles.

# Membership and other Statistics

Shown below are Nature Group members per RPS region as at January 2020 (and January 2019) together with other statistics.

Regions	Jan 2020	Jan 2019	Distinctions	Jan 2020	Jan 2019
1 Central	64	67	Honorary FRPS	4	4
2 East Anglia	90	84	FRPS	69	71
3 East Midlands	49	47	ARPS	247	241
4 Eire	8	8	LRPS	217	208
6 London	80	75	No Distinctions	368	400
7 North Wales	10	9	<b>Total</b>	<b>905</b>	<b>924</b>
8 North Western	54	54			
9 Northern	29	29			
10 Northern Ireland	4	5			
11 Scotland	45	50			
12 South Eastern	81	90			
13 South Wales	18	22			
14 South Western	31	36			
15 Southern	76	81			
16 Thames Valley	73	63			
17 Western	71	67			
18 Yorkshire	53	50			
<b>Total UK</b>	<b>836</b>	<b>837</b>			
<b>Overseas</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>87</b>			
<b>Total Membership</b>	<b>905</b>	<b>924</b>			



These statistics are prepared from data by the RPS Membership Department

Map courtesy of the RPS website

# **RPS Nature Group Spring Meeting 44th Annual General Meeting Opening of the Annual Exhibition**

**Saturday 4th April 2020**

**Smethwick Photographic Society  
The Old Schoolhouse, Churchbridge, Oldbury,  
West Midlands, B69 2AS**

*(for directions see below)*

## **Programme:**

- 10:00hrs** Doors open, tea and coffee available
- 10:30hrs** Welcome and Introduction
- 10:40hrs** It is planned to have two inspirational presentations by leading Nature Photographers, illustrated by examples of their own work. Details to be announced nearer the time. There will be a short break between presentations.
- 13:00hrs** Break for lunch  
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.
- 13:45hrs** **44th Annual General Meeting of the RPS Nature Group**  
**Agenda:**
1. Apologies for Absence
  2. Minutes of the 43rd AGM 2019 (printed in Issue 134 of 'The Iris')
  3. Matters arising
  4. Chairman's Report
  5. Treasurer's Report
  6. Secretary's Report
  7. Any Other Business
  8. Date and Venue of the 45th AGM 2021
- 14:15hrs** **Opening of the 2020 Exhibition**  
Presentation of the Awards  
Projection of the accepted images
- 16:30hrs** Close

**Throughout the day the prints accepted for the 2020 Exhibition will be on display**

## **Directions:**

From Junction 2 of the M5 follow the signs for the A4034 north towards West Bromwich.

Once on the A4034 stay in the left hand lane and after about 1/3 mile turn left at the first set of traffic lights into Park Street.

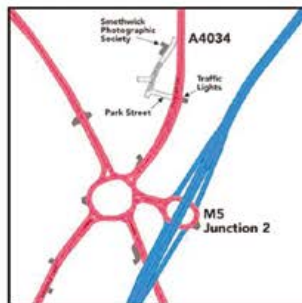
At the end of Park Street turn right into Churchbridge (cul-de-sac).

The Old Schoolhouse is the last but one building on the left.

If you have SatNav use postcode: B69 2AS

Google Maps Coordinates: 52.497771, -2.019776

The long running road works between Junctions 1 and 2 of the M5 are due to be finished by the end of 2019. M5 users should still check the status of the M5 before travelling and allow extra time if necessary.





# **RPS Nature Group Residential Weekend 2020**

## **Foxlease, New Forest**

**Foxlease Girlguiding Activities Centre, Lyndhurst, Hampshire SO43 7DE**

**Friday 16th - Monday 19th October 2020**

**Leader: James Foad LRPS**



James Foad LRPS, the organiser of this event, is now accepting bookings on a first come first served basis for the 2020 Autumn residential Weekend to be held at Foxlease Girlguiding Activities Centre, Lyndhurst, Hampshire. Foxlease combines the classic charm of a Georgian Manor House and the beauty of the surrounding area of the New Forest. All rooms are en-suite.

I am told by Heather Angel that it is quite some time ago that the Nature Group stayed here.

There will be opportunities to photograph a wide range of fungi, plants, invertebrates and vertebrates.

**The cost for the for Single room occupancy is £310.00**

**A deposit of £125.00 is required to secure your place**

**For further details please contact:**

**James Foad LRPS**

**Tel: 07834 – 810430**

**E-mail: [jamesfoadlrps@inbox.com](mailto:jamesfoadlrps@inbox.com)**