



## Lesser horseshoe adventures

*A long-held ambition to photograph bats in flight was finally realised when Andrew McCarthy found the time and technical know-how (not to mention a long enough ladder) to fully commit*

The first Covid lockdown brought most of my wildlife photography projects to a grinding halt and for a while I struggled with creativity. With many of my usual project sites closed I felt that a completely new and challenging project might inject some much-needed spark back into my work.

In addition to being a nature photographer, I also hold a licence to work with and photograph roosting bats. I had wanted to photograph these extraordinary creatures in flight for a number of years (particularly after meeting the inspirational photographer Paul Colley at the British Wildlife Photography Awards in 2018) but for a number of reasons the project kept being shunted off into the 'one for later' pile. The free time afforded by lockdown meant I no longer had an excuse and, since I am lucky enough to have a small roost of rare lesser horseshoe bats at the rear of our Devon house, I finally began to experiment with low-power multiple flash photography using an Olympus E-M1X,

fired by a Cognisys Sabre laser trigger.

Early results were mixed, with most all-night shoots yielding nothing but blank frames. In time, however, and following incremental tweaking of the set-up and plenty of background reading and discussions with other photographers, I began to obtain some reasonable results. Six weeks in and I realised I needed to find a larger and more photogenic roost at which to shoot in order to increase the chance of capturing shots of these small, fast-flying animals.

Around this time, I also started thinking about investing in an infrared set-up; while there was no evidence that my low-power, daylight-balanced flash set-up was causing disturbance, I knew that infrared would allow me to shoot in complete darkness, as well as allowing me to create images very different to the rather conventional shots I had been taking to date.

Shortly after purchasing a full spectrum-converted full-frame Sony body and a cheap

kit lens, and armed with a set of homemade 720nm infrared flash filters, an exciting opportunity presented itself to shoot at a large lesser horseshoe roost at an old convent in Devon. The roost entrance at this site was very photogenic, with plenty of old timber beams on the exterior, and was also (just) within safe ladder reach, however its configuration made setting up the equipment challenging. As a result, my first night's shooting was very disappointing, with all shots being underexposed and very out of focus.

Several sessions later, after a good deal of flash repositioning and laser trigger tweaking (all while balanced precariously at the top of a ladder), I finally had the shots I was after – well composed, tack sharp and with the bats nicely positioned against a photogenic background. The shot in this article is my personal favourite from that shoot and every time I look at it, I'm reminded that focus, perseverance and attention to detail does indeed pay off in the long run.