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# THE IRIS

MAGAZINE OF THE NATURE GROUP OF THE RPS

Issue No. 127 / Spring 2017



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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. Images (whether vertical or horizontal) should be supplied on CD as flattened 8bit sRGB Tiff files, 6" x 4" at 300 pixels per inch (1800 x 1200 pixels, file size approx 6.17MB). Please do not send larger images. If your image is selected for use on the cover of *The Iris* you will be asked to supply a larger file.

No payment will be made for material used and whilst every care will be taken, neither the Editor, the Nature Group or the Printers can accept liability for any damage that may occur to photographic material submitted.

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

## Distribution:

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Cover shot: Conehead nymph,  
*Empusa pennata*  
by Robert Thompson FRPS

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Chairman of the Nature A & F Distinctions Panel

## Nature Group Exhibitions

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

# Editorial

Yes, this is it - my 'swansong' edition of *The Iris*. This, my 41st edition as Editor, will be my last. The next will be compiled by our new Editor, Kevin Booth ARPS.

I hope you will show him the same support that you have shown to me during my tenure.

I confess, there has been the odd time when I would rather have been doing something else - sometimes deadlines have conflicted with photo trips and I've arrived home wishing I could look at my pictures rather than have to work on *The Iris*, but now that it's time to pass the responsibility on, I do find I have a tear in my eye and a little lump in my throat. I have enjoyed my thirteen years as Editor - it has given me the opportunity to get to know some of you quite well and it has been a pleasure meeting so many of you over the years at Group meetings and other events.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has contributed to *The Iris* during my time as Editor. Special thanks to those who have responded quickly to requests to write something when I have asked and also to those members who have contributed regularly over the years.

Ever a glutton for punishment, my new challenge is to start an eNewsletter for the group. Hopefully this will enable us to keep members better informed about events and items of interest to nature photographers. Initially eNewsletter will be published 3 times a year between issues of *The Iris* and emailed to members whose email address is listed with the membership department but it will also be available as a download from the Nature Group members pages on the RPS website. I would stress that the eNewsletter is intended to supplement not replace *The Iris*. Articles should be forwarded to the new Editor. You can contact Kevin at: editor-iris-rps@virginmedia.com but I will forward to Kevin anything for *The Iris* that is sent to me.

The eNewsletter will only be successful if members support it and therefore I am asking you for information of talks or workshops you may be doing, photographic kit you may have for sale and any topical information of interest to fellow members. Notices of Field Meetings will also be included, so if you can host a meeting, even at short notice, please contact Barbara Lawton FRPS, the Programme Co-ordinator, who will send the details on to me. My email address will be active until *The Iris* Summer issue, by which time I should have one set up for the newsletter. The first issue should be ready to email in September.

Bye for now -





# From the chair

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It hardly seems possible that my 2 year term as your Chairman comes to an end at the AGM in April. How time has flown! This will be my last 'From the Chair' article, and I wish to thank the NG committee for all their work both organizing events, and doing all the other jobs that are needed to keep the Nature Group running smoothly.

Although the Chairmanship was rather more time consuming than I expected, it has been an honour to have been your Chairman for the last 2 years. The major event to occur during my term of office was the Nature Group's 40th Anniversary meeting, and I am pleased to say the event was a sell-out, leaving some late applicants unable to secure a ticket. Just about everyone attending had to battle their way through torrential rain to reach Smethwick P.S. clubhouse, the venue for the event. In places the M6 was more like a river than a road!

As usual such events do not go off without a few problems, one of which was our main speaker for the afternoon David Osborn FRPS, who had to drop out due to a health problem. However, Dawn, David's sister, stepped in and gave an excellent show about my favourite location, the Falklands. Thank you Dawn. Dickie Duckett FRPS was due to give us a 'mini show' about African wildlife but also had to cancel, as a few days before the event he went down with a nasty bug that resulted in him losing his voice. Bob Gibbons FRPS was our first main speaker and gave us some spectacular views of wild flowers, from a range of different countries. Many are featured in his book 'Wild Flower Wonders of the World'. I wish to thank all the speakers who gave us such a very varied and excellent set of presentations.

Although the Nature Group does not have anything to do with running and awarding RPS Distinctions, we like to keep NG members informed about any major changes in the Distinctions rules and regulations. One recent major change that may affect some members who are thinking of applying for their Associateship or Fellowship in Natural History, is a new rule restricting applicants for Associateship from submitting more than 4 images that have been taken in paid for hides, (or other similar set ups) provided by a third party. Applicants for Fellowship are still allowed up to four images in their submission taken in paid for hides, etc. This rule has been introduced because in recent years

many specially built photographic hides have been set up both in Britain and abroad for wildlife photography on a commercial basis. At such places all a visiting photographer has to do is turn up, pay the money and start taking pictures. Everything is set up for them. In my view there is nothing wrong with taking advantage of such hides, except when you are submitting pictures for Distinctions - these are supposed to be all your own work. This restriction does not apply to pictures taken from hides in RSPB, Wildlife Trusts, Wetland and Wildlife Trust, National Trust reserves, etc. as they are provided for the use of the general membership of their organisations, and are not specially set up just for photography. Indeed most of these hides are for bird watching, and are far from ideal for wildlife photography, being normally sited too high and too far away from the subjects. For more guidance on these rules go to [arps@rps.org](mailto:arps@rps.org) or [frps@rps.org](mailto:frps@rps.org) or contact Andy Moore at Bath.

We have an outstanding wildlife photographer booked as the morning speaker at the Nature Group's Spring Meeting/AGM/Exhibition in April. It will be Chris Gomersall, formally the main photographer for the RSPB based at their HQ at Sandy. Some 20 years ago, Chris left the RSPB and became a freelance wildlife photographer, bird photography tutor, and tour leader. I am not sure what he plans to include in his show, except that he has promised to include some animated sequences. Chris gave a brilliant show at the last photography Joint Convention and I urge you not to miss this chance of seeing this show. There is no charge to attend the combined Spring Meeting/AGM/Exhibition. We will also have for sale copies of the RPS Portfolio 1 and 2 at the bargain price of only £5 each.

At this AGM we need to elect several new Nature Group members onto the committee, as several long serving committee members will be standing down.

I hope we will have a good attendance on the day, but remember that you need to bring your own lunch. Drinks will be available at the bar as usual.



# 41st Annual General Meeting, Spring Meeting & Annual Exhibition Opening

**Saturday 8th April 2017**

**Smethwick Photographic Society**  
**The Old Schoolhouse, Oldbury, West Midlands, B69 2AS**  
*(for directions see below)*

## **Timetable**

- |          |   |
|----------|---|
| 10.30hrs | Assemble for 10.45 hrs start  |
| 11.00hrs | 'And your bird can sing' -<br>a talk by professional wild life photographer and tour leader, Chris Gomersall. |
| 12.00hrs | Break for lunch   |

Please bring your own packed lunch as lunch will not be available. There is a dining area available. Tea, coffee, drinks, etc. will be available at the bar.

## **13.00hrs 41st Annual General Meeting**

### **Agenda**

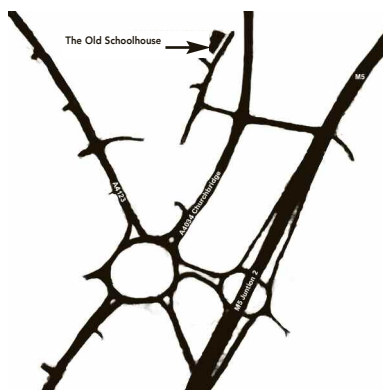
1. Apologies for absence.
2. Minutes of the 40th AGM 2016 printed in issue 125 of 'The Iris'.
3. Matters arising
4. Chairman's Report
5. Treasurer's Report
6. Secretary's Report
7. Any Other Business
8. Date and Venue of the 42nd AGM 2018

## **13.45hrs Opening of the 2017 Exhibition**

Presentation of the Awards  
Projection of the accepted images.  
Accepted prints 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 turn left at the first set of traffic lights (approx 1/3 mile) 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 the postcode B69 2AS



# Field Meeting Announcement

## Ainsdale Dunes 2017

**Date:** Saturday, June 10th, 2017

**Time:** 10:00 am.

**Location:** The Ainsdale Discovery Centre,  
The Promenade, Shore Road,  
Ainsdale-on-Sea, Nr. Southport, PR8 2QB

**Main subjects of interest:** Orchids and other dune flora, amphibians, reptiles and rare insects etc.

**Items to bring:** There are very few natural hazards but the area is exposed so light warm clothing and waterproofs are ideal in case of rain. Stout shoes or wellingtons are required. There are no charges but a packed lunch and a drink is advisable.

**Leader:** Trevor Davenport ARPS

**Tel** 01704 870284

**Mobile:** 07831 643844

**Email:** trevor43davenport@gmail.com

### Additional Information:

Dr. Phil Smith, MBE, has kindly agreed to join us again on this field meeting; Phil is a noted expert on the Sefton Coast and author of 'The Sands of Time' and 'The Sands of Time Revisited'

The sand-dunes of the Sefton Coast provide the largest sand-dune complex in England covering an area of approximately 2100 ha. It is a fascinating and ever-changing habitat with many photographic opportunities throughout the seasons; however, early summer is usually a period when the dunes are richly rewarding for both botanic and entomological subjects.

This year our field meeting is timed for Orchids, White Satin moths and other plants and insects. These are always dependant upon seasonal weather and the weather on the day. There are many other botanic specialties to be found in the dunes and on the 'Green Beach' at this time of the year. If the day is warm we should find the Northern Dune Tiger-beetle - a superbly photogenic insect; and there should be a plentiful supply of early butterflies and dragonflies. The frontal dunes and the 'Green Beach' are also well known for sightings of migratory birds and there may be some latecomers passing through. The area is also noted for having two increasingly rare species: The Sand Lizard and The Natterjack Toad. These are not easy to locate, especially the Sand Lizard, but we will do some prior research into suitable locations. In addition to the flora and fauna the Sefton Coast is itself very photogenic with sand, sea and dune landscape opportunities.

The dunes are always changing, both physically and with subtle and dramatic lighting, and there are locations where 'sand blow' has scoured large 'Devil Holes' further down the coast.

We also hope to supply moths from the previous evenings moth trap if the weather is suitable.

There is plentiful accommodation in the nearby seaside resort of Southport. This is a popular field trip with a maximum number of fifteen so early booking is important.



Southern Marsh Orchid by Tony Bond FRPS

# Southern Ocean Expedition

by Maggie Manson ARPS

The adventure begins in Ushuaia at the southern tip of Argentina, looking out over the Beagle Channel, with a backdrop of snowy mountains. Wrapped up against the sleety spring showers, we familiarise ourselves with the local wildlife. Kelp geese are searching the shoreline for their favourite seaweed, while dolphin and kelp gulls prise mussels from the exposed rocks and drop them from a height to release their contents. Southern Lapwings are mating and Flying Steamer Ducks and Crested Ducks are courting. Rock Shags fly low over the water with nest materials.

On the afternoon of October 30th we board the Akademik Sergey Vavilov with another ninety-four passengers and set sail at 18.00hrs. A huge flock of gulls sees us off as we head out into the Beagle Channel. After an introduction from our tour leaders (Mark Carwadine, conservationist, broadcaster and wildlife photographer, Joe Cornish, landscape photographer, Pete Bassett, wildlife film producer and Roz Kidman-Cox, writer and former editor of BBC wildlife magazine) and the One Ocean crew, we head on deck for an obligatory safety demonstration. Peering inside the fully enclosed, claustrophobic lifeboats we pray that they will not be required and doubt whether we would be able to follow the instructions of our Russian speaking crew if they were. As the light fails, we retire to our cabins unsure of what to expect when we leave the shelter of the Channel. Around 11.00pm our pilot is winched overboard to a small boat as we head for the open ocean. During the night the increased motion of the ship is a sure indication that we had left the shelter of the mainland.

After a day and two nights on wild seas with winds of 40 knots, we catch our first sight of the Falklands (November 1st). The sun is rising as we anchor off West Point Island. Once on shore we trek uphill across open land, punctuated with bright yellow gorse, to the far side of the island. We are greeted by steep cliffs and a huge mixed colony of Black-browed Albatross and Rockhopper Penguins, all completely unconcerned by our presence. In fact it would be quite easy to tread accidentally on a rockhopper as it shoves its way past in the narrow paths between the mounds of tussock grass. The colony is noisy with squabbling penguins, yet serene

with albatross preening and courting. Many are already sitting on eggs or soaring in the updraft overhead. The nesting birds are tightly packed together, so that creating a pleasing composition is a challenge.

From here we sail to Carcass Island where the shoreline is alive with interesting subjects. Magellanic and Blackish Oystercatchers are nesting, Kelp Geese are courting, and a pair of Flightless Steamer Duck shepherd their nine ducklings through the waves and rocky outcrops. A lone Magellanic Penguin has come ashore, unsure whether to proceed up the beach to its burrow. As we head to the house at the other end of the bay for a sumptuous spread of afternoon tea, we catch a crimson glimpse of a Long-tailed Meadow Lark. A Striated Caracara sees us off when reluctantly we finally take our leave in the zodiacs.

After stopping in Stanley the following morning, we leave the Falklands in a hailstorm and sail on to South Georgia. The route is rather indirect to avoid the worst of a storm – keeping the wind behind us allows for a more comfortable journey, but adds an extra day to our time at sea. As the light fades on November 5th we catch our first glimpse of South Georgia but have to wait until morning to really appreciate the stark beauty of the island.

Dawn brings a calm sea and soft light. Our first landing is in St Andrews Bay. Here we are thrown straight into the amazing wealth of wildlife this island has to offer, with a colony of around 300,000 King Penguin and several thousand Southern Elephant Seals. Where to point the camera? It is necessary to pause for a while and take stock of the scene, the sounds and the smells. None of the animals seem bothered by our presence. In fact the adult penguins and furry brown youngsters are inquisitive enough to peck a wellie boot or rucksack. Plenty of opportunity then for a wide angle approach, but taking care to avoid the inclusion of a red jacket.

There are penguins as far as the eye can see, great huddles of youngsters, columns of sleek adults and disheveled groups of those undergoing their annual moult. For the latter, this is a stressful few weeks as the moulting birds cannot go to sea to feed, so we give them a wide berth. Close to the shoreline



each harem of Elephant Seals is jealously guarded by its beach master, while other sneaky males patrol the shallows looking for a mating opportunity. The females came ashore several weeks earlier to give birth. After feeding their pups for 3-4 weeks they abandon them and become sexually receptive again, hence the fierce battles between the testosterone fuelled males. The youngsters can be crushed during such struggles. Once abandoned, it takes the weaners several weeks to realise that they are on their own. At this time they are still looking for comfort and will cuddle up to each other or anything else such as a bag of life jackets or a red coated human.

We are so absorbed by our surroundings that it is difficult to tear ourselves away, but we have to move on. In the afternoon we land at Gold Harbour, another bay filled with wildlife action. In addition to Penguins and Elephant Seals there are a number of feisty Fur Seals that have to be treated with great respect. Even the youngsters can be aggressive. Later in the season when large numbers have come ashore at the height of the breeding season, many of the beaches are too dangerous for landings. Snowy Sheathbills flit in and out of the colony, cleaning up after the Penguins. Skuas and Giant Petrels are always on the lookout for seal afterbirths or weak and dying animals. As we try to improve on the morning's photography with a new cast of characters, the air becomes chillier and snow begins to fall. Finally we pack away the gear and head back for the warmth of the ship. What an amazing day it has been – we can't wait for tomorrow.

But the next day the weather beats us. We sail up and down the coast looking for shelter, but with winds gusting to 45 knots there is no possibility of a landing. Instead we have to content ourselves with peering through the snow flurries at the old whaling stations of Stromness and Leith Harbor.

The storm passes and the following day we have better luck. In the morning sunshine we land at Grytviken to be greeted by the gruesome sight of a Giant Petrel, flanked by two Skuas, tucking into the carcass of a newborn Elephant Seal pup. We make our way up the hill to the little cemetery with its white picket fence, to pay our respects to Sir Ernest Shackleton whose ship, the Endurance, was crushed by Antarctic ice almost exactly 100 years ago. As the weather deteriorates once more we wander among the rusting remains of the whaling station and marvel at the fact that when it first started operating, the whales were so plentiful that the ships didn't even have to leave the bay for their catch. In contrast, we have seen no more than the odd blow on the horizon so far. Scattered among the ruins is the odd fur seal,



*Flightless Steamer Duck family, Falkland Islands.*



*Fur Seals sparring, St Andrew's Bay, South Georgia.*



*Elephant Seal pup trying not to get squashed.  
Jason Harbour, South Georgia.*



*Young Elephant Seal pups, Gold Harbour, S. Georgia*



Chinstrap Penguin, Mikkelson Harbour, Antarctica



King Penguin at St Andrew's Bay, South Georgia



Preening King Penguin

elephant seal or penguin. Antarctic Terns are fishing in the bay and endemic South Georgia Pintails are searching for food in the mushy grass.

The afternoon sees us land at Jason Harbour, voted by all as one of our favourite spots. On this beach it is quite easy to make out the harem structure of the elephant seals. The females lie in groups along the shoreline each with their attendant beach master. In their urge to mate the big bulls take little heed of the newborn youngsters, and we watch with baited breath as they struggle to avoid being crushed. The weaners occupy the slightly higher tussocky areas. Some look up wistfully at passing humans, others are frolicking in shallow pools. Sitting in the sunshine in all our polar gear it seems quite warm, but as the sun drops behind the mountain range a deep chill quickly develops. So we return to the ship as the good light fades.

A wake up call comes at 4.00am for our last day in South Georgia. As dawn breaks a lenticular cloud glows pink above us. Our zodiac landings are now slick and we set foot on Salisbury Plain, a vast beach filled with King Penguins of all ages against a beautiful backdrop of snow covered mountains. Many of the adults are taking an early morning bath and photo opportunities abound as they come and go, surfing out and in on the waves and dodging the elephant seals. On land, groups of adult and furry young penguins stretch to the horizon and on up the mountain slopes.

After breakfast our next destination is Prion Island, but unfortunately as we approach the weather deteriorates, making for a very choppy zodiac ride. The highlight on this small island is a close-up view of Wandering Albatross chicks waiting patiently at the nest for their parent to return with food. We are lucky enough to witness this. Since this island remained rat free, it has also been the stronghold of the endemic South Georgia Pipit. We can hear them singing and finally get a good view of one in flight and another preening only a few feet away. There is hope that the birds will become re-established all over the main island, as in the last few years an extensive and seemingly successful rat eradication project has been undertaken.

Then it's on to our final stop in South Georgia at Elsehul in the far north of the island. By now the snow is blowing horizontally as we sail into the bay past a colony of Macaroni Penguins, mountaineering up a steep rock face. We land on a tiny beach watched by a Leopard Seal and struggle uphill through deep muddy trenches between the tussocks, dodging angry fur seals. First we come upon a little



breeding colony of Gentoo Penguin sitting on eggs. Their nests are made of various local materials, including stones, vegetation or even bones. Those of us with enough stamina struggle to the top to get a closer view of a Sooty Albatross nesting area. Most of the way back down is a mud slide.

This afternoon (November 10th) we reluctantly turn our backs on South Georgia, considering ourselves lucky to have managed seven landings at many of the prime sites. As we head south across the Scotia Sea towards the Antarctic Peninsula, a cyclone is brewing and once again we have to change course to avoid the worst of the weather. We have all become experts at reading the wind charts. During another three days at sea, we do our best to catch sea birds in flight from a rolling deck and marvel at the size and beauty of passing icebergs. Standing in the warmth of the bridge we watch waves crashing over the bow and flooding deck 3.

On the fourteenth day we finally reach the South Shetland Islands, hoping to visit Chinstrap and Adelie Penguin colonies. However, the charts indicate that there is still extensive sea ice and a landing at Turret Point on King George Island is pronounced out of the question because of the swell and brash ice. Instead we cruise by zodiac among the wonderful sculpted forms of blue icebergs. We spot Adelie and Chinstrap colonies and Blue-eyed Cormorants on nests. Back at the ship we are greeted by the appearance of Humpback and Fin whales.

D'Hainaut Island in Mikkelsen Harbour is home to a large colony of Gentoos. Next morning we sail across this bay in biting winds, avoiding rocks and ice, to land on the snow at the foot of the slope where a Weddell Seal is reclining. The penguins favour rocky outcrops for their nest sites. There is feathered traffic in all directions, but some are hunkered down, half covered in snow, while others are courting or mating. Several birds appear to be eating the snow. Many are sheltering by a small red hut at the foot of the slope along with a number of Snowy Sheathbills. All around the scenery is stunning.

In the afternoon we take another zodiac trip in Cierva Cove. It is snowing hard and soon we are doing our utmost to keep cameras dry and functioning. Photographing from a zodiac is difficult at the best of times, what with the swell and crush of passengers. We cruise past even more fantastic bergs and watch Penguins porpoising along their base. A large group of Gentoo are poised on the edge of an icy overhang debating whether to take to the rocks and water below. The challenge is to catch them in mid jump. Among them is one lone Adelie.

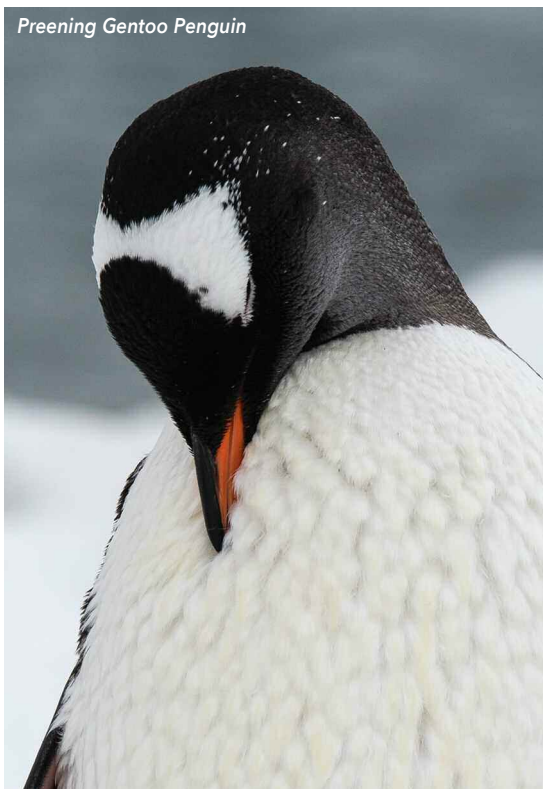


*Gentoo Colony, Mikkelsen Harbour, Antarctica*



*Gentoos and Adelie, Cierva Cove, Antarctica*

*Preening Gentoo Penguin*



On November 15th we get another 4.30am wake up for a 5.00am gangway. The outside temperature is -3°C. Our final landing is at Neko Harbour on the Antarctic Peninsula, allowing many of us to claim our seventh (if you split North and South America) continental landing. The bay is bounded on one side by a huge glacier that constantly rumbles and cracks, but sheds only a small ice fall during our visit. A Crabeater Seal glides silently through the water and parties of Gentoo are continually porpoising in and out of the bay. On the snow covered slopes the Penguins have nest sites on all available rocky outcrops. Some are still nest building, collecting stones (often stolen) and presenting them to partners. Others are bowing in courtship, while a few are mating. Many plod up and down the mountainside along well worn trails. The sky is heavy and black with a pending snowstorm. We take our leave and sail through the stunning landscape of the Gerlache Strait, lit by shafts of sunlight, alternating with blizzard conditions.

Finally, with two days to go, we grit our teeth, turn north and enter the infamous Drake Passage on our final leg back to Ushuaia. Gradually we leave the world of ice behind, although there are still a few giant bergs on the horizon. On the first day Cape Petrel, Antarctic Prion, Albatross and Giant Petrel

accompany us, swooping over the deep blue waves. The sun is shining and with only a moderate swell, the Drake does not seem so bad after all, compared to what we have already endured. But the charts look ominous and sure enough, for our last day at sea, the Beaufort scale hits 11 going on 12. The skies are grey and the sea is wild. As the ship rocks and rolls, we gather in the lounge on deck 6, hanging on to any solid support, to watch a presentation of stills and video of our trip which our tour leader experts have hastily put together. Later, during the Captain's dinner, several sets of crockery slide onto the floor and many tables are awash with red wine. Salvation comes as we enter the Beagle Channel once more and by dawn all is calm.

Later that morning as we disembark, we pass another cruise ship holed just above the water line and learn that it had collided with an iceberg off the South Shetland Islands. We hear of another ship heading for the Antarctic, which caught fire, causing some 200 passengers to be evacuated. And on its very next trip, within hours of reaching South Georgia, a passenger on the Vavilov was bitten by a fur seal and had to be airlifted to hospital in the Falklands. So all in all we felt lucky to have had such a wonderful time in the Southern Ocean.



*Wandering Albatross chick, Prion Island, S.G.*



*Black-browed Albatross, Falkland Islands*



*Grey-headed Albatross, Southern Ocean*



*Black-browed Albatross off South Georgia*

# On the banks of the Chobe & Zambezi

by **Conor Molloy ARPS**

Chobe is one of those special places. When you flick through the pages of photography/travel literature and see the variety of species on offer plus the facilities for the photographer it becomes more than appealing, you just have to do it !!

Together with some camera club friends, I visited the Birmingham Photo Show in 2015 and met up with Lou Coetzer who leads CNP Safari's. He assured us that Chobe is one of the best destinations for nature photography, especially for birds. September/October was regarded as the best time of year to go and so two of us booked the trip in October 2016. We flew first to Johannesburg and then had a short 2 hour hop to Kasane in Botswana. Chobe Safari Lodge was just a ten minute drive from there.

Lou is quite a character and would rank as one of the best wildlife photographers in Africa. He is strong in his views about how things need to be set up for success. He operates a low level boat that is purposefully made for six photographers with cushioned seating and fully adjustable gimbal head

housings that easily cope with the heaviest of lenses - incredibly flexible and comfortable for a day on the river.

The wildlife in Chobe certainly lived up to Lou's recommendation. I have never seen so many elephants - coming down to drink at the river's edge, crossing the river in single file and playing in the mud baths with some very small babies in the large family groups. They were highly entertaining but not so easy to photograph well as their close groupings make it difficult to get some separation and they tend to cast dark shadows over each other. Hippo's, crocs and numerous species of antelope were also in abundance and easily photographable.

The bird life was plentiful as well with four different type of Kingfisher (Giant, Brown-hooded, Pied & Malachite) and three Bee eaters (Carmine, Little & White-fronted) much in evidence. The African Fish Eagle was also quite common but alas they didn't go fishing for us - just stayed immobile on their posts before flying off.







Giant Kingfisher



Collared Pratincole



Carmine Bee Eater

Lou kept reminding us to “work the scene” by which he meant, kill the engine, park the boat in an area of activity and just stay there for an hour or so and watch what happens. Patience like this does get rewarded as the birds and animals do come closer than they would if you keep moving off in search of the next thrill. Close up shots of African Jacana, Skimmers, Thicknees, Collared Pratincoles and various Herons & Lapwings were just some of the highlights.

One of the big challenges came when Lou berated us for not keeping our camera settings somewhere between -1 and -2 exposure compensation. His justification for this was twofold, firstly, “shutter speed is king” and secondly, you have to “protect the whites” with the added benefit of being able to use lower ISO’s. We found this hard to appreciate at first coming from the +EV and high ISO grey skies we usually face in the UK but for the quality of light you get in Africa he was, of course, correct - in any case why argue with the pro in his own patch !!!

After three days on the Chobe we then hopped in an MPV for the two hour drive across the border into Kalizo in Namibia where an active colony of around 3,000 Carmine Bee-eaters were to be found on the banks of the Zambezi River. On this trip I particularly wanted to capture images of the Carmine Bee-eaters. For some reason these birds have held a particular fascination for me - maybe its the wonderful colour, but they are such a magnificent bird.

Getting to the site involved a ten minute boat ride and then there before us was a huge flock of Carmines, settled in the trees one minute and then airborne the next - a swirl of pink and red and an amazing spectacle. It reminded me a bit of those wonderfully dramatic scenes, usually involving David Attenborough, that you see on the BBC wildlife programmes - the sort of scene that makes you gasp in awe at what you are



Flock of Carmine Bee Eaters

witnessing and it certainly leaves an impression. Their nests were just holes in the sandbanks and in the ground. They would sit around near their nest holes, occasionally entering the wrong hole causing fights to break out. We simply sat on the ground as near as possible but without getting too close to cause disturbance.

It was also amazing to watch the antics of the Yellow-billed Kites flying amongst the flocks of Carmine's waiting for their chance to prey on one. Airborne, the Carmine's were too quick for the Kites, so they had to be caught whilst resting on the ground. The Kites would stand near the nest hole and stamp their feet hoping for a Carmine to fly out and be grabbed or failing that it would reach into the hole and steal the eggs. For me, seeing these Bee-eaters was a true highlight of the trip - a bonus was a much smaller colony of White-fronted Bee Eaters just a few hundred yards down the river.

Following our three days photographing Carmine's we drove back to Chobe for the final two days of the trip. Our target now was to focus on the elephants, particularly at sunset when the sky turns a lovely golden orange and the elephants are silhouetted against it. The Elephant sunset is probably amongst the more common photographs but it is still a treasure in anyone's portfolio.

Just to emphasise the variety of birds on the Chobe, we were also able to get very good images of African Openbill cracking shells, Lilac-breasted Roller at its nest, Kittlitz Plover drinking on the water plus Coppery-tailed Coucal, Wire-tailed Swallow, Yellow-billed & Maribou Stork, flocks of Whistling Duck, Hammerkop and Slaty Egret to name but a few.

Would I do it again ? Absolutely! In a heartbeat!



*Yellow-billed Kite*



*African Fish Eagle*



*Coppery-tailed Coucal*



*Elephant at Sunset*



*African Jacana*

# Photographing the wild orchids of Sicily

by Robert Thompson FRPS FIPF

## Introduction

April is that time of the year in the UK when spring has not quite kicked in, and winter can still make its presence felt. It's usually around this period that I head off to the Mediterranean, to run a workshop on flowers and early insects, or pursue my interest in wild orchids, which has been a passion of mine for the last twenty years. My desire to capture photographically, the diversity of species and variations of these charismatic plants has taken me to numerous locations throughout Europe, including many of the well-known islands in the Mediterranean. Spring comes early to this area, and the islands explode with colour in late March and throughout April. The whole region is a popular destination for botanists and photographers

especially at this time of the year when things are still relatively quiet at home.

Sicily is one of those amazing places when you experience it for the first time remaining with you for years to come. It is the largest of the Mediterranean islands, steeped in archaeological history and separated from the toe of mainland Italy by the Straits of Messina. The ruins and temple relics that were once part of the Greek empire are now home to a wide variety of flowers and orchids, which brings colour to these historical remains and the surrounding landscapes in early spring. As an island Sicily has a wide diverse flora many of which are endemic and associated with its volcanic geology.

*Ophrys tenthredinifera*



*Anacamptis longicornu*





I have had a long association with Italy, it's one of my favourite locations for workshops and doing my own thing. Driving in parts of it can be a little challenging, but Palermo at rush hour is a whole new experience. The main road into the city lacks any structured protocol; here it's every man for himself as you try to navigate the wide arterial road which is occupied with virtually every type of vehicle and devoid of any order or road markings; it reminds me of a Formula One starting grid.

The island has an incredible diversity of scenery with a dramatic coastline backed by high mountains through to lowland fertile volcanic scrub and of course Mount Etna, at 3,350 metres it's Europe's highest and most active volcano. The Sicilian people are warm, friendly and passionate about their island and rightly so. The cuisine is excellent and with a good bottle of wine at the end of a day's photography, what more could a photographer want?

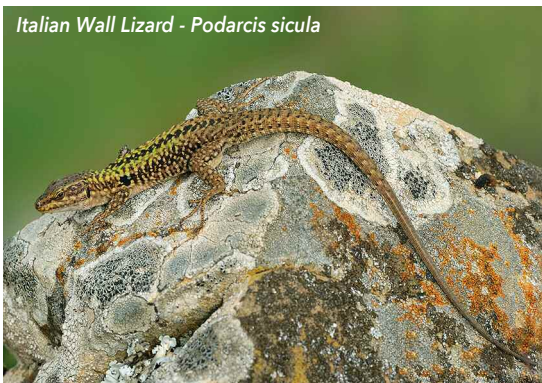
### Where to go

Flowers abound in Sicily, so you won't need to travel far to find orchids. Once inland, many of the minor side roads are rich in colour and insect life. Following the coastal route east of Palermo takes you to the picturesque peninsula of Cape Zafferino and its breath-taking views; this is an area well worth exploring. It has a rich diversity of flowers and some notable orchids including, *Himantoglossum robertianum*, *Neotinea commutata*, *Neotinea tridentata* and the scarcer *Ophrys explanata*, which is a Sicilian endemic and member of the *Ophrys bertolonii* group. Other species in the area include *Ophrys lutea*, *Ophrys tenthredinifera* and *Orchis italica* to name but a few.

Approximately 45 miles south of Palermo is the limestone massif of Rocca Busambra. Its lower slopes contain the largest forest in western Sicily. Here among the stands of oak, ash and elm is the small majestic village of Ficuzza, an area of botanical importance and rich in orchids and wildlife. The woodland is part of the Bosco di Ficuzza National Nature Reserve. Exploring the forest and the area around Albanesi will produce a good range of species including, *Anacamptis longicornu*, *Ophrys bombyliflora*, *Ophrys sicula*, *Ophrys speculum*, and *Ophrys pallida*, (a speciality of the area) and several *Ophrys fusca*'s, which can be challenging to identify. Searching suitable areas along the roadside at a higher altitude may yield the rarer Sicilian Orchid *Dactylorhiza markusii* which is a real bonus, it is more commonly encountered in its creamy-yellow form, but there is also a rare red variation that has been recorded on the island. The central area of the forest has a similar range of species, but here you



Ficuzza Forest



Italian Wall Lizard - *Podarcis sicula*



*Dactylorhiza markusii*



*Ophrys pallida*

will find *Ophrys melenia*, and *Orchis provincialis*. Ficuzza is an excellent location for other wildlife populations in particular birds and different species of lizard while the trees support a rich variety of lichens and ground flora. The area around Ficuzza has much to offer the photo-grapher, and it is worth spending time in this locality.

Monte Formaggio in south-east of the island is another excellent location and a good base for exploring the general area. A wide range of species occur here, many of which can be found along the roadside verges. *Ophrys mirabilis*, *Ophrys lunulata*, *Ophrys oxysrhynchos* and *Orchis italica* can be found growing in profusion on some roadside embankments. With a little judicious searching, more elusive species such as *Limodorum abortivum* and several species of *Serapias* can be found.

Travelling further south takes you to Mount Lauro - part of the Hyblaean mountain chain. It has an extensive expanse of coniferous forest. The area is rich and botanically diverse with a number of notable orchids including, *Ophrys candica*, *Ophrys grandiflora*, *Ophrys laurensis*, *Anacamptis papilionacea* and various populations of the highly attractive *Neotinea lactea* in a variety of colour forms in addition to some of the already mentioned species.



*Ophrys speculum*



*Neotinea lactea*

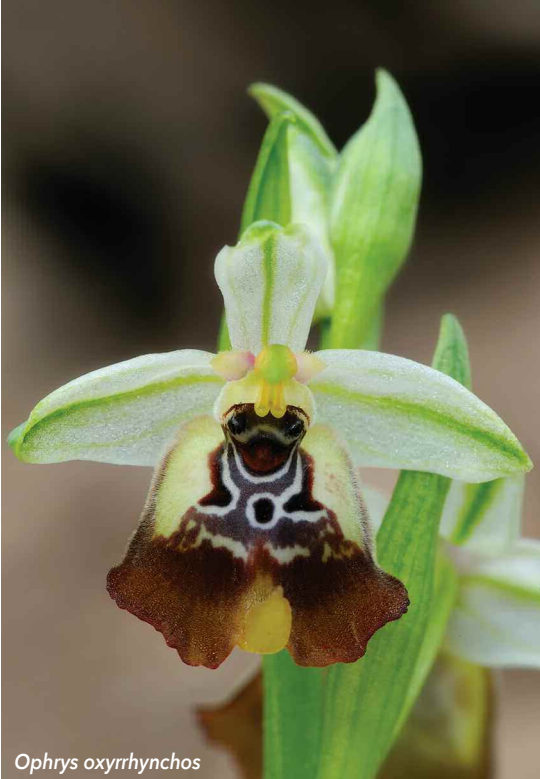


One of the best-known regions for orchid hunting is the area around Palazzola and Ferla in the south of the island. The botanically rich area of Mount Grosso nearby is worth exploring; you can expect to find up to 30 species along with a number of hybrids. An area such as this demands a few days' exploration since there is so much to see and photograph. Notable species include *Ophrys biancae*, *Ophrys calliantha* including hybrids between *Ophrys speculum* and *Ophrys incubacea* and *Orchis italica* and *Orchis anthropophora*. The highlight of the region if you can find it is the exquisitely beautiful *Ophrys lacaitae*; this is a rarity on Sicily and an orchid that I had wanted to see and photograph for quite some time.

### Photographic considerations

Photographing abroad brings its challenges. Airline restrictions on what you can take on board means you often have to compromise on your choice of equipment. It is also important for me to be able to achieve consistency in my images irrespective of what the elements or lighting conditions are at the time. You simply can't confine yourself to working in early morning and late evening. Another important, but often overlooked fact, is that we are all transient photographers and don't normally have the luxury of being able to visit a location in ideal conditions - unless you are extremely fortunate to be there at the right time. Flowers and intense sunlight don't work that well together unless you are photographing very early in the morning or in warm evening light. The harsh light produced during the day is generally counter-productive for macro work. Diffusers are an essential part of my kit when photographing abroad and are often the key to achieving a satisfactory result in the field, which would otherwise fail in the glaring light of midday. The majority of images illustrated here were all taken under diffused light.

It has often been said that photographing static subjects present little in the way of a challenge on the photographer's part; this is a misconception in my opinion, flower photography is more challenging in terms of trying to create something that is beyond a mere record shot. Dealing with the elements and conditions at the time can also add to the frustration. Orchids often grow in well-vegetated areas and isolating a single plant can be difficult. It pays to take a little time and look carefully at the choice of specimens available and where they are situated. Lens selection and aperture are also important factors in terms of how the final image will look. Sometimes it is just not possible to achieve your objective, and you have to accept compromise. Learning to see creatively takes



*Ophrys oxyrhynchos*



*Ophrys calliantha*



*Ophrys lacaitae*



*Orchis anthropophora* x *Orchis italica*

time, but with practice, it becomes instinctive as to what works and what doesn't. I like to spend fifteen or twenty minutes evaluating a site and the quality of the material before I pick up a camera; by then, I have articulated some thoughts and ideas in my mind. Another important but frequently overlooked point is the welfare of other plants when working at ground level. I have often seen the impact on the surrounding vegetation left by over enthusiastic photographers when they get excited about their quarry. It often resembles the aftermath of a tsunami.

I have been fortunate to have travelled to so many countries and islands, photographing their flora and fauna. In the 1990's many places particularly around the Mediterranean were not that well set up for tourism. Accommodation was also not that abundant except in coastal or tourist regions. Getting to some destinations frequently involved more than one flight. However, the experience of seeing fields and roadsides abundant with flowers and insects makes you quickly forget the journey and the hassle.

Unfortunately, change does eventually catch up, and tourism is now the business of the day. Many areas that were once flower-rich dwindle with each passing year. It has often been said that you should never go back to a place that holds pleasant memories of time spent there. I have found this to be true on many occasions when I have returned to places several years later, only to find sites either destroyed or greatly diminished. The vistas of wildflowers and orchids that once carpeted the roadsides and meadows are in decline everywhere. These, unfortunately, are the times we live in. I'm so glad that I had the opportunity to experience first hand, and through my photography, capture places and plants as I remember them without having to rely on my memory in the years to come.

There is an incredible network of orchid enthusiasts and societies out there, with lots of information on sites and locations for many different species, both in the UK and further afield. Below is the web address of the Hardy Orchid Society, which has information on orchids both in the UK and abroad. The society produces a quarterly journal and runs field trips for orchids throughout the UK.

[www.hardyorchidsociety.org.uk](http://www.hardyorchidsociety.org.uk)

# Canyons of Utah - Sculpted by Time

by Dawn Osborn FRPS

You've got to love America - they've got so much wild open space. National and State Parks with some of the world's most amazing geological features, good public access and plenty of wildlife too.

During late October and early November I had the good fortune to visit Utah, in particular the National Parks of Bryce, Zion and Arches. The weather was much hotter than anticipated - up in the mid 70's Fahrenheit during the day and, as you would expect, quite chilly before sunrise and after sunset. Mostly it was warm, dry and sunny - perfect conditions for both walking and photographing the landscape and geological features. I'm not really a landscape photographer - I'm too easily distracted by the sounds of wildlife - but I found the geological features very interesting to photograph and of course, geology is part of our earth's natural history.

Bryce and Zion Canyons are encompassed within the Colorado Plateau, an area of 130,000 square miles with an average elevation of a mile high. Within this area is the Grand Staircase. The name was given by geologist Clarence Dutton in the late 19th Century,

who compared it to a giant staircase stepping away northwards from the top of the Grand Canyon, through Zion and upwards to Bryce Canyon. Dutton identified five distinct layers of colour - chocolate, vermillion, white, grey and pink. Chocolate being the oldest layer and pink the youngest and highest. Later geologists have subsequently further divided these layers, which span between 1,800 million years old in the Grand Canyon to 50-60 million years young in Bryce. Since then periods of uplift and movement of the earth's crust plus erosion caused by rivers and the varying climatic elements, have combined together to create these dramatic and visually spectacular landscapes.

Bryce was an amazing spectacle - the pink and ochre colours so rich in the early morning sunshine. The light changed quickly as the sun rose in the sky - and what was in shadow one minute was dramatically lit in the next. Bryce was named for early settler and native Scot, Ebenezer Bryce, who once attempted to farm in the region. He described Bryce as "a hell of a place to lose a cow!"

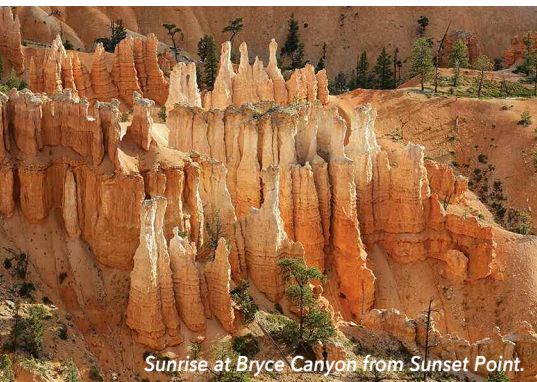


*Desert Bighorn Sheep, Zion Plateau, Utah.*

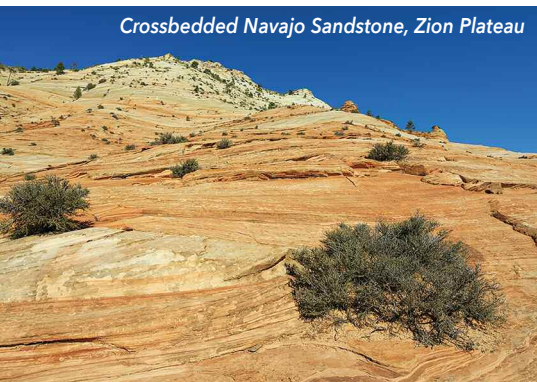




*Bristlecone Pine at Red Canyon.*



*Sunrise at Bryce Canyon from Sunset Point.*



*Crossbedded Navajo Sandstone, Zion Plateau*



*The Castle, Capitol Reef.*

After Bryce we drove to Zion National Park. Zion is very different to Bryce but equally dramatic. It sits at the start of the 'chocolate' step of the Grand Staircase. The 2,000 ft high sandstone cliffs of Zion are the highest in the world and were the creation of the Virgin river. The cliff walls are often partially streaked red and brown in 'desert varnish' - a combination of minerals, clay, iron and manganese oxides/hydroxides.

Zion is a very popular park and only two hours drive from Las Vegas. We had timed our visit to arrive there after November 1st - before this date visitors must use the Park Bus Service to enter Zion Canyon. From November 1st you can normally use your car, but unfortunately the good weather brought large numbers of day visitors driving up from Vegas, so the Park was kept closed to cars for the duration of our visit. Using the bus service did make getting around with camera bags, tripods, etc. a little more difficult. Nevertheless, we found Zion very enjoyable, and despite the unanticipated number of visitors we found lots of photogenic spots where we were mostly on our own.

After spending four days in Zion, we drove via Capitol Reef to Moab which is located a few miles from Arches National Park. It was a long way but we saw some amazing landscape features on our way and the fall colour was lovely too.



*The Virgin River, Zion National Park*



I think Arches National Park was my favourite - there were just so many spectacular features to photograph and the colours were so rich. We spent several hours each morning and afternoon looking for pictures - we never had to look very hard.

This area of Utah lies above what 300 million years ago was a vast sea. The sea evaporated, leaving behind it a bed of salt thousands of feet thick in places. During the millennia that followed debris, silt, etc. were deposited above the salt bed and then compressed into rock. The unstable salt bed eventually shifted beneath the heavier rock above moving along faults and creating domes in the rock. Over time the domes cracked and water seeped in, the salt dissolved, the water froze, expanded and formed fissures. Wind and water went to work and the rest as they say is history.

We saw plenty of wildlife but always when you least expected to. A full frame DSLR and a 24-70mm lens isn't going to get you very far with wild creatures and almost certainly not with birds. Nevertheless, I achieved reasonable shots of Stellar's Jay, Rock and Antelope Squirrel, Mule Deer and Bighorn Sheep with a 100-400 lens on a second full frame camera body.

Utah's National Parks are well worth more of my vacation time and I look forward to returning soon.



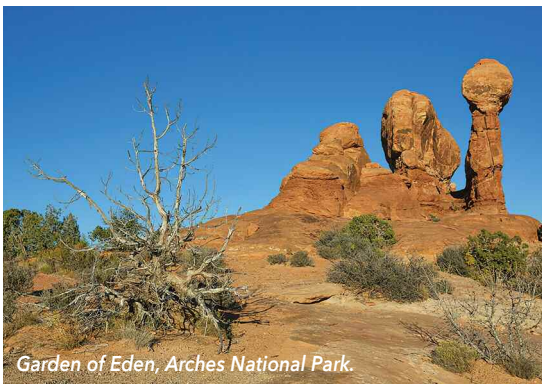
*Rock Squirrel, Zion Canyon.*



*Mule Deer, Arches National Park.*



*Pine Tree Arch, Arches National Park*



*Garden of Eden, Arches National Park.*



*Skyline Arch at sunset, Arches National Park.*





Grasses in the Gobi Desert



*Silene uralensis*



*Vicia cracca*, Gobi Desert



Colour in the Gobi Desert



# On the Steppes of Genghis Khan

by John Nathan ARPS

Even the name sounds quite exotic - Mongolia, home of one of the greatest empires the world has ever seen - the largest contiguous empire in history - bigger than the Roman empire, bigger than the Inca empire.

Where is it? Inner or Outer Mongolia? What is it like? Mongolia lies between Eastern Russia (Siberia) to the north and China to the south. It is the second largest country in the world without a coastline (the largest being Kazakhstan). Mongolia is what used to be called 'Outer Mongolia'; the old 'Inner' Mongolia is part of modern China.

Mongolia's history goes back thousands of years, but its most significant events were the empire of Genghis (Chinggis) Khan, 1162-1227, and successors, and Russian occupation 1922-1990. It is now a free country with elections, one of which was being held while we visited in July 2016.

The main tourist flights into Mongolia arrive at the capital Ulan Bataar, and as you cannot fly there from London, we flew to Frankfurt, then on to Mongolia. The country has a population of three million, of whom one million live in the capital, a modern city with few remains of the old buildings of the Communist era.

My trip, one of a group of six friends, was not a specific photography trip, but was a tailor made trip. After a couple of days in the capital, we then went east to Terelj national park, south into the Gobi desert, north back to Orkhon valley, and finally the Hustai national park; a journey of nearly 2000 miles. The winter in Mongolia is very severe, but in July it was warm in Ulan Bataar, and hot in the Gobi. Much of the area between is the Steppe, an enormous area of grassland, with very few trees, though there is forest in the northern part. You drive across the Steppe for hours, mostly off road, on ancient tracks. This is where wild horses live. They seem to stay together in herds, but all the ones you see nowadays are hybrids. However, there is a re-introduction programme for an ancient breed of wild horse. The ancient (Takhi) horses which Genghis Khan used were more squat than modern horses. A Russian cavalry Officer, Maj Przewalski, realised in the 1890s that horses on the Mongolia Steppe were the last truly wild horses in the world. By the 1960s they had become extinct in the wild, but had been bred in several zoos around the world.

They were re-introduced in the 1980s into Hustai National Park, dedicated to preserving these animals. There are now about 300 of them and I remember tearing up a steep hill with a 200mm F2.8 lens, and a guide half my age, to photograph them.

We did see other wildlife. Ibex in a mountain region, and few deer on the plain - both of these are endangered because of hunting. There are also ground squirrels and lizards living in the Gobi - which was not as barren as you might think.

I saw Demoiselle Cranes a few times; these are birds which fly through Himalayan valleys to their wintering grounds. We also saw vultures on the ground once or twice; with many wild horses, camels etc, there are always likely to be carcasses for them to feed on.

Mongolia is said to be one of the best places in the world for unspoilt flora, and, though you did have to look carefully, we saw quite a lot. Towards the north we saw Pulsatilla, then further south various other colourful plants, and desert succulents in the Gobi desert.

The camera I used was a Canon EOS5D MkIII. Lenses were Canon 24-105, Canon 70-200 f2.8 plus X1.4 and X2 Extenders and a Sigma 16-35 which was rarely used. For image storage (all RAW) I used a Microsoft Surface tablet, so charging camera and tablet batteries was necessary. Some gers had mains electricity, some did not, some had power points in public places - I was not prepared to leave expensive equipment. The only photographic difficulty was charging batteries - I took four of Canon's own, I have found them the most long lasting and reliable. My chief anxiety was sand storms, so my camera rucksack had a waterproof cover, and I took a dry bag for the camera. In the end, there was no sand storm.

On reflection I would say that Mongolia is a very varied and worthwhile place to visit, but don't expect luxury. We stayed in gers (yurts) every night for nearly a fortnight - often more comfortable than a hotel room. Distances are huge and mostly off road; we were driven 1600 miles in 4 x 4s. But the freshness of an unpolluted country, especially shown by the night sky, made it all worth it.

*Editor's note:*

*See more of John's images on the back cover.*

# Fascinating Pholcus

by John Bebbington FRPS

When I worked at Juniper Hall Field Centre in Surrey I was delighted to find small numbers of the Daddy-long-legs Spider *Pholcus phalangoides* around the premises, but almost always indoors. On my retirement to Somerset I was amazed to find a thriving population in our small outhouse!

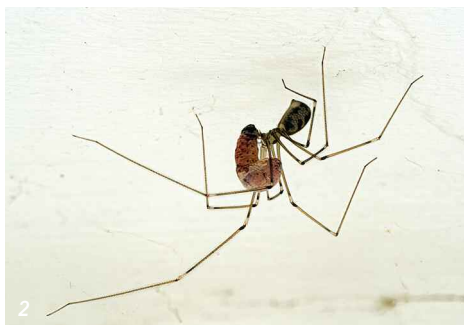
I took a few casual photographs, initially on film but then digitally, between 2004 and 2009 but became rather more focused when one day in July 2010 I found a male transferring his sperm to a female and decided to try to follow the life cycle of this fascinating spider.

*Pholcus phalangoides* is widely recorded as killing woodlice and it also predated other spiders - I have observed it killing a specimen of the Spitting Spider *Scytodes thoracica* (itself a fascinating species) and also a very large House Spider (*Eratigena* (formerly *Tegenaria*) sp.). In our kitchen, one specimen caught a Codling Moth larva which had emerged from a fallen apple.

A female may mate several times and produces a semi-transparent egg cocoon, in which the eggs can clearly be seen, around 2 months later. I suspect that egg production happens at night because I have never been able to observe the process during daylight hours, although I have to admit that I haven't done any continuous observation or time-lapse photography. A wish-list image!

The female carries the cocoon in her jaws, and from my observations stops feeding and slowly wastes away. Gradually, markings begin to develop on the eggs; these appear to be the folded (very long) legs off the spiderlings. I wanted to photograph the head and eyes of the developing spiderlings at high magnification (without harming either them or the adult, needless to say!) but they seem to be positioned with the head orientated to the middle of the cocoon!

Eventually the female (at least, the females in my outhouse) unpicks the silken cover of the cocoon and





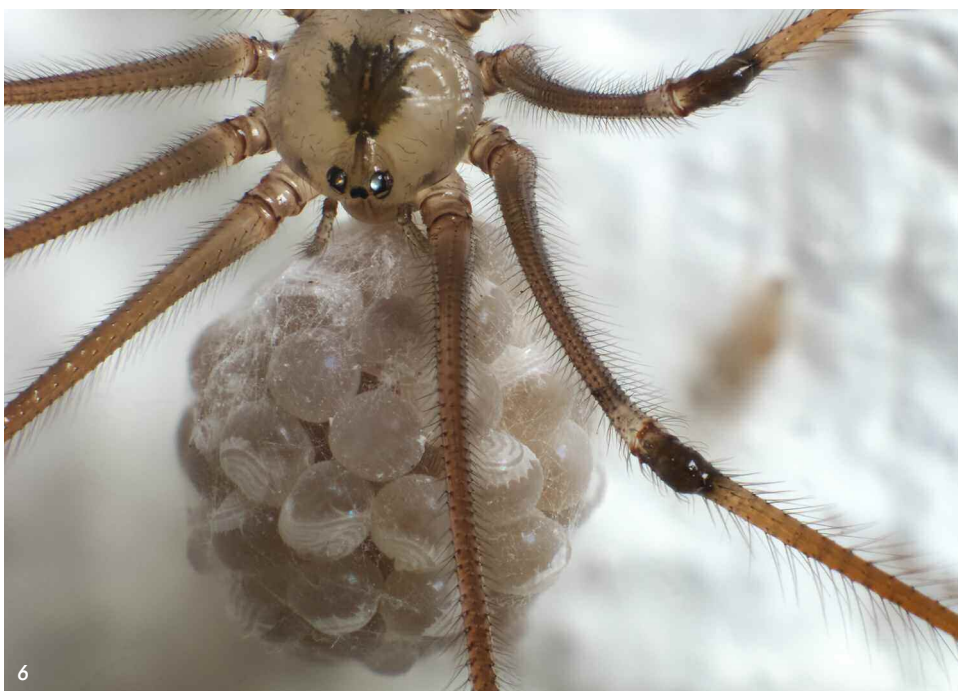
may or may not spin a 'safety net' below it. This seems to catch the spiderlings as they struggle out of the egg cocoon.

Very soon the spiderlings move on to either the ceiling or the wall next to the female and within a day or two disperse. The female disappears - presumably she dies once her job is done! However I have not found dead females, as I suspect that they are predated by other *Pholcus* individuals.

In late July and early August there are literally hundreds of young individuals in the outhouse but by the Autumn numbers are dramatically reduced and by December they are down to the average population of around 20 maturing individuals.

What happens to the young? Are they eaten by larger individuals (survival of the fittest!) or do they make their way to the gaps around the outhouse door and, like many other spiders, disperse on the wind?

*Pholcus phalangoides* is a fascinating species to observe and photograph.



The three projects for 2017 are

- to obtain better images of a 'mating' pair (and the aftermath - does the male escape or is he killed?),
- to record a female actually producing her eggs from her genital aperture and
- to monitor what happens to the young individuals.

This last might involve sealing most of the gaps around the outhouse door and setting up a camera to record what (if anything) comes out of the remaining exit!

Although I carry a lightweight carbon fibre tripod for most of my fieldwork, my Benbo 1 is kept in the outhouse and was used for all the accompanying images. I used focus stacking for two of the images but many other attempts failed owing to subject movement!

Image details:

- 1 *Pholcus* female with spider prey 9 September 2010; 1.3 sec f22, ISO 200, +1EV. Pentax K-10, Sigma 180mm APO macro on tripod.
- 2 *Pholcus* female with Codling Moth larva prey
- 3 *Pholcus* male transferring sperm to female 21 July 2010; 1/15 sec f22, ISO 800 AWB +1EV. Pentax K-10, Sigma 180mm APO macro on tripod
- 4 *Pholcus* female with egg mass 23 August 2010; 1 sec f22, ISO 400. Pentax K-10, Sigma 180mm APO macro on tripod
- 5 *Pholcus* female with emerging young, 7 Jul 2016. Pentax K-3, EL-Nikkor 50mm enlarging lens on bellows, tripod mounted. Stack of 16 images each 1/2 sec f11, ISO 200.
- 6 *Pholcus* female with egg cocoon, 4 July 2016. Pentax K-3, EL-Nikkor 50mm enlarging lens on bellows, tripod mounted. Stack of 17 images each 1/4 sec f8, ISO 200.
- 7 *Pholcus* female with dispersing young, 6 July 2016. Pentax K-3, Sigma 180mm APO macro lens on tripod, 1/5 sec f25.





# Happy Birthday

## by Tony Bond FRPS

The 40th Birthday of the Group was celebrated on the 16th of September at The Old Schoolhouse, the headquarters of Smethwick PS. Approximately 80 members and guests braved torrential rain, flooded roads and a closed motorway to hear our Chairman, Richard Revels, open the proceedings. We were also welcomed by Judith Parry on behalf of Smethwick PS.

Heather Angel then described how she had been invited to form a nature group in 1975 which led to a notice in the Journal inviting expressions of interest and the establishment of a Special Interest Group in 1976. She also pointed out that I was one of two founder members present, the other being herself. It made me feel quite vulnerable! Heather then described the first field meetings of the new Group



and showed a very simple newsletter of the time. She showed how this had evolved into The Iris which is a vital link between the membership.

Bob Gibbons then gave the first of the major presentations of the day on the flowers of various corners of Europe, the USA and South Africa which



Left to right: Tony Bond FRPS, Richard Revels FRPS, Heather Angel Hon FRPS and RPS CEO Dr. Michael Pritchard.

have been untouched by modern agricultural practices or unsuitable for agriculture. This was very timely in view of the recent debates in the media about the effects of modern agriculture on biodiversity. The images were mainly wide angle shots showing sheets of brilliant colour in the landscape. Bob said that these spectacles are unpredictable and often last for only 2 weeks. This means that Bob must have been very lucky, has good local contacts or has made repeated visits. I suspect the latter. He considered that California was much undervalued. It is very large and outside the major cities there is a wealth of unspoiled territory protected by law. In questions after his presentation Bob said that many of his pictures were taken with a 24-70mm zoom and he made good use of a large reflector. He also uses a tilt/shift lens to facilitate front to back sharpness.

In the first of the short talks, John Bebbington showed how focus stacking can be used to improve sharpness and depth of field when photographing close up. He had recorded the life cycle of a species of spider living at his home with impressive results. Next, Thomas Hanahoe surprised us by showing black and white nature images. I felt relieved as I had a black and white print on display. Roger Hance's presentation began with pictures of Adders, Grass Snakes and Sand Lizards. He went on to show pictures taken on the field meetings hosted by Christine and Geoff Trinder in their garden cum nature reserve. This brought back happy memories for me as I attended both and enjoyed them immensely. Our chairman, Richard Revels, described how his initial interest in photographing nature had been butterflies. He branched out into the orchids of Bedfordshire which led to a book. He then showed images of two wasps nests, one in an RSPB hide and the other on his garage door. The problem with the latter was that when the door was shut the entrance/exit was at the bottom of the nest and when it was open it was on the side. This must have confused the wasps. In the final presentation before lunch Heather Angel returned to describe her three year project on pollination which has resulted in a book. She described it as her most ambitious project to date. The images showed a bewildering array of stratagems plants use to become pollinated. The one which sticks in my mind was taken with a thermal imaging camera showing how the plant used heat. The hired camera was valued at £35,000 - Heather did not dare let out of her sight.

Lunch enabled everyone to catch up with old friends. Unfortunately this tended to be descriptions of a wide range of medical problems which I suppose was inevitable and to which I plead guilty! Despite this it was possibly the most rewarding aspect of the

day. There were then opportunities to inspect the panels of prints by some former chairs of the Group with accompanying details. Two of these were by Chairmen sadly no longer with us – Martin Withers and Robert Hawkesworth. There was also a successful Associateship and Fellowship panel on display.

The final presentations after lunch should have been one of 15 minutes by Dawn Osborn and an hour by her brother David. However David had endured a minor surgical operation only two days earlier and was not well enough to attend. Dawn shouldered the responsibility and did so with distinction. Those who know Dawn will not be surprised to learn that her subject was the Falklands - a destination she has visited many, many times. The introduction showed Stanley, the airport with an Islander aircraft which is the only practical way to get from island to island, and the coastline, then on to landscapes and some of the very sparse plant life of the Falklands including their Lady's Slipper which is not an Orchid. Next came pictures of passerines which I never saw on my visit and, working up the size scale, the larger birds such as Skuas and both Crested and Striated Caracara which were shown preying on Penguin chicks. Then came what we had been waiting for – the penguins. Rockhopper, Gentoo, Magellanic and King Penguins were pictured in a wide variety of situations, often with young. Those which created the greatest interest, judging by the questions asked, were of penguins in their natural environment, the sea. We saw Gentoos propelling themselves from the sea to the beach at a rapid rate of knots. The shots which were most evocative for me were of Rockhoppers taking a fresh water shower on Saunders Island. While I was busy taking similar shots there two Rockhoppers were rummaging in my camera bag!

The day concluded with our chairman thanking Judith and Roger Parry for their help and Barbara Lawton for acting as the link between the Group and Smethwick PS. The final remarks were from the Society's CEO, Dr. Michael Pritchard. He said that the SIGs are a vital part of the Society and often the reason why people join. He revealed that he was reading the recently published book about the Kearton brothers. He questioned why it had taken so long after the Keartons for a nature group to be formed. We are the second largest SIG of the Society and Michael challenged us to recruit another 910 members to bring the number up to 2,000. We then retired to enjoy the birthday cake which had been cut earlier by Heather Angel FRPSr.

We emerged from The Old Schoolhouse into brilliant sunshine to go our separate ways after a memorable day.

# RPS Nature Group 40th Anniversary Retrospective

Given by Heather Angel, Hon. FRPS, at the RPS Nature Group 40th Anniversary meeting 16-10-2016

I am delighted to give you a brief history of the early years of the Nature Group in this, our 40th anniversary year.

Great Britain has maintained a long tradition of natural history photography. Fortunately, we no longer have to contend with bulky cameras and slow speed emulsions as used by early nature photographers. By the time the RPS Nature Group was formed in 1976, most nature photographers favoured 35mm SLR cameras. At this time, no one foresaw the transformation to digital that would take place a few decades later.

In 1976, the RPS was based at South Audley Street in London and the Society's secretary, Kenneth Warr, contacted several nature Fellows – including myself – to see if we would be willing to help form a new specialist interest group. I was enthusiastic and attended the inaugural meeting in London on 29 January with 33 photographers and naturalists.

In the first newsletter, the initial 43 members who each paid £2 to join the group are listed. I am pleased to say that two of us, both fellows, are here today – myself and Tony Bond.

The first Nature Group committee worked hard, so that within a few weeks we had arranged four field days, two field weekends and three indoor meetings for the 1976 spring/summer season that could then be announced in the first Newsletter in March 1976.

Our first indoor meeting was a New Zealand evening held in South Audley Street when Geoff Moon ARPS, who had by then retired as a vet, showed us some of his superb images of New Zealand native birds, including the very rare flightless parrot, the Kakapo. Geoff managed to wangle a seat in a helicopter with a group of scientists to Milford Sound where the last 12 known birds lived at that time. He would be thrilled to know of the successful Kakapo captive breeding programme in recent years, whereby the total population has increased to around 130 individuals.

Pat Whitehouse FRPS organised our first field day at Buff Wood near Cambridge in late April for Primroses, Oxlips and their hybrids. Every nature photographer knows however carefully you research

and plan ahead, you cannot control the weather or the interaction of animals with plants. On this occasion, the weather was not a problem; but unfortunately, sparrows had attacked many of the flowers, but did leave some for us to photograph.

Any doubts we had about the success of our first field weekend to Monks Wood NNR near Huntingdon and Woodwalton NNR nearby in May 1976; proved unfounded when 32 participants signed up. We even had a most obliging pair of mating Poplar Hawk Moths at Woodwalton, which was photographed by everyone from every conceivable angle.

Our second field weekend was held at Rogate Field Centre in Hampshire in October 1976. The following year we had a weekend at Nettlecombe Court – the Leonard Wills Field Centre in Somerset run by the Field Studies Council.

In May 1978, the Nature Group organised its longest and most ambitious event. By then a small group of us regularly met up at weekends in the New Forest, so depending on where our interest lay, we knew the best time for the best places for flowers, trees and also fungi. Therefore the New Forest was chosen as the location for the first Nature Group field week as it is the perfect time for seeing the Forest when the ancient pollarded beech trees are beginning to leaf out. Another New Forest glory is the shallow ponds that become transformed in May by a sea of white Water Crowfoot flowers.

We stayed at Foxlease in Lyndhurst, which is the Girl Guides Association training centre and the event was superbly organised by Gordon Dickson ARPS, whose obituary I wrote for issue 117 of *The Iris*. Foxlease house dates back to the C18 and has a white and gold dining room designed by Robert Adam. Twenty-four members attended the week including Marion von Ronk all the way from California. At this time, the Benbo tripod was the favoured choice of virtually every NG enthusiast and many appeared at field meetings.

I managed to get in touch with Andrew Henley who now lives in Australia and he has sent me his recollections of the early days, which I should like to share with you.



*"The Nature Group was the only reason I joined the RPS. Then in my mid-20's I was an Oxford animal behaviour research student and my interest in photography was pretty much exclusively natural history.*

*The field trips were always educational, informative, entertaining and a good day out, well worth the cost of joining the RPS. The weekend trips were a chance to get to know an area in greater detail, immerse oneself in photography and forge friendships. The evening conversations mostly centered around photo techniques and the latest incarnations of homemade gear - brackets to hold flashes or reflectors. Clips to hold flowers steady, wind shields and diffusers.*

*The first Foxlease field trip also provided two of the images for my Associate portfolio. I fell in love with the New Forest. It was easy to tell when the Nature Group was on the move. Our field outings should have been labelled 'the march of the Benbo Brigade'.*

*Those were the days!"*

Dr C. Andrew Henley ARPS,  
Larus Natural History Photographs

I am glad that the tradition of field trips still continues but was sorry to learn they are not as well attended as in the past. Maybe the format should be modified?

Soon after the group was formed, I can recall an elderly member of the Society who came up to me at South Audley Street and said 'I hear you're having FIELD meetings'. To which I replied 'Yes, it is appropriate because we all enjoy working in the field'. It was not until that moment, that I realised they would appear such a novelty to non-nature photographers, because my whole life was filled with field outings; both on my own and with others. At this stage, the few other RPS groups all arranged indoor meetings, including lectures, print displays or exhibitions.

By the mid-80's the Group membership had risen to 969 – virtually a tenth of the Society's total and embracing representatives from a staggering 36 countries.

The basic group newsletter we produced in 1976 has evolved into the superbly produced magazine, known as *The Iris* that we receive today. Issues 1-4 were simply several cyclostyled A4 sheets, increasing from 4 pages in the first issue to 20 in the fourth. From issue 5 the format was changed to A5, but still had text throughout. Issue 9, the first one I edited after I stepped down from the Chair, had our first cover image, albeit in monochrome, and a Contents page! This made the cover more appealing than a listing of the Nature Group Committee members.

The distinctive Nature Group logo first appeared on the autumn 1980 issue. Designed by James Fenton FRPS, it was unanimously selected by the group committee from several submissions. The winter 1989 issue (No. 45) became a magazine named *The Iris*. The cover picture features the classic heraldic barn owl pose by Eric Hosking FRPS to commemorate his 80th birthday. I suggested the Nature Group should arrange a day to mark this occasion. In the end, it coincided with a previous commitment of mine, so I suggested the proceeding should be taped. Months later, I asked if anyone had transcribed the tape. As no one had, my office ended up doing it. When Eric died a few years later, his son David called me to ask if I would be prepared to speak to the press. The first call I had was from *The Times* wanting me to write Eric's obituary – in two hours! I could not have done it without that tape and the fly leaves of Eric's books.

Since most of Nature Group members work exclusively in colour, it is relevant that their work should be seen in colour and in spring 1996 the 32 page *Iris* had colour on both the front and back covers. Over the years, the logo has changed in colour and size but has essentially remained the same for 36 years

In addition to full colour throughout, as we have enjoyed for several years; the latest magazine has a clean, uncluttered cover with the NG logo, the name of the magazine, the modern RPS logo and the ISSN number with the photographer credited below the image. An attractive and lively group magazine is essential for retaining members and encouraging new ones to join.

Looking back over four decades of the group's newsletters and magazines, you can see how the capture of natural world images has evolved. The very first time I was present on the Nature judging panel (long before we had open judging panels), we had a set of monochrome prints, which included a backlit flower. One member of the panel immediately dismissed it saying it was Pictorial not Nature. As a newcomer, I pondered for a moment whether I should speak out, but felt I could not let that go. I cannot now recall what flower we were looking at, but it certainly had a hairy stem, so I was able to point out that backlighting was ideal for highlighting the structure of this particular flower, which would not have been apparent had it been lit in any other way. My comment was met by a stony stare; fortunately, Eric Hosking defended me and said  
*'I think she has a point'.*

# Letter to Members

Hello Everyone

As you can see from the list of field meetings for the Nature Group, the response has been disappointing. However, I would like to thank those members who have organised field meetings and I hope that these will be well supported.

Having spoken to one or two Nature Group members, it is hoped that we will be able to arrange a few more field meetings for the current season. Unfortunately, due to the deadline for *The Iris*, these cannot appear in this issue, but will be shown on the RPS website and Journal and also in the new Nature Group eNewsletter, which Dawn is going to be producing. If you feel you are able to organise a field meeting for later on this season, please let me know and we will advertise these appropriately.

Field Meetings have always been an important aspect of the Nature Group, and at the recent Committee meeting, we were discussing the possibility of organising joint ventures with Regional RPS Groups. Currently, I am in the process of looking into the possibility of organising indoor meetings, which may include talks, workshops and assessment days in different areas of the country.

However, these can only be a success if members of the Nature Group are prepared to support them. Therefore, I would appreciate some feedback as to what events, lectures, field meetings etc you would like to see on the Nature Group programme. Please email me at: [barbara.lawton@talktalk.net](mailto:barbara.lawton@talktalk.net)

Thank you and I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards

Barbara

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*RPS Nature Group 40th Anniversary Retrospective continued from previous page.*

Today, no-one would adopt such a blinkered attitude. Indeed, my own philosophy is that the structure of subjects from the natural world should convey to you the photographer, the optimum way to light them. For example, translucent leaves and some marine worms visibly glow when light is shone through them, while grazed lighting can help to accentuate a textured surface.

Portraits of both plants and animals were always popular and still are today. The ability to push the ISO has enabled sharp wildlife action shots to be captured even in poor light, while macro flash set-ups make active insects in the field achievable, providing time is invested. Enhanced depth of field by means of focus stacking has enabled us to portray three-dimensional macro subjects in greatly enhanced detail.

Today, all of us who have worked to generate the momentum of the Nature Group should be proud we are the second largest RPS group after Digital Imaging, which of course embraces all genres. The current Nature Group membership of just over 1000, represents over 9% of the Society's members.

The current £14 annual fee to join the group is worth it for receiving three issues of *The Iris* alone, not to mention the exchange of information gained from participating in field trips, meetings and exhibitions as well as browsing the Group section of the RPS website.

May I wish the Nature Group all success during the next decade and hope I shall be around to celebrate the 50th anniversary, because the group was, and still is, very dear to my heart.

Heather Angel Hon FRPS

# Membership Statistics

Shown below are Nature Group members per RPS region as at January 2017 (and January 2016) together with regional codes and other statistics

Regions	Jan 2017	Jan 2016	Distinctions	Jan 2017	Jan 2016
CE - Central	68	77	Honorary FRPS	04	04
EA - East Anglia	83	94	FRPS	78	80
EM - East Midlands	55	57	ARPS	242	246
IRL - Ireland	11	09	LRPS	224	221
LN - London	75	72	No Distinction	434	477
NI - Ireland (North)	04	03			
NO - Northern	23	25			
NW - North Western	70	70			
SC - Scotland	49	43			
SE - South Eastern	91	76			
SO - Southern	94	86			
SW - South Western	33	36			
TH - Thames Valley	67	70			
WE - Western	69	83			
WN - North Wales	12	11			
WS - South Wales	23	26			
YO - Yorkshire	47	45			
			<b>Total</b>	<b>982</b>	<b>1028</b>
<b>Total UK</b>	<b>874</b>	<b>903</b>			
<b>Overseas</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>125</b>			
<b>Total Membership</b>	<b>982</b>	<b>1028</b>			

These statistics are prepared from data supplied by the RPS Membership Department January 2017.

Map courtesy of the RPS Journal January/February 2001 revised 2014



# Obituary

## Fiona Mackay (1948-2017)

**Fiona Dorothy Mackay ARPS, AFIAP, BPE\*** died on the first of January 2017, after a protracted battle with cancer. Born in Longformacus in the Scottish borders, Fiona had a great love of both Nature and learning from her childhood. Her love of both these subjects possibly directed her life, as she went on to study English at St Andrews University where she kept increasing her knowledge of her surrounding wildlife.

She taught English as a foreign language in several countries and was able to speak and teach in Arabic, Swedish and Portuguese and probably many other languages.

Photography was an important part of Fiona's life. She and Sheila, her sister and companion, frequently holidayed in Austria where Fiona would spend hours photographing Marmots and Edelweiss very successfully.

Fiona became the secretary of the Edinburgh Photographic Society's Nature Group after J. Rosemary Davidson and nurtured the group with encouragement and enthusiasm for many years until her illness sadly forced her, reluctantly, to give it up.

Fiona achieved her ARPS directly she did not do the usual progression from Licentiate to Associate. She became very accomplished as her list of International acceptances clearly shows enabling her to become AFIAP and also BPE\*, and she was also working towards her Fellowship of the RPS.

Fiona instigated the 'An lolaire' cup for the best set of three images on a theme from the Nature Group of the Edinburgh Photographic Society, which she herself won several times.

To her friends she will be sorely missed. She will also be a great loss to the photographic world with her wonderful images of wildlife.

Rest in peace Fiona



*Metellina segmentata*



*Green-underside Blue*

*pictures by Fiona Mackay ARPS*



Mongolian Pika, Gobi



Desert plant

Images by John Nathan ARPS. See On the Steppes of Genghis Khan. Page 22



Takhi Horses in Hustai National Park



Pulsatilla, Mongolia



Wild Camels at oasis, Gobi Desert