



Wild Art

A Wild Read

September 2021

Issue No. 1

Trapped!

Josh Galicki talks
camera traps

Autumn is here!

Paul Stancliffe looks at
bird migration

Victoria Hillman shares the
science behind autumn
colour

Shinrin-yoku

Rob Read takes a walk in
the woods

David Tipling goes in search of leaping Salmon



Welcome to the very first edition of *A Wild Read*, the new quarterly eMagazine from the WildArt team which I hope you will enjoy. WildArt is not just about delivering an enjoyable and challenging photo competition through WildArt Photographer of the Year, it is about celebrating wildlife and inspiring people to get out there and enjoy what nature has to offer. I hope that the magazine will help with this aim.

Well, autumn is virtually with us, for those of us in the northern hemisphere at least, and the WildArt contributors have been getting into the spirit of things with a variety of articles to entertain and inform. We hope that you will like the content of *A Wild Read*, a magazine which will remain free to enjoy every quarter.

I have always intended WildArt to be viewed as a community platform. Whether you simply love wildlife and want to learn, and enjoy great writing and photography, or you are an aspiring or seasoned wildlife photographer looking to be inspired by others and expand your skills, then I hope you will continue to enjoy what WildArt has to offer. WildArt is intended as a community and we would love to hear from you, our audience, with any thoughts, ideas, photographs or advice you would like to share with others. If you'd like to be featured in the magazine, or on the *A Wild Read* blog, then do drop me an email.

Enjoy autumn and I'll see you again in December.


Rob Read.



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Front Cover: Black Bear ©Josh Galicki
Spread Image: Autumn fungi ©Rob Read
Rear Cover: Great White Egret ©Rob Read



Autumn - The Science Behind the Colours

by Victoria Hillman

Main image: Autumn is a time of spectacular colour, but what causes this change? Victoria Hillman delves into the science. ©Victoria Hillman



As we head into September, I'm getting ready to enjoy the annual display of colour that comes from the turning of the leaves on the trees, the precursor to winter's shutdown and the year's last natural hoorah. Writing this article has heightened my sense of anticipation for this year's arboreal treat, and my wellington boots are lined up and ready for action! As a photographer with an artistic and more impressionistic approach, photographing the details of autumn colour is one of my favourite subjects, and I'll soon be out with my camera capturing the first glimpses of the colours to come. But what causes these amazing displays? As well as being a photographer, I am first and foremost a scientist, so it's time to get geeky with the science behind this autumn wardrobe.

Leaves contain several different pigments and it is the changing concentrations of these throughout the year that will determine the colours we see. During the spring and summer, we see the leaves as green; this is because the chlorophyll, which is responsible for the green colour, is the dominant pigment. It is constantly replaced during the summer months as the tree photosynthesises, collecting the sun's energy and converting it to the compounds needed for health, growth and reproduction.

As the summer gives way to autumn and the trees begin their winter preparation, chlorophyll production ceases and the existing chlorophyll in the leaves begins to break down. The essential nutrients in the leaves that can be reused are transferred out of the leaves into the branches - this is when we start to see the green colours fade and other colours such as the yellows and oranges come through. Trees effectively cut off contact with their leaves through the formation of cells across the base of the leaf stalk in preparation for leaf shedding. This restricts the movement of sugars, and these trapped sugars become concentrated in the leaves and promote the production of anthocyanins which produce the vibrant red pigments we see - these are only produced in the autumn when it's bright and cold.

Different trees have varying proportions of the different pigments, hence the colours vary between species. The colours we see come from the following:

1. Green is from chlorophyll.
2. Yellows come from carotenoids and flavonoids.
3. Oranges come from carotenoids.
4. Reds are from anthocyanins and carotenoids.

Chlorophyll - this is a chemical contained within the chloroplasts in the leaf cells and is an essential component of photosynthesis, the process by which plants (and some other organisms) convert the sun's energy into chemical energy, which in turn is used to convert water, carbon dioxide and minerals into energy-rich carbohydrates. These sugars are then used by the plants to grow; but as summer turns to autumn, temperatures begin to drop and light begins to fade, the trees begin to prepare for winter.

Flavonoids and Carotenoids - this is a large family of chemical compounds which are actually present in leaves along with chlorophyll, but we don't see these colours as they are present in lower levels compared to chlorophyll and are masked by the dominant greens. As chlorophyll degrades, the green colours fade, the yellows and oranges becoming more noticeable. Flavonoids contribute to the yellow colours with the carotenoids contributing yellows, orange and red colours. Although these compounds also degrade, they do so at a much slower rate than chlorophyll.

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Left: Splendid autumn colour results from a shutdown in photosynthesis and a change in the chemical balance and pigmentation.

©Victoria Hillman



Anthocyanins – these compounds are actually members of the flavanoid family but are not commonly present in leaves during the spring and summer months. As the days shorten, their synthesis is initiated by an increase in sugar concentrations in the leaves. Although their precise role is unclear, it is thought that they may have some light-protective properties allowing the tree to protect its leaves from light damage and extend the length of time they are on the tree before being shed. The anthocyanins produce the vivid reds, purples and magentas that we see, and it is thought that these colours may also be affected by the acidity of the tree sap.

So why do we see differences in colours and intensities of colours from year to year?

Images of autumn colour. ©Victoria Hillman

The differences in colours and intensity are influenced by the combination of weather conditions and the chemical processes taking place in the trees. There are three main conditions that influence the colours.

1. **Cold Nights** – Low temperatures destroy the chlorophyll in the leaves causing the green colour to fade; if temperatures stay above freezing the production of anthocyanins is enhanced producing more red colours.
2. **Dry Weather** – During dry weather, the sugars become more concentrated in the leaves enhancing anthocyanin production leading to redder colours appearing.
3. **Bright/Sunny Days** – As autumn starts, the production of new chlorophyll stops. But if there are bright sunny days, photosynthesis can still occur using up the remaining chlorophyll, increasing the sugar concentrations and therefore colours.

In the years we have warm and sunny early autumns we see more intense colours in the leaves and a more spectacular display, the very conditions we have experienced this year in the south of the UK. As I write, the first signs of autumn colour are beginning to show in our native deciduous trees. I'm hoping that these colours intensify and give us an autumn display to remember. Let's hope the first storms of autumn delay their arrival and we hold onto this autumn treasure for as long as we can.

In a time that has brought all of us unprecedented restrictions to our normal way of life, it is reassuring to know that nature continues her seasonal cycle, oblivious to the problems we face. Take some time to enjoy the autumn this year, I know I will. I have a feeling that the colours will be spectacular.

Victoria Hillman.



Caught in a Trap!

Wildlife Photographer
Josh Galicki experiments
with camera trapping and
shares some thoughts.

by Josh Galicki

Main image: Get it right and camera traps can produce some excellent results, but be prepared to work at it before images of animals like this Black Bear are captured. ©Josh Galicki



As a wildlife photographer, I've spent countless hours in the field utilizing camouflage clothing, blinds (or hides as some of us know them), ghillie suits, and my vehicle to sneak up and photograph the natural behaviour of animals. My pursuits have primarily been centred around birds as they are abundant subjects in the northeast United States where I live. While numerous colourful and magnificent bird species can be found in a variety of habitats relatively easily, photographing mammals is more of a challenge. In certain parts of the American West, there's an abundance of opportunities to shoot bison, moose, and elk for example. My part of the country, like many other areas, contains fewer open spaces without any grazing megafauna, and the fierce predators to match. Even where the isolated patches of woodland give way to the more extensive forests that I frequent, these areas tend to be home to mostly shy critters that are either crepuscular or nocturnal. Many of these animals are regularly hunted and have wisely become wary of humans. Even the larger mammals, like black bears, are extremely shy (dumpster divers excluded) and go out of their way to avoid human contact.

While I've had a few lucky encounters over the years, photographing these mammals by intention has always felt out of reach until I discovered camera trapping. At its simplest, camera trapping involves setting up a camera that's remotely triggered by a sensor that recognizes when wildlife is present. By using a camera trap, you're able to photograph your subjects ethically and with minimal disturbance. Camera trapping has been around in the photography community for some time but has recently become more popular, and I attribute this growth to a number of factors. There's new sensor technology and a greater availability of camera trapping equipment that has been made more accessible and easier to use. There's also been a stronger desire by many to see what's happening in our backyards. Human populations are encroaching further out into wild spaces forcing wildlife to live closer to our homes.

With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, many of us have been spending more time outside, especially in our own gardens and local parks. Camera trapping can be an excellent way to photograph that elusive red fox you've only managed to catch a glimpse of by your back deck. Or it may allow you to photograph that skunk which you suspect is digging up your garden looking for grubs during the night. This technique can also be used to capture animals in more remote locations.

Like most things, your camera trap system can be fairly simple or extremely complicated, purchased for a few dollars, or necessitate remortgaging the house! My setup is rather straightforward and includes an older Canon DSLR, an 18-55mm kit lens, two Nikon SB-28 flashes, an infrared sensor with a remote receiver, and triggers by Camtraptions to ensure the camera and flashes are synced during exposure. Additionally, I use an old tripod to mount the camera along with a plastic housing that provides protection from the elements. I also use two light stands to mount the flashes off camera with some plastic coverings over each to protect them as well. Depending upon what you wish to shoot, you may not need flash if ample ambient light is available, or you might need more flash if you're shooting at night and want to illuminate more of the environment surrounding your subject. Most photographers will design their setups to taste and that is part of the fun and the challenge.

By utilizing a remote camera system in the field, and using a little creativity, you have the ability to take high quality images well beyond the bland documentary shot of a trail camera. Camera trapping has become a recognized art form, indeed, some of the world's biggest wildlife photography competitions have awarded prizes to shots taken by trap setups, and some even have a dedicated category for trapping. To get started, there are plenty of instructional guidebooks on this subject.

A multiple flash set up and remote trigger enabled Josh to get this image of a Raccoon. ©Josh Galicki



A recent publication that comes to mind is "Wildlife Photography at Home" by Richard Peters. Personally, I never underestimate the instructional power of YouTube videos. There are some incredible videos covering gear recommendations and setup techniques which are only a quick search away.

While equipment and its deployment are important, the most critical decision when it comes to camera trapping is the strategic positioning of your setup. As in real estate, it's all about location, location, location! Animals are creatures of habit, and their movements can be predicted with some careful study and knowledge of your local landscape. This is what makes backyards such a great place to start. We know these areas well and have a good understanding of where the animals might cross in front of the camera. In my case, my Washington D.C. backyard and alley isn't a great option, unless I want to expand my norway rat portfolio! Instead, I reached out to a family member who has some property in a more remote area with lots of forest cover and greater activity.

After surveying the property closely, I decided to place my setup near a large fallen log which provided a bridge over a muddy area at the bottom of a steep ridge line. I noticed that the log had scat on it and appeared to serve as dry passage over the muddy area. The steep ridge acted as a funnel, forcing most of the animals to travel through this general area. Once I had my camera trap in place, it was such a joy to come back every few days and check my results. It's quite the rush scrolling through your images not knowing what will be in one frame after the next. Each visit taught me something new about my subjects allowing me to make camera adjustments and reposition accordingly. I consider the entire process a learn-as-you-go exercise and my failures improved my chances moving forward.

During a few visits, the black bears had done some redecorating and I found my equipment with chew marks or having been dragged a few hundred feet. This is why I use an old DSLR and kit lens that's less valuable to me. Ultimately what matters most is what's captured on the memory card and my recent experiences have produced intimate moments with black bears, white-tailed deer, fisher cats, raccoons, ermine, and even a barred owl. I wouldn't have been able to capture anything similar in the field while holding a camera, nor would I be that stealthy. Best of all, this process, if done right, is ethical and not as intrusive for animals compared to being on location, even if it's within a blind.

If you're interested in expanding your portfolio with new subjects or just curious as to what's been active in your backyard, I highly recommend camera trapping. It's both a challenge and a lot of fun at the same time. Many of your shots may contain nothing, only part of an animal, or the back of an animal walking away. It can be frustrating, or even infuriating, but every so often, things will come together. You just need persistence and patience. I'm still a newbie at this and look forward to more learning and experimentation in the coming years as that's just part of the excitement. If you're looking for new ways to produce images of shy wildlife or specific animals that you wouldn't come across during daylight hours, then camera trapping might be a great option for you. Trust me, it's highly addictive and I sense you'll feel the same way about it!

Josh Galicki.

Recovering a memory card from a camera trap is exciting - you never know what images you may have on it. ©Josh Galicki



The King of the River

by David Tipling

At this time of year, the Atlantic Salmon makes an incredible journey from the sea back to the river of their birth. There are many obstacles to negotiate including waterfalls - which just happen to be the perfect place to try and photograph them leaping, as David Tipling explains.

Main Image: An Atlantic Salmon negotiating a waterfall as it makes its way upstream.

©David Tipling

Above the sound of the roar of water, a loud cheer caused me to quicken my step. After a week of waiting, watching and hoping, finally the salmon I had been waiting to photograph were on the move.

It is early September, and I am in northern Scotland at one of the region's top tourist attractions to witness, and hopefully photograph, Atlantic Salmon *Salmo salar* on their migration upstream to spawn. Here at the Falls of Shin they were attempting to navigate a raging waterfall, the last hurdle of a journey from the open ocean, upstream to the place of their birth.

Although I had seen the occasional salmon leap at various waterfalls, they had not been frequent enough to allow repeated efforts to photograph them. But now, with overnight rain increasing the flow of the river, I was witnessing a jump every 30 seconds or so. As I watched, I soon realised there were favoured points across the waterfall where most leaps were attempted; when a fish made it, a cheer went up from the assembled salmon watchers. When the occasional fish got it a bit wrong, they were swept back into the pool below to try again.

The name salmon originates from the Latin *salire* to leap, which they will do to pass any obstacle put in their way on a journey back to the headwaters of rivers where they hatched from an egg. The mature female salmon creates a groove in the gravel bed known as a redd where she lays her spawn, thousands of eggs that are fertilised by the male's sperm - known as milt. The exhausted fish, which have not fed since they entered the river from the sea, then drift back downstream. A few (mainly females) return to the sea to make the journey another year, but the rest die. Atlantic Salmon rarely live beyond seven years.

Once the young hatch they are known as alevins and have a yolk sac, off which they feed while hidden under the gravel, before swimming free as fry. Growing into tiny fish a few millimetres long, they become known as parr.

As they grow, they develop into smolts and drift downstream to the sea. After one year the fish that return to the river are called grilse, while others will remain at sea, sometimes for a few years, before they return to breed.

When they return to the river, after a few weeks they lose their silvery appearance and take on breeding colours: the females turn dark grey with blue and purple colouration, evident especially when they leap and the light catches their bodies. The males develop a hooked lower jaw known as a kype and develop a deep orangey red colouration.

Not all is well for the Atlantic Salmon. They have been in decline since at least the 1970s. The reasons for this decline are many and range from effects of climate change causing rising sea temperatures in the North Atlantic which changes prey distribution, to fish lice infestations linked to salmon farming. These declines have been more dramatic in some river systems than others and anecdotal evidence suggests salmon are doing better on rivers on the eastern side of Britain compared to the west coast. This might be a link to the large number of salmon farms on the west coast of Scotland, but there are also thought to be changes in climate and ocean currents at play here too.
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*Main image: Photographing Salmon as they leap the waterfalls can not only be challenging, but can become addictive!
©David Tipling*

When I started researching the best places to photograph leaping salmon, it was apparent that it was not possible to narrow down a specific time of the year to guarantee success. As a rule of thumb, the farther from the sea the waterfall is, the later in the year you can expect to encounter leaping salmon. On some rivers there are strong runs of salmon early in the year, while other rivers rely on heavy rains and increased flow before salmon will move upriver. Late summer to late autumn offers the best opportunities and, while Scottish rivers with impressive falls can give you a good chance, there are a number of sites in England and Wales where it is possible to see this behaviour.

However, if you want to be fairly sure of seeing a salmon leap, then the Falls of Shin are hard to beat.

My next challenge is to photograph the Atlantic Salmon spawning and I look forward to sharing these images with you and delving into the threats the species faces in more detail - all assuming my photographic endeavours are successful of course!

David Tipling.

Below: Waterfalls such as this one in Scotland can provide opportunities to both see and photograph leaping Salmon. Photo ©David Tipling



The Atlantic Salmon Factfile:

The Atlantic Salmon is an anadromous species, meaning that the adult fish migrate from the sea to breed in freshwater. Amazingly, the adults choose to return to the same river in which they were born to continue the reproduction cycle. There is much speculation as to how they manage to find their way back, but it is thought that the smell may play a big factor - different rivers will carry their own unique watery scent, a result of their different geological catchment areas and course journeys.

The species is widely distributed in Europe, being found as far south as Portugal and as far north as Scandinavia. The population in the United Kingdom is a stronghold for the species and supports a significant proportion of the European population. Atlantic Salmon also occur in the rivers that drain into the ocean off the northeast coasts of North America.

Salmon spawn in a wide variety of different river systems, from the gently flowing chalk streams of southern England to the harsh mountain streams of Wales and Scotland. Their rates of growth also show a distinct north/south divide, those in the north growing at a slower pace than their southern cousins. The richness and gentler pace of the southern rivers when compared to the harsher environment of those found in the north seemingly being the main reason for this.

Scotland has always been a mecca for Salmon fishing, some of the top beats commanding thousands of pounds for a day's angling. The current British record rod-caught Salmon has stood for nearly 100 years. It weighed a massive 64lbs 8oz and was caught by Miss Georgina Ballentine on 7th October 1922 on the Glendelvine beat on the River Tay in Scotland. The fish was landed after an epic battle that lasted for over two hours!

Sadly, there is little chance of this record being surpassed as fish of this size are no longer thought to exist owing to a number of factors including fishing pressures, the decline in water quality, disease, climate change and the degradation of spawning sites.

In the 1950s, large numbers of Atlantic Salmon from both Europe and North America were found to congregate in the sea around Greenland and the Faroe Islands. Subsequent exploitation of the stocks by commercial fishing had a devastating impact of their numbers which had declined by over 80% by the beginning of the 1990s.

Despite the continuing pressures and the significant drop in its numbers, the Atlantic Salmon is a species the International Union for the Conservation of Nature still rates with a conservation status of 'least concern'.



Main Image: Another Atlantic Salmon attempts to navigate the Falls of Shin. Photo ©David Tipling

**Collection 1
Now Available for
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**WildArt Photographer
of the Year - Foreword by
Robert Irwin**

One of the main aims of the WildArt Photographer of the Year is to celebrate the best images from the competition in a beautiful hardback book. We are delighted to announce that Robert Irwin will be writing the Foreword.

To enable complete control over the look, content, and print quality of the book, WildArt are self-publishing Collection 1 which will be printed on sustainably sourced paper and produced in the UK to minimise its carbon footprint.

Collection 1 will be a limited edition of 1,000 copies, each copy carrying its own unique serial number. Once all the copies are sold, then the opportunity to own a copy will be gone. Click the link below to go directly to our book shop to order your copy. The book is only available to purchase through WildArt.

Publication will be in January 2022 and for every copy sold prior to publication, WildArt will donate £5 to the conservation causes supported by our judges in 2021. Buy your copy now and help us raise another £5,000 for conservation.



Please note the cover image is a mock-up for illustrative purposes and may change. Image ©Kevin Morgans

Autumn sees thousands of birds migrating from their breeding locations to their over-wintering sites.

Paul Stancliffe looks at their journeys.

Flying South for the Winter

by Paul Stancliffe

Right now millions of birds are on the move, both into and out of the United Kingdom. Some are coming here from further north, escaping the freezing conditions that locks up what was their summer breeding grounds, whilst others are heading south to warmer climes and the guarantee of a plentiful supply of their insect food.

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Main Image: Male Cuckoo ©Rob Read



Of course, this seasonal migration is happening in many other places in the world too. These journeys will involve lengthy crossings of featureless seas and deserts, crossings that will include navigating to precise stopover locations strung out along the migration route. It is at these stopover sites that they will rest and feed, taking on more fat to fuel the onward journey to a wintering location, a location that is sometimes tens of thousands of miles from where they started their journey.

The Cuckoo is often seen as the classic migratory bird, its arrival in the UK an icon of spring. Since 2011 the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) has been tracking Cuckoos on their migration, using lightweight satellite tags to follow them in near real time as they make their way back from Britain to the Congo basin. Prior to 2011 we had no idea where our Cuckoos spent the winter months, or the precise routes they took to get there. With the new data from these satellite tags, we now know that they take two very different routes to the Congo; one via Spain and West Africa and the other via Italy involving a direct route across the Sahara. Northern Italy and southern Spain are therefore important stopover sites.

We know that birds undertake huge migratory journeys involving tens of thousands of miles in some instances, but how do they do it? Let's go back to the Cuckoo. As is well known, Cuckoos are a parasitic bird and a young Cuckoo will spend the first couple of months of its life being raised by another species, possibly a Reed Warbler, Meadow Pipit, Dunnock or Robin. But during September it will head off for the Congo completely alone, following a map that has been passed on to it genetically, or at the very least, a rough map of where it has to go.

It is thought that the change in day length is the trigger for beginning the migratory journey and at the right time the young Cuckoo will head off roughly in the direction it needs to go – either south and east if going via Italy, or south and west if via Spain. And it will fly for a pre-determined length of time that will take it to the area of its first stopover site. It will then repeat this process until it reaches its winter destination, around 5,000 miles from where it was born, and the migration urge switches off.

Once completed, the whole journey will be repeated year after year with a high degree of accuracy. If you think about it, it makes perfect sense - if the journey was successful once it is likely to be so again in future years.

However, these migratory journeys are full of danger, not least of which is bad weather, and sometimes there needs to be a degree of flexibility built in. We have seen our Cuckoos blown a thousand miles or more off course and forced to stop in unfamiliar locations. Sometimes they have been lucky and have been able to head back to the route they were taking, for others it has been too much and they have perished. For those birds that survived these new enforced stopover sites, future migrations often incorporate the new location into their migration map – again, it makes perfect sense to use a location that provided what was needed to carry on with the journey. If you are interested in finding out more about the BTO's Cuckoo tracking project, you can follow the BTO Cuckoos at www.bto.org/cuckoos

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Main image: The rather diminutive House Martin © Rob Read.



Main image: Another of the UK's migratory birds is the Nightjar. A similar satellite tagging programme to that of the Cuckoo is underway to understand more about their migration routes and stopoff sites. ©Rob Read

So, at least some of our long-distance migrants have a migratory map to help them on their way, but they have other tools too. They are able to detect the earth's magnetic field, or maybe even visualise it – latest research has suggested that a chemical compound in a bird's eye is able to detect the magnetic fields and actually see it. They can also see polarised light and from this know the location of the sun, even on a cloudy day. Of course this is only useful if you have a fairly accurate clock and calendar and it seems that they have these too.

Migratory birds also memorise the position of the stars around the North Star and are able to use these when on the move during the hours of darkness. For some birds a sense of smell is a very important navigational aid, particularly so for our long-distance migratory seabirds that carry out their journeys over vast areas of seemingly featureless ocean. Different ocean currents have different smells associated with them. And of course migrant birds use visual cues too – Ospreys wearing satellite tags have been observed migrating to and from Scotland using the A1 road as a guide.

For most of our birds, even those that we think of as largely resident, a percentage of the population is migratory. Some of our Blackbirds will be departing the northeast of the UK for a winter in the southwest, enjoying the relative milder winter that Devon and Cornwall have to offer. Some of our Blackbirds will go even further south, to southern Europe and North Africa. However, for some of us, particularly in the north and east of the UK, our departing Blackbirds will be replaced by others from across the North Sea – even a mild winter in northern Scandinavia will be much colder than that experienced on this side of the sea.

For the next couple of months our bird populations are truly dynamic and you never know what might turn up. If you find something unusual in your garden, maybe your first ever Blackcap, spare a thought for the journey it might have undertaken to get there and how amazing that tiny bird is.

Paul Stancliffe.



Woodland bathing

Shinrin-yoku is the Japanese term to describe the practice of 'Woodland Bathing'.

Rob Read explores the health benefits of taking a walk in the woods and connecting with wildlife.

When I was growing up, I was fortunate to live in a quiet road that led to a piece of woodland. Looking back on it, the woodland wasn't that large and had been ravaged by the typical post-war activities of gravel extraction and the planting of fast-growing coniferous trees; in common with many of the woodlands in my area of the country in fact. This woodland was my childhood playground and I spent many happy hours escaping the confines of the family home for the delights it offered a curious kid.

As well as the coniferous plantation, there were pockets of deciduous woodland, the remnants of its broadleaf origins, all interspersed with clear glades and gravelled clearings. There was even the odd pond or two and a steep ravine-like valley with a trickle of a stream at the bottom. Perhaps it wasn't the richly biodiverse habitat of a true ancient woodland, but it did have a mix of different habitats and it was one of the places that introduced me to the delights of the natural world. As a young lad, who could resist the fascination of a Slow Worm hiding under a log pile or a newt fished from a shallow pond? There was even the odd encounter with an Adder to add an element of naive jeopardy to the mix. And the wood was full of birds; I couldn't have told you what most of them were back then, but the wood still exists and I have revisited it on occasion, nesting Hobby perhaps being my most precious adult discovery.

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I knew many of the trees in that woodland intimately. I climbed them, I scratched my initials in their bark, I made camps with their fallen branches and leaves, and I discovered many of the things that called those trees home. I didn't realise how lucky I was at the time. I do now.

This childhood connection with nature has stayed with me to this day. I have always known that spending time outdoors and overloading my senses with the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and feel of the world around me was a natural panacea to the stresses and strains of everyday life. And I have turned to it consistently during some of the darker episodes of my life; nature's equivalent of Prozac if you like. It has never let me down and the side-effects of its addictions are entirely positive. Today, I am fortunate to live with a fabulously rich woodland on my doorstep. A hop over the fence and a short walk across a field sees me under its canopy in no more than two minutes; it has kept me sane during the difficult days of Covid-enforced lockdown.



On one of my regular exercise walks around the wood, I bumped into a neighbour who mentioned an article on the Japanese art of *Shinrin-yoku* which translates as 'forest' or 'woodland bathing'. She kindly emailed me a copy directly after our woodland encounter. Such an eloquent term extolling the virtues of the power of nature to heal and so befitting of this ancient cultural nation. A fascinating concept that I could certainly empathise with, and I was keen to understand more.

There is an art to getting the most out of *Shinrin-yoku*; it turns out that I have been unknowingly practicing it for years, the key being getting into the right headspace. Turn off your mobile devices and other electronic distractions, forget the map or any predefined routes, stay silent, allow your mind to go blank, wander freely at your own pace, and take regular breaks to just sit and enjoy. The idea is to lose yourself in the wood (figuratively speaking, although perhaps literally too as you don't have a map remember!), unshackle your emotions and do not allow the problems in your life to bombard your brain. If you feel the urge to turn things over, do it one thing at a time and don't force a solution, allow it to come to you.



I guess this all sounds logical if you think about it. But there is science to back up the theory. Cortisol is known as the stress hormone; taking a walk in the woods has been proven to lower the concentration of cortisol in the blood stream; similarly, it lowers both the pulse rate and blood pressure.

Trees also release Phytoncides (antimicrobial allelochemical volatile organic compounds according to Wikipedia) – in other words, substances that help the trees protect themselves from harmful insects and germs. This explains the fresh aroma of woodland. Inhaling these substances is proven to aid the stimulation of white blood cells – the body's natural immune system. Fascinating stuff.

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I was moved to research other nature-related Japanese terms in an attempt to uncover additional compelling words and phrases. It seems the Japanese culture is full of these rather romantic and poetic expressions, many of which retain the forest theme of this article.

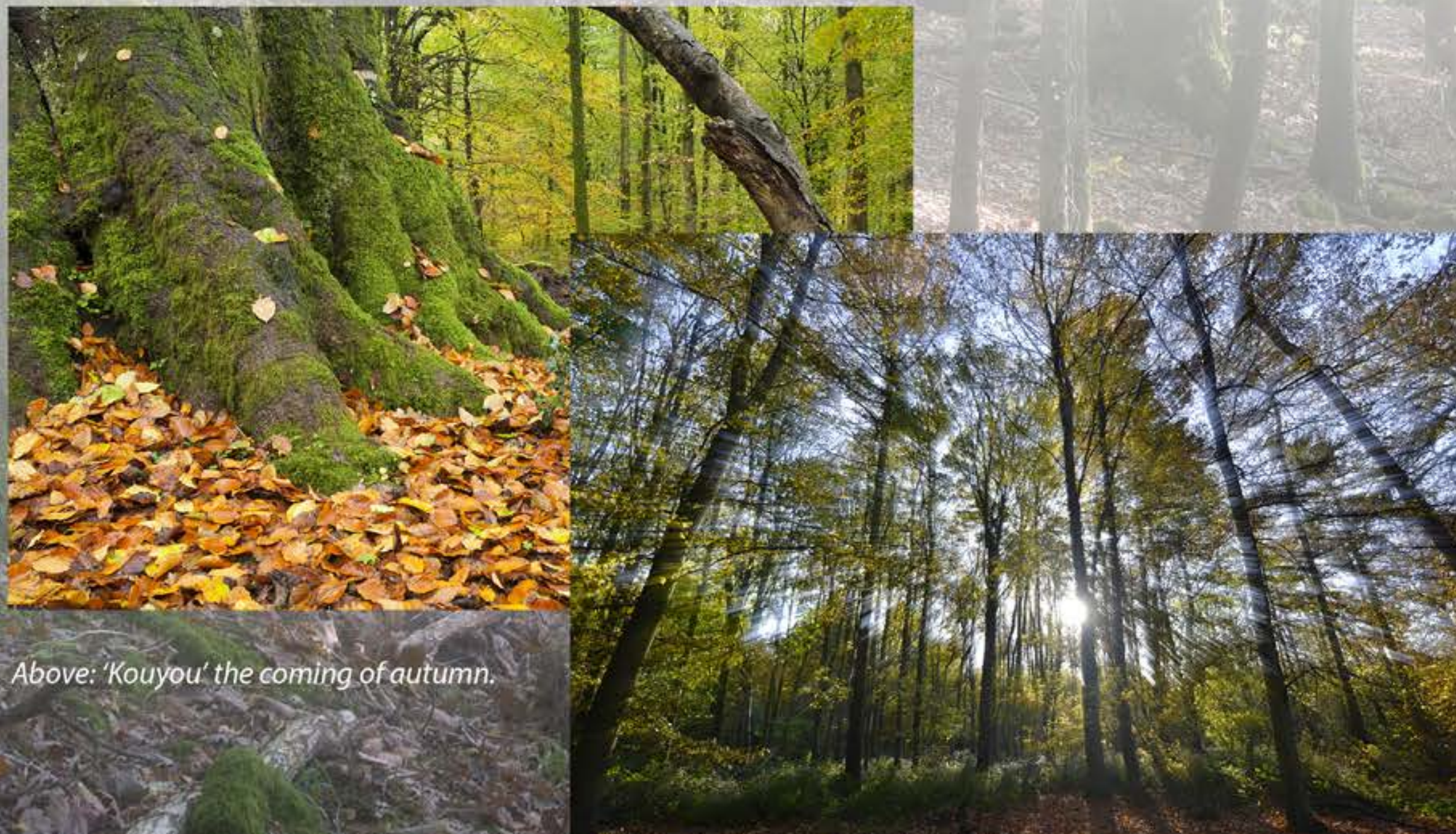
One of my favourites is *Komorebi* which translates as 'forest light'. One of the most magical things about woodland is the way light acts in so many different ways; from the bright dappled patterns created during the heat of a summer day to the low-angled shafts streaming through the mist of an autumn dawn. It is often difficult to portray these varying lighting conditions photographically and I don't yet feel I have immortalised the 'perfect' woodland scene in pixels. I shall have fun while I keep trying.

The changing seasons are one of the things that I enjoy the most and Autumn is a wonderful time to experience woodland. The trees gently kiss the summer goodbye as the daylight hours shorten, their leaves taking on those wonderfully colourful hues of red, orange and brown signifying the end of another annual growing cycle and the coming winter shutdown. *Kouyou* is a term used to describe this change and the coming of autumn. Beautiful.

Kogaraski moves us through the seasons and is used to describe the cold wind that coaxes the leaves off the trees as autumn fades into winter. It makes you want to zip up your coat against the cold and enjoy the final throws of autumn colour before winter takes its icy grip. *Brrrrrr....*



Above: '*Komorebi*' describes the magical light of the forest.



Above: '*Kouyou*' the coming of autumn.

I have had the privilege of having nature as a constant life companion, but it seems that it is never too late to let it into your life and benefit from its powers of healing. In recent months we have all had our movements restricted, forcing us to look closer to home for a bit of stress relief and escape. The increase in the number of people enjoying my local wood is testament to that. I hope that many of these 'woodland newbies' have taken the time to discover and enjoy the simplicities of the nature they will find there. Perhaps it will heal them too.

Taking a walk through the woods not only helps mental health, but also promotes physical well-being too. This all sounds like the properties advertised by the pharmaceutical industry on the side of the bottles containing their latest synthetic laboratory-produced offering. I'm sure a solution offered by nature itself is a far better option, and it's all for free too. Maybe one day your doctor's prescription will read '*Shinrin-yoku*' and you will be off to the local wood in place of the queue for the Pharmacist. What a delight that would be; but perhaps we should write the prescription ourselves.

Rob Read.

All text and photographs ©Rob Read.

Left: '*Kogaraski*' - the cold wind that tugs at the last of the autumn leaves and signals the arrival of winter.



A Really Wild Read

Rob Read



A Really Wild Read

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THE BOOK**

Award-winning Canadian wildlife photographer and WildArt POTY judge Gail Bisson shares her love of shorebirds and gives an insight into her approach to photography.

As Gail reveals, it is not all about fancy cameras and long lenses, mud can play a big part!



Finding Feathered Treasure in the Mud

Gail Bisson shares some of her spectacular shorebird photography and explains the equipment and methods she employs to get these beautiful images. As you will learn, there is more to it than investing in a long lens and that getting mucky is all part of the experience!

Cont..

Main Image: Greater Yellowlegs ©Gail Bisson

Gail Bisson is a retired family physician from Nova Scotia in Canada. Now living the dream, she travels the world photographing wildlife, having a special passion for birds, particularly shorebirds (or waders as we refer to them in the UK). Buying her first DSLR in 2011, Gail has quickly become a photographic force to be reckoned with and 2020 has seen her pick up awards including Amateur Category Winner of the 2020 Audubon Photography Awards, 2020 winner of Inspirational Encounters category of Bird Photographer of the Year and 2020 Grand Prize Winner of 'Everybody Duck' Kingbirder photo contest.

For most of us, time spent on the beach at sunrise and sunset can evoke feelings of romance, contentment, solitude or joy. A beach towel, swimsuit, flip flops, sunscreen and refreshments are all that is needed – unless you are a wildlife photographer.

I love the beach as much as the next person, but for a completely different reason - shorebirds. Shorebirds draw me to the beach at those special times of the day when the light is soft and beautiful.

As I unpack my gear from the car in the gathering dawn light, I get interested (and at times incredulous) looks from the occasional dog walkers, early morning joggers and beachgoers when I pull out all the gear I need to photograph my favourite birds.



Main image: Spotted Sandpiper Chick.
©Gail Bisson

Most would perhaps think that all that's required is a camera fitted with a telephoto lens, but there is a long list of accessories that are essential items to enable me to obtain the images I'm after: elbow and knee pads to protect me from skin burn and bruising, chest waders to keep me clean and dry, scuba booties, a special camera mount called a skimmer pod (which looks rather like a frying pan) to hold my camera off the sand at a height of 4 to 6 inches, and a tripod with plastic sleeves on the legs to protect the leg joints from mud and sand. A soft terry cloth towel is hooked onto my shirt, bra strap or waders to wipe off grit, mud and sand from my hands.

As for my attire, long pants are essential to cut down on sand flea bites and to avoid getting sand in all the wrong places. Making sure my pants are tucked into my socks, I slip on my scuba booties for the finishing touch. If I'm photographing in marshy, wet, muddy and poop-infested areas then I'll employ my chest waders. I may not be the best dressed or sexiest girl on the beach, but I make sure that I am dressed appropriately for the birds!

As you may have already guessed from my kit list, plenty of mud is usually involved - photographing shorebirds is certainly not for the fainthearted and if I am cold and wet then I will not get the best out my photography; the correct clothing is as important as the camera equipment itself.

Telephoto lenses are standard equipment for wildlife photographers, but don't be fooled into thinking that you don't need to get close to your subject.

Some of these birds are pretty small and even the longest lenses available will not do the job unless you employ a bit of fieldcraft and put yourself in the right place. The welfare of the birds is my first priority, I always ensure that whatever I do they remain relaxed and undisturbed. These animals are allowing me to get a glimpse into their world and I want to portray that in my images; a startled or nervous subject does not make for a good photograph and to alter their behaviour in any way is ethically unacceptable.

When I locate a group of shorebirds, I will approach cautiously, slowly walking towards them. As I get closer, I drop to my knees (hence the knee pads) and inch closer. Once I am about 20 meters away, I will lie flat on my belly and crawl towards them very slowly, pushing my skimmer pod (the frying pan-shaped device) and camera on the sand ahead of me. I stop every 3 meters or so and wait for a minute before moving on. The birds have time to get used to my presence and I use this pause to check my camera settings. I am also able to make sure I am not stressing the birds by watching their behaviour. If they stop feeding, or raise their heads and appear on alert, I stop advancing. If the birds continue to do their normal things, I know I can take my pictures or move a bit closer.

Being on my belly presents a much less threatening profile to the birds and this position is a win-win for both the birds and me, I want the lens of the camera to be at eye level with the birds. This creates a much more intimate connection with my subject, something that will be portrayed to the viewer and make the photographs stand out.

Cont...

The shores of Nova Scotia are a haven for shore-birds and autumn migration is the best time to encounter them as Gail explains:

We get thousands of birds: Sanderling, Semi-palmated Sandpiper and Dunlin being the most numerous. Black-bellied Plover, Semi-palmated Plover, Spotted Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, Whimbrel, Killdeer and Ruddy Turnstone are also well represented. We also see occasional Marbled and Hudsonian Godwit, American Golden Plover and Solitary Sandpiper – there's lots to keep this bird photographer occupied!

Continued overleaf...

Main image: A Piping Plover and three chicks. Intimate images like this necessitate a low angle which means the photographer getting dirty as the photo below demonstrates! ©Darren Moss



Right: A Wilson's Plover preens itself. Gail's careful approach has resulted in this bird being completely unconcerned by her presence. ©Gail Bisson





Left: Gail demonstrates the art of getting muddy in the name of her craft.

If you have ever watched shorebirds for any time, you will be familiar with their rhythmic movements; run, run, run, run, run, STOP. Run, run, STOP. Run, run, run, STOP..... It is impossible to know where these movements will take them and it's unethical to chase the birds around; the best approach is to sit tight and wait for them to come to me. Shorebirds are naturally curious and will eventually come towards me to investigate. I once even had the wondrous experience of a Piping Plover chick run into my lens hood and examine her reflection in the glass!

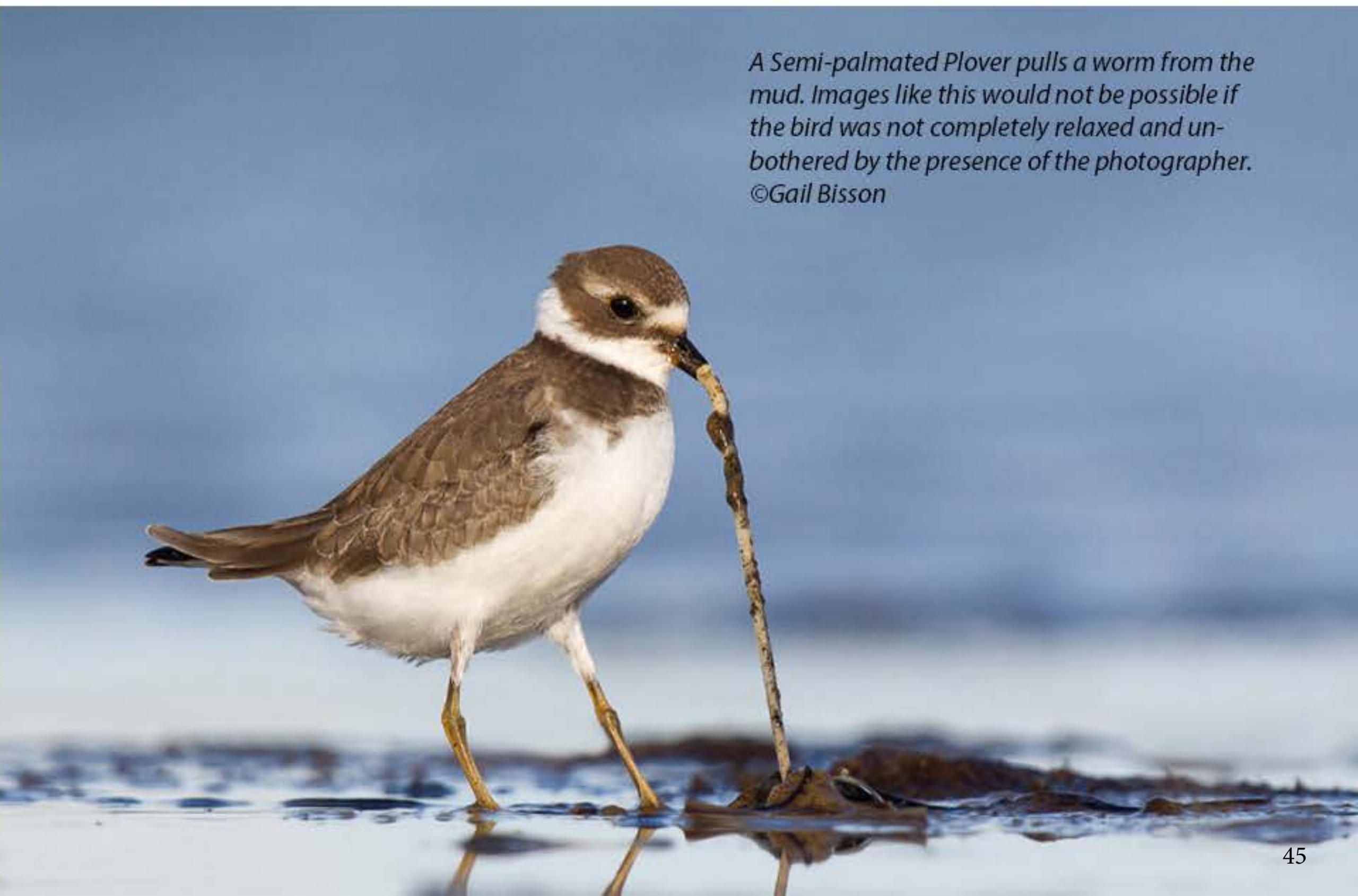
The secret to success is patience. Lots of patience. It may take 30 minutes for a shorebird to approach me. But the wait is worth it, allowing a bird to come to me allows great head-on images as opposed to the rear-end shots that result from chasing a bird. When I am finished photographing, I reverse the approach process to avoid spooking them. No image is ever worth a stressed and upset bird.

Shorebird season in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia is signalled by the arrival in late April of the endangered Piping Plovers. Willet and Yellowlegs are next to arrive, but the real action starts in mid-August as the fall migration of shorebirds begins. The birds are moving south to their wintering grounds in the Caribbean and South and Central America and stop along the way to feed and rest.

The next time you are at the beach, why not swap your bathing costume and sunscreen for a pair of binoculars and enjoy the birds? The species encountered where you live may be different to those that I enjoy, but just think of all those treasures waiting to be discovered, treasures that until now may have been hidden in plain sight.

Gail Bisson.

A Semi-palmated Plover pulls a worm from the mud. Images like this would not be possible if the bird was not completely relaxed and unbothered by the presence of the photographer.
©Gail Bisson



An Unknown Native the Wild Service Tree

By Ian Parsons

Ian Parsons takes a look at this
often forgotten British native.

A native tree that is often indicative of ancient woodland or an ancient hedgerow, a tree with beautiful autumn foliage, it is a tree whose fruits have named many a pub and possibly the official country residence of our Prime Minister, it is a tree that perhaps produces the most valuable timber in the country, yet it is also a tree that many do not know.

Cont...

Main image: The distinctive and maple-like leaves of the Wild Service Tree. ©Ian Parsons

The Wild Service Tree (*Sorbus torminalis*) is found growing naturally mainly in central and southern England, occasionally reaching as far north as Cumbria, but only straying further when planted. It is widespread, but with rather scattered distribution across southern Europe, favouring warmer areas. It is a member of the *Sorbus* genus, and is therefore closely related to the Rowan and the Whitebeam. Along with the Whitebeam, the Wild Service Tree is one of the 'parents' of our many endemic Whitebeam species. The *Sorbus* genus sits within the very large Rosaceae, or Rose, family and the tree is indeed related to the roses you may have growing in your garden.

The name of Service is basically derived from a mispronunciation of the Latin name of *Sorbus* which means red or reddish brown and refers to the colour of the fruits of the genus when they ripen. The second part of the scientific name, *torminalis* means good for colic and refers to an old herbal remedy for the condition that was once made from the tree's fruits. These fruits also give the tree its alternative name of Chequers, a name that is believed to come from the pattern of pale lenticels that speckle the surface of the ripening fruit. One of the theories behind the name of the UK's official country residence of the prime minister, Chequers, is that it was so named due to a number of Wild Service Trees growing in the grounds when the house was first built in the sixteenth century.

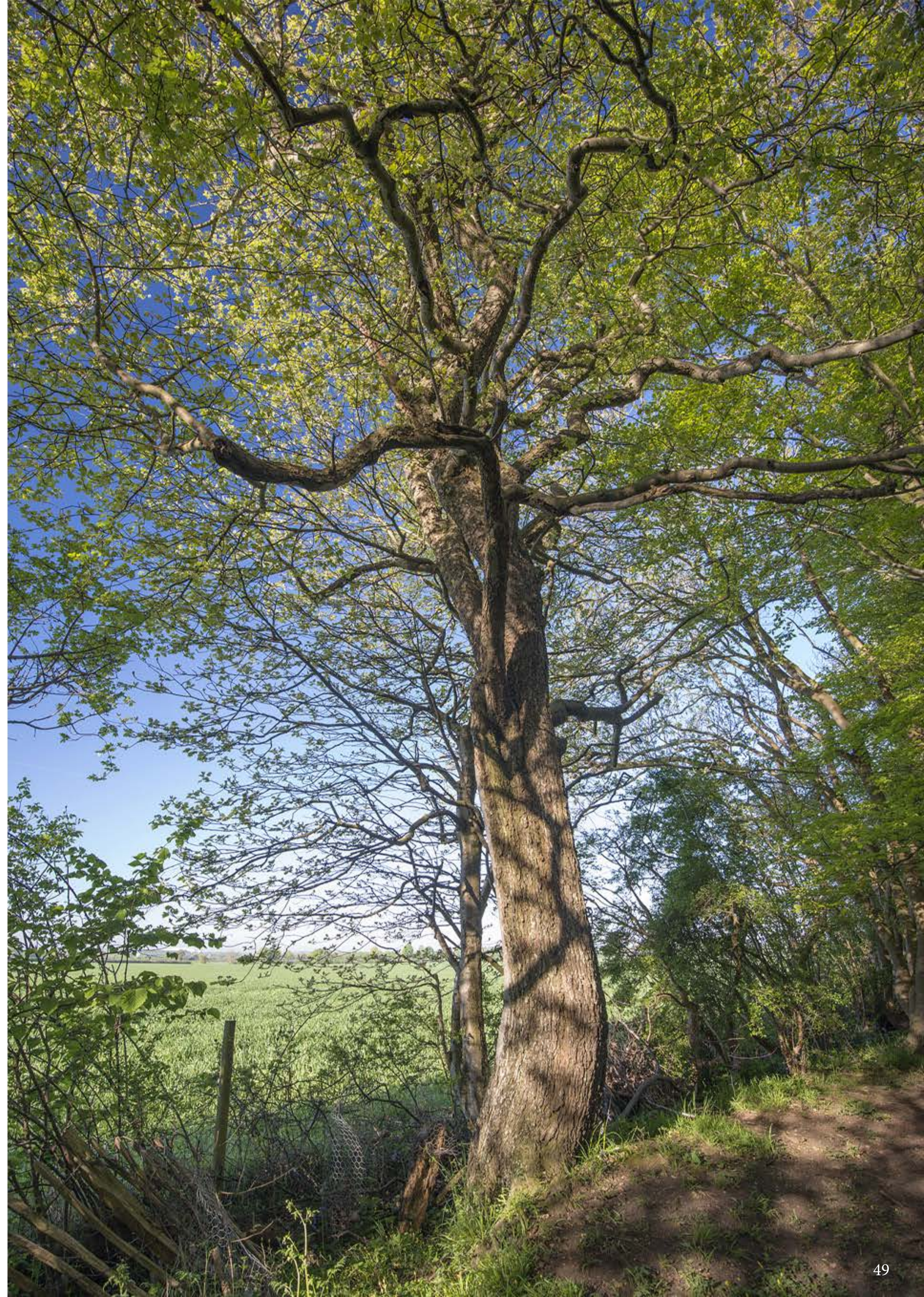
And the pubs? Before the use of hops in flavouring beer, the tree's fruits, or chequers, were used to give ale its flavour. Over time the name became associated with public houses and many were subsequently named after the source of the beer's flavour. The fruits can also be used in whisky, much like the sloes of Blackthorn are used in gin.

The Wild Service Tree is scattered in its distribution and is often associated with heavy clay soils, its presence is often taken as an indicator of ancient woodland and ancient hedgerows (which themselves may be a remnant fragment of an ancient woodland). Nowadays, it is also widely planted; if you do spot one in an old hedge or growing apparently at random in a woodland it is likely to indicate a long history of woodland cover.

They are relatively shade tolerant, so often form the understorey of woodlands, growing beneath larger trees, heading upwards towards any gaps in the canopy; but because they are slow growing in the relatively cool climate of Britain, they rarely get there, most being under 20 metres in height. Trees growing in old hedgerows can be a variety of shapes, having been regularly pruned by those undertaking hedgerow maintenance, but allowed to grow freely they can form large trees with a rounded canopy, heavy limbs and distinctive straight shoots. Those heavy limbs and a propensity for forking means that if they are being grown for timber production they need to be pruned regularly to ensure straight, knot free trunks.

The leaves of the Wild Service Tree are highly distinctive, they look vaguely Maple like, but instead of the palmate pattern of veins, you will notice that the leaf of the Wild Service has a central vein running its entire length, branching into pairs of diagonal veins and creating a highly symmetrical leaf. The lobes of the leaves are sharply pointed, their undersides are shiny, and uniformly green in the spring and early summer. The leaves put on a brilliant display of autumnal colour before they drop, turning bright yellow or brilliantly red, they are hard to miss.

Main Image: An old Wild Service Tree growing on the boundary of an ancient woodland in Oxfordshire. ©Rob Read



At the end of May and the beginning of June, the trees adorn themselves in blossom, showy clumps of small creamy white flowers, more numerous on trees growing in hedges or on the woodland edge, these readily catch your eye and can lead you to discovering a hitherto unknown Wild Service Tree. After the flowers come the fruits, the famed chequers. They are small, being only about 1cm round, and resemble small, speckled apples, starting off greenish in colour before ripening to a rich reddish brown. At this stage they become bletted, the flesh sweetening and softening giving them a delicious taste similar to dates. But if the summer is poor, this tree, more widespread in the warmer climes of southern Europe, can fail to produce ripe fruits in our cooler climate. The flowers and the fruits of the tree are important food sources for wildlife; insects buzz around the flowers, feeding on the nectar and pollen. Birds, especially thrushes, devour the fruits rapidly.

The timber of the Wild Service Tree is highly sought after, but only if it has grown with tall straight trunks. It is pale in colour and finely grained, but also very dense and strong. Traditional uses include the large wooden screws in wine presses, gun and crossbow stocks and, especially the straight younger branches, billiard cues and arrows. Today it is highly valued for use in high end furniture making, the timber being used in intricate inlay work and also for veneer. The timber, with its dense fine grain is perfect for this sort of work and it is this aspect that has ensured that the timber of the Wild Service Tree is now ranked as one of the most valuable European timbers there is.

The Wild Service Tree is definitely a tree to seek out, it can indicate a long history of woodland, telling you about the landscape it grows within, but above all it is simply a beautiful tree to behold.

Ian Parsons.



Right - The leaves of a Wild Service Tree. ©Ian Parsons

Left - The blossom in spring puts on quite a display. ©Ian Parsons.

Identification Tips

Form: When growing in woodland it can be drawn up to 28 metres in height, when light not heavily restricted it will form a large rounded dome. New shoots appear distinctively straight. Often forks and has heavy limbs. Variable in shape when growing in an old hedgerow, but straight shoots noticeable.

Bark: On young trees grey brown and smooth, becoming darker brown and forming small squarish scale-like plates.

Twigs: Straight and shiny, grey brown in colour. Slightly downy when first sprouting, but very soon becoming smooth. Buds are green and rounded, looking like peas stuck alternately on to the twigs.

Leaves: Distinctive symmetrical sharp lobed shape with central leaf vein from which all other veins emanate. Shiny on underside. Bright show of autumn colour, both red and yellow.

Flowers: Showy clusters of small creamy white flowers.

Fruit: Small apple-like berries, starting green and ripening to a reddish brown. The surface is speckled with pale lenticels that show distinctly against the darker background.





LEO Musings

by
Rebecca Nason

As the daylight hours shorten,
Rebecca Nason looks forward to
the beginning of autumn on
Shetland and the migrant birds
it attracts.

Main Image: A more 'arty' shot. This LEO was the most exposed find yet, out on a rock in the middle of a sheep field on Fair Isle one October. I had rather sore knees after having to crawl at sheep height across the field to get a good enough distance for some shots amongst the tall grasses. Not the best roosting spot, this bird was eventually flushed by a passing sheep who hadn't noticed him until they nearly made contact! ©Rebecca Nason

As the winds grow colder here on Shetland, and the nights draw in after this bizarre lockdown summer, I am drawn enthusiastically to thoughts of autumn migration. LEO you may ask? An endearing shortening for the beautiful Long-eared Owl, *Asio otus*. I have always associated LEO's with Shetland, and in particular Fair Isle. Although generally a non-migratory species, our northern populations migrate or at least partial migrate and they come through the islands in small numbers in both Spring and Autumn, though more numerous in late Autumn. Escaping the cold Scandinavian winters, it is not unusual to see at least one or two LEO's, usually in harsh, northerly gale conditions, resting up on the islands after their North Sea crossing before continuing south to mainland UK. Some years can see notable influxes with double figures being recorded.

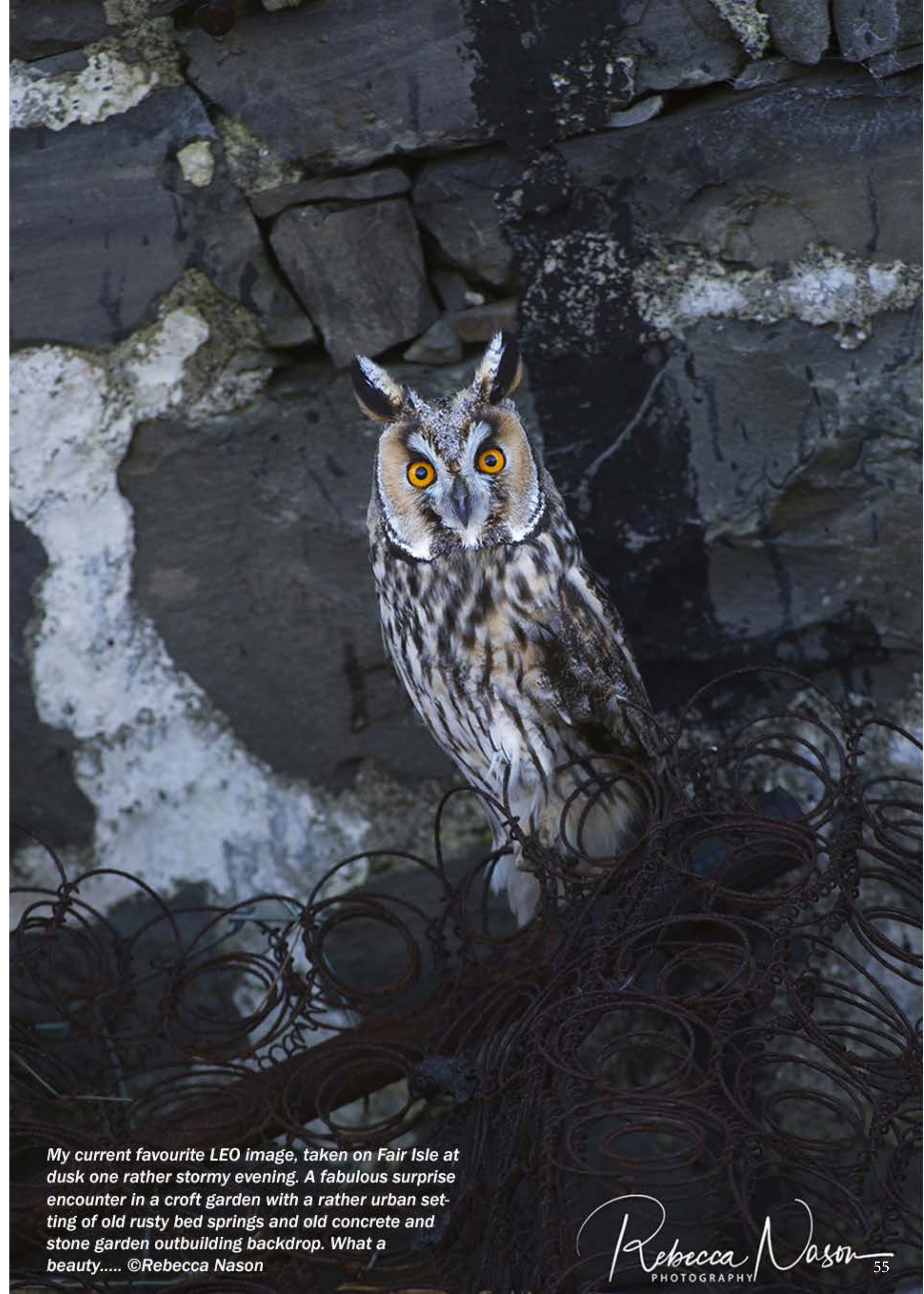
A very secretive species, Long-eared Owls are normally hard to encounter in the UK due to their daytime roosting behaviour, perched silently & perfectly still, often high up against the trunks of conifers or deep in hedgerows, most frequently alone but sometimes in roosting groups. However, on migration, stopping over on Islands such as the migratory hot-spot of Fair Isle, they do not have the benefit of trees or large plantations to roost in & are much easier to spot in these sparsely vegetated Islands. They land, often exhausted, ready to refuel & find themselves in uncharacteristically exposed territory. To encounter one of these birds during migration can be a photographer's dream. They often appear to be unfazed by human presence, have maybe never encountered a human before, and concentrate instead on getting some much-needed rest and staying as invisible as possible. Whether it be on an exposed stone in the middle of a sheep field, in a crofter's garden, a cliff-face surrounded by resident fulmars, or a sheltered shop window sill, they take what they find and sit it out until they are ready to make their next port of call.

A couple of autumns ago on Fair Isle, I turned a corner into a crofter's garden at dusk to a wonderful surprise, a LEO perched on top of an old bed, it's glowing orange peel eyes in the half-light staring back at me from a pile of rusty bed springs.

Last year I saw my first Long-eared Owl nest on mainland Shetland too, in an old Sparrowhawk nest, tucked unassumingly away in a pine belt and about 20 yards away from an active Sparrowhawk nest. The nest was successful, the last visit left me with memories of fledged chicks 'hissing' through the trees in an otherwise relatively silent plantation, bar the odd enthusiastic Shetland Wren and near constant-whistling breeze. LEO's established a very small breeding population on Shetland in the 1960's though this had stopped by 1975. There has probably been sporadic breeding on the islands since, birds going un-noticed in rural plantations, but the 2020 record is maybe only the 3rd confirmed successful breeding of the species in over 45 years, so quite a record.

Most serious photographers remain loyal to one of the handful of leading camera manufacturers. I have used Nikon cameras for years, but with modern digital advancements being made swiftly, I made the rather scary decision to change for the lighter and more flexible system offered by Olympus and sold my beloved Nikons. Although Covid may have scuppered plans of Autumn LEO's on Fair Isle this year, I am still hoping mainland Shetland may turn up some of these stunning, tufted delights closer to home. I'd really enjoy photographing these special birds with my new Olympus gear.... only time will tell.

Rebecca Nason.



My current favourite LEO image, taken on Fair Isle at dusk one rather stormy evening. A fabulous surprise encounter in a croft garden with a rather urban setting of old rusty bed springs and old concrete and stone garden outbuilding backdrop. What a beauty..... ©Rebecca Nason

Rebecca Nason
PHOTOGRAPHY



A rather snug looking LEO in a willow-filled ditch near Sumburgh Airport (Virkie Willows). A sheltered spot for many a passing LEO, this one was very obliging for both video and stills, all taken from the car which can sometimes act as a perfect hide. ©Rebecca Nason.

Rebecca Nason
PHOTOGRAPHY

Long-eared Owl Fact File

Scientific Name: *Asio otus*

Description: The Long-eared Owl is a medium-sized Owl, slightly smaller than the Tawny Owl and noticeably slimmer in profile. As its name suggests, they possess large ear feather tufts, which allow confident identification when on show. Look out also for the diagnostic yellow-orange coloured eyes. The Long-eared Owl is a rather elusive bird and the most difficult owl to see of the five breeding species found in the UK, being the most nocturnal.

Call: The Long-eared Owl makes a distinctive and rather soft hoooo call which sounds rather like the noise made when one blows across the top of an open bottle. During the nesting season, listen out for a sound reminiscent of a 'squeaky gate' made by the young as they beg for food.

UK Distribution and Population: The Long-eared Owl is distributed widely across Britain, favouring areas of coniferous woodland and tall scrub, preferably adjacent to open areas suitable for hunting the small mammals on which they feed. According to data provided by the British Trust for Ornithology, in the UK their numbers are estimated at between 1,100 and 3,600 breeding pairs only. As the article outlines, numbers in the winter are swollen with birds arriving to escape the harsh winter weather that affects parts of Scandinavia and Eastern Europe. Not much is known about the dynamics of the UK breeding population, but it is thought to be in general decline - perhaps in part down to the breeding success of the Tawny Owl which shares similar habitat preferences.

Below: Taken some years ago now, this rather dishevelled individual had found a pleasant, sheltered suntrap next at the front of the only Fair Isle shop. ©Rebecca Nason.



Rebecca Nason
PHOTOGRAPHY

Robbers and Assassins

Rob Read takes a look at Robber Flies

The family of true flies, or Diptera to give them their formal order name, includes a family of species known as the Asilidae. These species are commonly referred to as robber flies or assassin flies, names which reflect their aggressive predatory habits as they feed mainly on other invertebrates which they ambush and catch in flight. Prey items can vary widely from beetles, flies, butterflies, dragonflies, damselflies and even wasps and bees; choice of prey item will depend to some degree on the species of robber fly in question.

Robber flies are a medium to large sized fly, generally 10-15mm in length, although some species can exceed 30mm. The legs and thorax in most species are robust-looking and bristly, the abdomen slender and elongated. This is a fly that certainly looks as if it could take care of itself in a fight!

The mouthparts are short and designed for piecing and sucking – it is more than capable of delivering a rather painful bite to humans if provoked. The facial area is covered in dense bristles referred to as the 'mystax' (derived from mystakos - the Greek word for moustache or upper lip) which is thought to protect the fly from struggling prey as they defend themselves.


These insects prefer warm, sunny and dry habitats. Look out for them on the sunny side of woodland edges, scrub and grassland areas, especially on warm sunny days. You may also encounter them in your garden. The individuals in the photographs were using the rails of a wooden fence on the edge of a woodland to consume their latest victims and to rest.

Sometimes the common names in use in nature are a little misleading and unfair on the species concerned. Robber flies is suitably apt for this group of insects, although I prefer assassin as I think it's perhaps a little more accurate and dramatic!

Rob Read.

Main image: The Robber Fly is a robust-looking insect that certainly looks as if it could take care of itself in a fight! ©Rob Read.





Turning COVID
Travel
Restrictions
into a Positive!

Wildlife Photographer
and Tutor Michael Snedic enjoys
photography close to home during
enforced travel restrictions.

Main image: This silhouette of a Pacific Black Duck is a good example of how Michael enjoyed experimenting with his photography with wildlife close to his home. ©Michael Snedic

Since March 2020, our lives have been impacted in so many ways, due to COVID 19 taking hold around the world. There are many negatives as a direct result of this insipid virus, including travel restrictions. Where I live, here in Australia, even after 18 months we are limited as to where we can travel due to the 'Super Spreader' Delta variant. Some states, such as New South Wales, are months into lockdown, with more to come. Here in my state of Queensland, we are leading a relatively 'normal' lifestyle and can travel around the state – for now at least.

As a professional wildlife/nature photographer and founder of WildNature Photo expeditions, I'm usually trekking around Australia and the world, organising and presenting photography tours. I love what I do, but it often leaves little time for my own photography, especially back home in Australia. Due to my not being able to travel overseas since COVID began, plus the postponement of tours here due to travel restrictions across borders, I have had a lot more time to get out and take photos.

I regularly rise before sunrise and drive to various lagoons and wetlands not far from where I live to photograph birds. I order a takeaway coffee on the way I and arrive at my destination in the dark.

Positioning myself so that the sun rises directly in front of me (or slightly to the side), I'll set up my camera and telephoto lens on a Gitzo tripod with a Wimberley gimbal, which is set as low to the ground as possible. I then open up one of my camp chairs, with a hot coffee by my side. As the sun starts to rise, I follow the birds through my viewfinder, looking to create rim lighting, backlighting, silhouettes or blurred out bokeh balls. I alternate these bird photography shoots with ventures to various Botanic Gardens and rainforests, looking for plants and fungi to photograph in the morning light.

Rather than look at the negatives associated with COVID and the resulting restrictions in travel, I feel grateful that I have had so much more opportunity to get out with my camera. I have also had more time (finally) to search through many of my RAW files. I have found some real gems and, with editing software being so much better, I'm able to re-edit some of these images.

Cont...

Right: Experimenting with local subjects like plants and fungi can be so rewarding. Below: Michael settling in at a local wetland with a takeaway coffee. ©Michael Snedic.



Mental health issues have been greatly exacerbated during COVID, so getting out with your camera is incredibly good for the soul. Whether you suffer from depression, anxiety or similar, being out in nature helps you to forget the 'real world' and often releases endorphins (i.e. happy cells). Also, photography is such a fantastic way of releasing your creative energy! You can share your photographic time with other photographers, creating a social network with like-minded people.

As far as what to photograph, there is an endless stream of subjects and locations out there to choose from. You may want to perfect your skills and take images of wildlife that are well composed, sharp, with no background distractions and subtle lighting. Alternatively, you might try techniques that are totally 'out there' and experimental. Neither method is right or wrong. Quite simply, it's the style that interests YOU that matters. Experiment, experiment, and experiment some more!

Having judged dozens of wildlife and nature photographic competitions over the last two decades or so, I have regularly seen multiple entries where photographers have copied the winners from previous years. With so many entries being received by photography competitions and entry numbers growing each year, you really need to be original to capture the attention of the judges. With digital photography, you can experiment to your heart's content, as it doesn't cost you any extra to shoot like crazy! The more you shoot using different compositions, lighting and settings, the more chance you have of capturing something unique.

Overall, my message here is to look at the positives of restricted travel and take advantage of the extra time you might now have.

Happy photography :-))

Michael Snedic.



The glow of early morning light on Grevillea, an image taken at a local botanical garden.
©Michael Snedic



Wild Art

Photographer of the Year
— THE PERFECT 10 —

Next Issue December 2021:

Join us again in December with more entertaining and informative articles from our contributors, plus some great photography. We will also take a look back at the WildArt Photographer of the Year competition for 2021 and share all the winning images.

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