



The power of projects

Want to take your wildlife photography to the next level? You need a project. They're the perfect way to develop your skills, create a unique body of work and indulge your love of a particular subject. Andrew McCarthy explains

Above A goldfinch portrait taken from a pop-up garden hide – note the aesthetic perch and well-controlled background.
Canon EOS 5D MkIII with 500mm lens, ISO 3200, 1/2500sec at f/7.1, tripod

When I began my wildlife photography journey, my approach was rather haphazard – encounters were often by chance, and my success rate was consequently low. As a result, there were periods when I became frustrated by my lack of success and my work really only began to improve when I started to take advice from more experienced photographers who were using a project-based approach, for example getting to know a single location, working for extended periods with one species, polishing their technique or working towards a competition or award.

The focus this gave me was liberating – my work improved and my photography finally began to feel as though the outcome was under my control. Even now, when I get into one of my occasional creative slumps, a new project re-energises me and, after seeing images of my chosen new subject steadily improve, gives a feeling of achievement.

A CHANGE OF MINDSET

There are several things you need to think about before embarking on this approach. First, be really honest with yourself about where you are as a photographer. Do you have the right equipment for the kind of work you aspire to? What about technique and knowledge? Go back to basics if needed – rethink your approach and aim for a better understanding of your gear and subject. Be honest about your field skills too. Time spent memorising dial settings and checking set-ups is never wasted, but fieldcraft is key and you will become a far better wildlife photographer by becoming a more knowledgeable naturalist.

Paid hides can be a tempting way of seeing unusual wildlife, polishing technique and helping you start to build a portfolio, but while these can be great fun, do try to develop your own work. It's hard to create

unique or unusual images at paid set-ups and your work will be far more original and satisfying if you work on your own projects, even though it can be hard work at times.

KNOW WHAT YOU WANT TO ACHIEVE

Ask yourself what you aspire to photographically and set realistic targets. For example, are you keen to improve your club competition performance or are you just shooting for your own pleasure and want to add that extra layer of enjoyment to your hobby?

I personally found working through the RPS distinctions process incredibly helpful. Not only did it give my work a focus that it had previously lacked, but it also motivated me to work towards a difficult to achieve goal over a constrained timeframe.

SEEK ADVICE

Ask more experienced photographers for advice – you will find most are helpful and like nothing more than talking about wildlife and photography. Consider one-to-one tuition or structured workshops as a way of honing your technique and (critically) your field skills.

Look at the work of others for inspiration too but try not to simply copy them. Instead, ask yourself what it is about the lighting, composition and detail in their images that appeals to you, and how you might apply these techniques to improve your own work.

MAKE THE MOST OF LIMITED TIME

In terms of potential projects, are there any animals or plants that fascinate you? It will always be easier to find motivation if you are fascinated by a subject. The other key question is how much free time do you have? This dictates where you can go and, of course, how much time you can spend on a site.

In general, the more time you spend

taking pictures, the quicker your images will improve. I work full-time and while I'm often able to photograph wildlife while out surveying, conducting one-to-ones or leading photo workshops, I rarely seem to have the luxury of a full day out photographing alone. Therefore, I have become adept at maximising my time by often staying local and targeting species I can spend quality time with, when weather and light are optimal.

WHAT KIND OF PROJECT SHOULD I BEGIN WITH?

Potential photographic projects are practically limitless, but a good place to start is your own garden, since this affords opportunities for projects from bird photography to macro. I have spent a good deal of time over the years improving my garden for wildlife photography for these reasons and now have a native wildflower meadow to attract pollinating insects, a wildlife pond to attract dragonflies and damselflies, and native hedges for nesting birds and rare mammals such as dormouse.

GARDEN BIRDS

Garden birds make a great starter project. All you need for simple portraits is a simple fabric hide in front of a feeding station to attract smaller species – and possibly larger species including predators. There is plenty of information online about such set-ups, but the key is to ensure perches have enough space behind them to enable backgrounds to be controlled and free of distractions.

Perches should be chosen so they look natural and photogenic – I have been known to bring fallen logs with woodpecker holes in back from my habitat-management work to use as props. If you have time and space, you could build a reflection pool, which can produce beautiful images. In spring, you could put nesting material out alongside food for more unusual images.

Always review your images critically and ask yourself how you might refine your approach.

Below Sparrowhawk in snow, taken from a pop-up garden hide.
Canon EOS 5D MkIV with 100-400mm lens, ISO 800, 1/800sec at f/8, tripod



DRAGONFLIES

You can photograph these spectacular species at home if you have a sufficiently large pond. Alternatively, research known dragonfly hotspots and focus on portraits until you have honed your technique and assembled a portfolio. Many dragonfly species will return repeatedly to the same perch between (occasionally prolonged) periods away from a pond, so use the opportunity afforded by an insect's absence to get into a discrete

position for an image with a clean background. As your photography improves, try flight shots. Identify a favoured perch and watch the incoming insect's flight path. Set the camera up on a tripod with a telephoto lens to give plenty of working distance, and pre-focus on the perch. Use an aperture that gives a reasonable depth of field but without introducing background distractions, then watch the perch and use a remote release to

fire bursts of images as the insect returns. Other things to try are reflection shots. The female emperor dragonfly (below) was patiently laying into an old log floating partially under the water surface.

Below Laying emperor dragonfly reflection shot taken at garden pond.
Olympus OM-1 with 150-400mm lens, ISO 2500, 1/1000sec at f/7.1, handheld



Above Large white butterfly in flight, in garden. Olympus OM-1 with 150-400mm lens, ISO 6400, 1/10000sec at f/7.1, handheld

BUTTERFLIES AND MOTHS

A summer spent photographing *Lepidoptera* will be rewarding. Research your subject and find out what kind of habitats and sites to go to for specific species. Commoner species are widespread, and you shouldn't have to travel far to photograph them – flower-rich waste ground, older flower-rich meadows and gardens are all good. Get up early to find roosting butterflies and ideally watch insects settle the night before, so you can find them the following morning. Keep compositions simple, consider focus stacking if your camera has such a function, as this will mean you can use a wider aperture for improved background control, and don't be afraid to experiment with including more background than is conventional.

If there is any breeze, clamps on a small second tripod or ground spike can help

stabilise perches. Be careful photographing mating insects, as they can damage themselves if they try to separate quickly, which they may well do if you disturb them. As with dragonflies, think about experimenting with flight shots once you have begun to build up a portfolio of strong images and have mastered the basic techniques.

Below (left) Feathered thorn moth. Canon EOS 5D MkIV with MP-E 65mm 1-5x macro lens and Wemacro focusing rail, ISO 200, 1/200sec at f/5.6

Below (right) Ringlet butterfly at dawn. Olympus OM-D E-M1 MkII with 40-150mm lens, ISO 640, 1/500sec at f/5.6, handheld





BIRDS

Over the past few years I have worked with a variety of birds, including cuckoos, Dartford warblers and stonechats, but I live in Devon and keep coming back to one species with which I have a particular fascination – the dipper. This species remains widespread along clean rivers with stretches of faster shallow water, and it makes a compelling photographic subject. Dippers start building nests early in the year, so late February is a good time to start looking for territories and possible nest sites (watch for birds carrying nest material). Providing you exercise great care and consideration for your subject, you should be able to capture shots of birds building nests and later bringing in food or feeding young.

I only photograph in the vicinity of any nest site if I'm absolutely sure my presence won't have a detrimental effect upon the birds, which can happen if there is no suitable cover through which to make an unseen approach or if there is nowhere to remain concealed. Set up a hide or carry a portable bag hide if you need to, but if you are not absolutely sure the birds won't be disturbed, search a different stretch of river.

As with any project, once you start to build up a portfolio of images, you can start to be more creative. For example, try using a shutter speed between 1/60sec and 1/15sec to blur water motion around the perch on which the bird is standing. If light allows, think about photographing action. Alternatively, use backlighting or experiment with low or high-key imaging.

CONCLUSION

I now know that my early feeling of frustration and lack of progress is a widespread phenomenon. I hear it regularly from attendees at RPS events and camera club talks and in some cases it has caused budding photographers to give up altogether. If this feeling resonates with you, I hope this article has reassured you that there is a different way of working than simply trusting to chance, and hopefully it has also provided you with a few ideas for projects that you could work on in your own time, including at home if, like me, you have limited time.

Left (top) Dartford warbler photographed at sunrise against a dawn sky to create a silhouette. Olympus OM-1 and 150-400mm lens, ISO 160, 1/500sec at f/8, handheld

Left (below) Dipper and slow-moving water. Olympus OM-1 and 150-400mm lens, ISO 320, 1/60sec at f/6.3, handheld

10 TIPS FOR PROJECT SUCCESS

1 Get to know a small number of locations really well. As you get to know a site better, you will find opportunities presenting themselves that would rarely occur if you only made a short single visit. You may also discover species (and see opportunities) that you would not otherwise find.

2 Work closely with a single species over a full season and spend quality time with them. Getting to know how a species behaves and how this behaviour changes over a season is key to getting strong images.

3 Develop your garden as a wildlife haven. This will enable you to take advantage of a short time window and also to minimise travel – your carbon footprint will be smaller and there will be a wider wildlife benefit from developing your garden as an outdoor studio.

4 Work on an unfamiliar technique such as

flash photography or macro. While it might be frustrating at first, challenging yourself to try something outside your comfort zone is a sure way to improve your images.

5 Research a species' ecology and behaviour and develop your knowledge and field skills. While cameras and the ability to use them are self-evidently important, the most important skill that the best wildlife photographers have in common is an in-depth knowledge of natural history.

6 Be your own worst critic. Progressively refine your technique and feed lessons learned from mistakes back into your photography in order to keep improving.

7 Work on your image-processing skills alongside your current crop of projects. Post-processing knowledge is an integral part of becoming a better photographer, and developing expertise in this area will really move your images up to the next level.

8 Start with a portrait-based approach and once you are happy with your technique, try experimenting with a more creative approach, such as flight shots or use of unusual lighting scenarios.

9 If you are working with insects, consider investing in (or making) a moth trap for working in the garden (unless you are lucky enough to have access to a secure private site). These are invaluable for helping you learn more about these nocturnal creatures but can help you obtain photographic opportunities you would not otherwise get.

10 Respect your subject and the wider environment. Read and follow the RPS Nature Photographers' Code of Conduct, as the welfare of the animal is far more important than simply getting the image. Download the code at: rps.org/media/1xcnsuga/the-nature-photographers-code-of-practice.pdf.

Dipper photographed in low-key lighting. This can be a useful technique to employ on a late spring morning if the light is harsh and birds are being cooperative by posing in a shaft of sunlight. Olympus OM-1 and 150-400mm lens, ISO 2500, 1/2500sec at f/9, handheld

