

# ANIMAL *PHOTO SKILLS*

Three top animal photographers reveal  
the skills you need for pets and wildlife!

**ANIMAL  
SPECIAL!**

Pet photography  
Brilliant bird shots  
How to shoot  
butterflies



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LANDSCAPES IN THE RAIN  
How to get stunning scenic shots in the Lakes... whatever the weather! p8

1.5 billion people not to view as something to put on your head change things big time p77

THIRTY FIFTY!  
Why every photographer needs a 50mm f/1.8 in their bag p55

TELEPHOTO SHOOTOUT!  
8 Nikon-fit tele zooms designed for action & wildlife photographers p68

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# ANIMAL PHOTO SKILLS

Three top animal photographers reveal the skills you need for pets and wildlife!



ANIMAL SPECIAL!  
Pet photography  
Brilliant bird shots  
How to shoot butterflies



**04 Dog photography**  
With three generations of Labradors, Anna gets tips from Robert Hooper to capture their fun side



**14 Butterfly photography**  
Bitten by the photo bug, Julie receives help from Heather Angel to get right up close for insect shots

# Welcome



There are few things that are as rewarding to photograph as animals – but to get the very best shots, you need to know

how to deal with them. So in this *Animal Photo Skills* mini-magazine, we've got plenty of tips for getting amazing pet and wildlife images, plus advice on essential equipment to help you.

We gave three enthusiastic photographers the chance to each spend a day with a pro who specialises in animal photography. You'll see how each person progresses from taking good images to genuinely great shots in a matter of hours, and pick up techniques to help you achieve the same! The experts will also help you tailor

your shooting approach to best suit the animals you're photographing. And they'll recommend gear to help you, plus a sneaky trick or two to get results while saving money!

Whether you want to get better shots of your family pets at home or to capture wildlife in its natural environment, *Animal Photo Skills* will give you all the photographic skills you need.

*Geoff*

Geoff Harris, Editor  
geoff.harris@futurenet.com



**26 Bird photography**  
Nature enthusiast Cavan gets tips on capturing fast-moving birds in action from wildlife pro Ben Hall

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# “My photos have gone from ruff to pedigree!”

Professional photographer Robert Hooper shows a dog lover how to take perfect pet portraits

## THE PRO...

Name: **Robert Hooper**  
Camera: **Canon EOS-1D Mark IV**

Robert is a lifestyle photographer from South Croydon in Surrey. He shoots with the professional Canon EOS-1D Mark IV, and specialises in photographing pets, people and weddings. Robert knows how challenging it can be to get a pooch to pose, however he's got a few tricks up his sleeve to get the job done. Robert has his own studio and also goes on location to snap our four-legged friends. See [www.roberthooper.co.uk](http://www.roberthooper.co.uk)

## THE APPRENTICE...

Name: **Anna Sharpe**  
Camera: **Canon EOS 30D**

Anna lives near Bristol, and loves photographing her two Labradors, a mother and daughter called Ruby and Amber, with her Canon EOS 30D. Amber has just given birth to her second litter of ten puppies – which have all been named after famous detectives! Anna enlisted our help to take professional-looking shots of the dogs and puppies. ▶



### ROBERT'S TIP

#### Wear a hood

"Always use a lens hood to avoid lens flare," Robert advises. "It's especially important on a sunny day because dogs – and puppies especially – can be unpredictable in their movements, so you may not have a choice as to what angle you're shooting from. You need to be adaptable!"



### KILLER KIT OF THE PROS #1

#### Fast telephoto zoom

"Photographing pets isn't the easiest of tasks and you'll need to use a lens that's fast enough to keep up with the pace," says Robert. "My Canon EF 70-200mm f/2.8L IS II USM (£1,799) is perfect for pet photography as it's versatile, and the aperture can go as wide as f/2.8." If Robert's choice is too pricey, consider the Sigma 70-200mm f/2.8 EX DG OS HSM (£863).



## Technique assessment

# Was Anna barking up the wrong tree with her D-SLR techniques?

Anna had made a bit of a dog's dinner of her camera settings, so Robert suggested a few quick improvements

### Make it shallow

"Shooting at a wide aperture setting has big advantages," says Anna. "As Robert showed me, it blurs the background so viewers will focus on the pet in the foreground. It also enables a fast shutter speed – 1/1000 sec, for example – so you can freeze the movements of the dogs and avoid blur. However opening the aperture up to f/2.8 also has its challenges, as it means you have to be 100 per cent accurate when focusing. And if you're shooting with a long lens such as a 70-200mm, keep one hand underneath it for extra support."



### No paws for thought

"Photographing pets that are darting back and forth isn't easy," Robert says. "You'll need to be quick on your feet, and you'll find it easier if you set your camera to Aperture Priority so the camera selects a shutter speed to match. To help you take sharper shots, set the autofocus mode to continuous so it tracks moving subjects; this is best used in conjunction with the automatic AF point selection mode, which uses all focus points and selects the one nearest to the camera. It's also worth reviewing your images on your LCD screen to check they're sharp."



## HOT SHOT #1



Exposure: 1/3200 sec at f/2.8; ISO 400  
Lens: Canon EF 70-200mm f/2.8L IS II USM

### ▲ Anna's comment

"The command 'lie down' doesn't just apply to the dogs!" says Anna. "Robert showed me that we also needed to get down as low as possible to frame our shots. From this angle we're at eye-level with the dogs, and this makes for a much stronger composition, as we're able to engage with them."

### ROBERT'S TIP

#### Puppy-dog eyes

"To capture adorable puppy-dog eyes it's important to keep the focus point spot-on," Robert explains. "Just like with a human portrait, the eyes are the window to the soul, and this exactly where you'll want to be focusing for pet portraits. Dog's eyes are dark and set deep into the face, so consider using a fill-in flash to bring them out. Don't set the flash too powerful though; something like -2/3 stop in E-TTL mode will do. You want to use just enough to get a catchlight in the eyes to give them some life. Remember, don't overpower the flash to the extent that it's noticeable."

### WITH FLASH



### NO FLASH



### KILLER KIT OF THE PROS #2

#### Flashgun

"Whatever the weather, a Speedlite will be handy," Robert advises. "Not only will it illuminate the eyes, it will fill in shadows if you're shooting against a light source, such as bright sunshine. As you have only so much control over where your pet is going to be, a flashgun is a must for any location shoot." ▶





## HOTSHOT #2

Exposure: 1/250 sec at f/9; ISO 320  
Lens: 70-200mm f/2.8

### ▲ Anna's comment

"I learnt very quickly that you can't get puppies to pose, however much you try!" says Anna. "You have to be fast and get down low quickly to take the shot. I narrowed the aperture setting to f/9 so that I could be a bit more flexible with where I set the focal point. Although I'm happy with this image there's still some clutter on the left-hand side in the background."

### ROBERT'S TIP

#### The dog house

"Many clients who come to me want a studio shot of their pet; however I find most of my stronger images are taken out on location," Robert says. "The studio is an alien environment to a cat or a dog, and they may not feel as comfortable there as they do roaming around in their familiar territory. It's worth keeping in mind that the animal will respond better to you when it's happy and not under pressure."

### ROBERT'S TIP

#### Don't forget the background

"Robert showed me how important it is to consider every aspect of the background scene," Anna says. "Bringing the dogs into the centre of the garden meant we could blur the green grass to make the dogs stand out more. Robert pointed out that making small movements to change my composition made a massive difference to the shot, and he advised me to look out for objects, plants or trees that would be distracting, and avoid them. He also told me that while it was fine to have the other dogs in the background if need be, I should make sure they weren't drawing the eye from the main doggy subject in the foreground of my frame."



### EXPERT INSIGHT

## Diffuse the light

With young pets it's likely they'll get to a point when they get tired and fall asleep, and this offers an excellent opportunity to take some engaging close-up shots. As this puppy was positioned near a streak of sunlight, Robert showed Anna how to soften the light with a diffuser, then bounced an even light back into the shade with a reflector. Robert also got Anna to switch to a 100mm macro lens. "With a macro lens the focus needs to be spot-on

again," Robert explains. "However, with the puppy sleeping and still you'll have much more time to get the focus right."



Robert shoots with the Canon EOS-1D Mk IV, and has a wide range of Canon pro lenses and other kit to get the job done:

- Canon EF 24-70mm f/2.8L USM
- Canon EF 14mm f/2.8L II USM
- Canon EF 70-200mm f/2.8L IS II USM
- Canon EF 135mm f/2L USM
- Canon EF 85mm f/1.2L II USM
- Canon EF 50mm f/1.2L USM
- Canon EF 100mm f/2.8L Macro IS USM
- 2 x Pocket Wizard flash triggers
- Canon Speedlite 580EX II
- Canon Speedlite 550EX
- Lastolite reflector
- Blanket



### ANNA'S TIP

#### Walkies!

It's a challenge to both photograph and command the dogs, as Anna found out. "My dogs respond best to me, but I realised on the shoot how important it is to have someone else to help out," she says. "Robert showed me that, by using treats, you can get the dog to follow your helper down a path and, when you're ready in position, you can call the dog over. But be ready to fire the shutter as it runs towards you. Set the AF to track moving subjects, and set the drive mode to continuous so you can fire off a few frames at a time. You'll need to do this a few times to get good results, as it can be hit-and-miss with fast-running dogs." ▶





## HOT SHOT #4

Exposure: 1/8000 sec at f/2.8; ISO 400  
Lens: 70-200mm f/2.8



### Anna's comment

"Robert encouraged me to shoot both landscape and portrait orientation," Anna says. "A vertical composition works particularly well for this shot of my neighbour's dog Fuggles. I found it much easier to photograph one dog at a time, as we could get it to pose using commands and treats, enabling me to keep the aperture wide open for a really blurred background; the blossom tree adds some interest to the top of the frame." ▶

### ROBERT'S TIP

#### Treat time

"You can't teach an old dog new tricks, but you can bribe them with treats!" says Robert. "Have a small container of biscuits to hand so you can get the dog to sit for you. Bear in mind that it can become confusing for the animal if there are lots of people telling it what to do, so just get one person to do it." ▶

### ANNA'S TIP

#### Exposure issues

"As we were shooting on a sunny day there were strong shadows and bright highlights, so Robert showed me how to use exposure compensation," Anna says. "This made it much quicker and easier to tweak the exposure if the dog was under- or overexposed. I was also shooting in raw, so that I could rescue images if the exposure wasn't spot on."



### KILLER KIT OF THE PROS #3

#### Blanket

"I never go out on a shoot without my blanket," Robert says. "A cheap old blanket keeps the worst of the dirt off your clothes if you need to lay on the grass when the ground is wet. For a small, cheap item it makes a big difference to the comfort of your shoot."



### Anna's comment

"Including some of the rich and vibrant natural environment gives some context to the dogs' surroundings," says Anna. "The light spilling through the woodland setting looked beautiful, but I had to be careful about where the shadows were being cast, and we had to sit the dogs in the right place before we started shooting. Robert showed me that, if you shoot through foreground branches and growth, these elements will be out of focus, which creates a different and interesting way of framing the image."

## HOT SHOT #3



Exposure: 1/1000 sec at f/2.8; ISO 320  
Lens: 70-200mm f/2.8



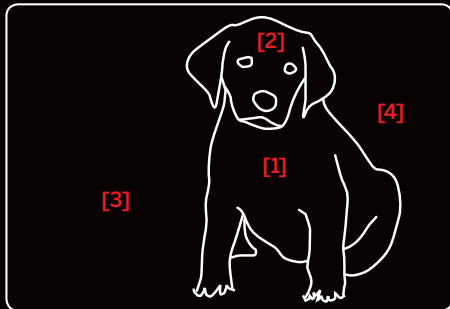
## Anna's comment

"I'm thrilled with the result as the puppy looks so cute with his head tilted to the side! The low composition works well, and there are no distractions in the background. I found the day to be a challenge, but got a lot of top shooting tips from Robert and I can't wait to keep practising with my dogs. After all, practice – and patience – make perfect!"



## Robert's verdict

"This shot has a strong composition that sits well on the eye, with the puppy positioned off-centre to the side of the frame [1]. The focus on the eyes [2] is spot-on and the grass in the background blurs [3] out perfectly, for an uncluttered, non-distracting backdrop. The exposure is superb [4], with both background and puppy lit correctly. Anna did extremely well to get this shot, considering how active and difficult to control the puppies were!" ■



# SHOT OF THE DAY

Exposure: 1/4000 sec at f/2.8; ISO 400  
Lens: 70-200mm f/2.8







# “I’ve got really close to nature”

Pro wildlife photographer Heather Angel passes on her advice for capturing great macro shots of creepy crawlies

## THE APPRENTICE...

Name **Julie Richardson**  
Camera **Nikon D5100**

Julie discovered photography four years ago, when she met her partner Dave. She’s been well and truly bitten by the photo bug, and has completed a darkroom course and BTEC in photography. She loves close-up shots.

## THE PRO...

Name **Heather Angel**  
Camera **Nikon D3**

Heather has been one of the UK’s leading wildlife photographers for four decades, tackling subjects from blue whales to water fleas. Her two passions are China, which she’s visited 32 times, and macro photography. ▶



Exposure: 1/250 sec at f/5.6; ISO 800  
Lens: 105mm f/2.8

## HOT SHOT #1

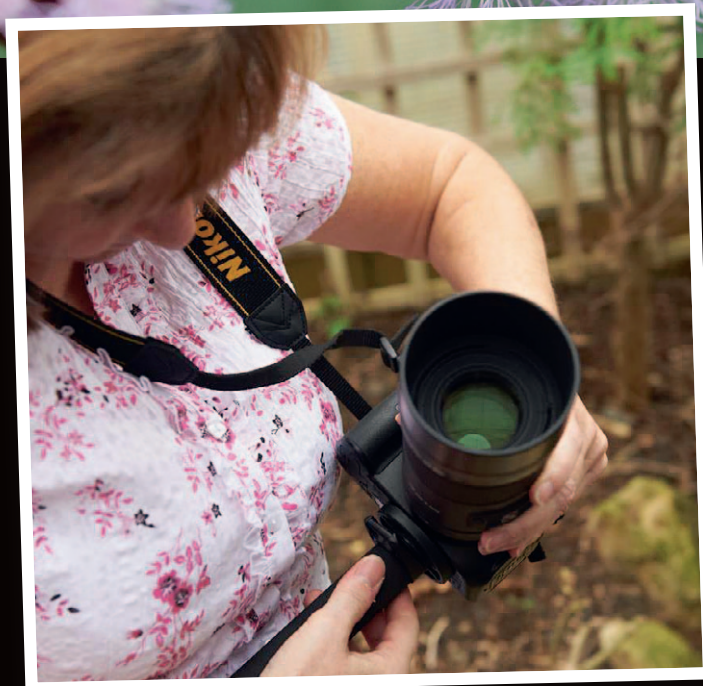


### ▲ Julie's comment

"I don't have a macro lens, and while my 18-55mm kit lens does focus quite close, it's not enough to fill the frame with a subject as small as a butterfly. I borrowed a Sigma 105mm f/2.8 Macro lens, and I could see the difference straight away. This was one of my first attempts – I saw this *Dryas iulia*, or Julia butterfly, resting on a bloom and thought the colours contrasted really nicely. Heather explained that macro lenses with a longer focal length are ideal when you don't want to get too close to a subject that's easily disturbed."

### KILLER KIT OF THE PROS #1 Monopod

Julie was expecting to use a tripod, but Heather suggested she try a monopod instead. "Butterfly houses are heated, and as temperatures rise, butterflies become more active," explains Heather. "Therefore, you need to be able to shoot and move quickly. There's more risk of camera-shake than with a tripod, but using a monopod is still much more stable than shooting handheld. You'll need to watch the focusing, though, as it's hard to avoid swaying slightly while you compose the shot, and your subject might drift out of focus."



### ▲ A leg to stand on?

On Heather's advice, Julie ditched her tripod and opted to shoot either handheld (at higher ISOs) or with a monopod (for greater stability in low light). This helped her keep up with moving subjects

### EXPERT INSIGHT

## Dealing with depth of field

Julie got much closer for her second attempt at this butterfly, but discovered straight away one of the difficulties of macro photography: the closer you get to your subject, the less depth of field there is. Plus, when you shoot at an angle like this you won't get the whole of your subject sharp – but, then, you don't always have to. You need to pick the right things to focus on, and with butterflies it's the head and antennae. Unfortunately, in Julie's photo the focus point is just behind the head, so it doesn't quite work. But by trying the shot and seeing the outcome she understood what she needed to do next time.



### ▲ Selective sharpness

Julie found that, when you're shooting your subject at an angle, you won't be able to get it all in focus. Heather advised her on the most important things to get sharp



### ◀ Practice makes perfect

Julie tried out her macro technique on a stationary subject, and soon found out that there's a knack to getting the exposure right. Heather showed her how to use her camera's spot metering mode to handle backlit subjects such as this one

## Technique assessment

### Was Julie's camera set up properly for capturing flighty subjects?

Close-up and macro shots require a slightly different approach to everyday photographs. To get your subjects sharp you need to eliminate any blur from camera or subject movement, and be super accurate with your focusing – your normal focus mode might not be the best choice.

### ISO advice

"Julie had her camera set to ISO 100 for best quality," says Heather. "However, because we were shooting in overcast daylight that was weakened even further as it came through the butterfly house's roof, I suggested ISO 800. The quality she'd get from her camera at this ISO would still be good, and the faster shutter speeds of about 1/250 sec cut the risk of camera-shake or blur from the subject moving. These are both big causes of out-of-focus areas in macro shots."



### Focus pointers

Heather says: "Julie had her camera set to Auto-area AF mode, in which the camera chooses a part of the scene to focus on (usually what's nearest to the camera). I advised her to switch to Single-point AF mode, because then she could control exactly what the camera focused on. If necessary she could select a different AF point with the navigational controller if the subject wasn't central. With macro you need fine focus control." ▶





## HOT SHOT #2



Exposure: 1/125 sec at f/5.6; ISO 800  
Lens: 105mm f/2.8 macro

### ▲ Julie's comment

"Heather thought my first attempt (on the previous page) was good, but that I could get closer still and fill the frame with my subject. This *Papilio thoas*, or King Swallowtail, was resting on the path leading through the butterfly house. It was still enough for me to try shooting it at lots of different angles. Heather explained that when butterflies have their wings open you should get directly overhead, so that the back of the camera is parallel with the wings. This means they stay sharp from edge to edge, even with the limited depth of field available. For my first attempt I positioned the butterfly horizontally across the frame, but Heather encouraged me to angle the camera to produce this more dynamic picture."

### KILLER KIT OF THE PROS #2

#### Long-range macro lens

"I use a 70-180mm macro zoom," says Heather. "It enables me to adjust for different subjects and shooting conditions quickly. The main requirement for this kind of photography, though, is a longer-than-usual focal length, so that you can shoot from further away. This reduces the risk of frightening timid subjects, though it does make the depth of field shallower still. You'll need to be extremely careful about focusing, as well as the angles you shoot from, which is why I emphasise the need to get parallel with your subject."



### ▲ Open wings?

Shooting from above lets you get the whole butterfly sharp, and reveals the wing patterns in all their glory

### EXPERT INSIGHT

## Get down and dirty

If a butterfly has closed wings, shoot it from the side and go in close to capture the patterns. Remember – you need to keep the camera parallel with the wings, too, so get on the same level as the butterfly. If it's on the ground, you'll need to lie down! That might not be comfortable, but it's what you need to do to make sure the wings look sharp; it makes it easier to keep the camera steady too. ▶





# HOT SHOT #3



## Julie's comment ▶

"This *Greta oto*, or Glasswing butterfly, was a really tricky subject because of its transparent wings. Heather explained that getting the background right would be especially important. She reminded me to get the camera parallel with the butterfly's wings, to make the most of the depth of field, but also to look for a subdued, complementary background that was further away so would be nicely defocused. I had to stand on tiptoe for this shot, which made it tricky to keep the butterfly in focus, even with a monopod. Heather's advice was to check the sharpness of every shot you've taken, and to stay with your subject until you've got the picture just right."

## ▲ Check the sharpness

Heather told Julie to review her shots on the LCD before moving on. She recommends imagining you're working to a commission and have to get a great shot, come what may

## ▶ Get the height right

This butterfly's wings were closed, so Heather told Julie to position the camera at the same height to make the wings look sharp



## EXPERT INSIGHT

### Look on the sunny side

When you're shooting in a butterfly house, use the Direct Sunlight White Balance setting, even on overcast days. It makes plants look fresher, and it's really important to get the greens looking good. The Cloudy or Shade settings add a warmer tone that just doesn't look right with this kind of subject.



## ▲ Note the background

Julie's first attempt was spoiled by the direction of the light, and an ugly mesh in the background. Heather helped her find a similar subject in better lighting and with a softer backdrop



## ◀ Off-camera flash

Heather moved one of the flash heads to one side of a butterfly. This lightened the shrub and picked out the butterfly's wings and antennae



Exposure: 1/100 sec at f/5.6; ISO 800  
Lens: 105mm f/2.8 macro

## KILLER KIT OF THE PROS #3

### Macro flash

Nikon's RIC1 macro flash kit includes a wireless commander and two flash units that fix to a ring mounted around the lens. "These provide balanced illumination for close-ups but can also be used handheld to provide backlighting," reveals Heather. "I use a Speedlight SB-900 fitted with a portable softbox, too. This provides controllable, diffuse lighting, and a remote flash cable means it can be used off-camera to vary the lighting direction." ▶





# HOT SHOT #4



Exposure: 1/250 sec at f/5.6; ISO 800  
Lens: 105mm f/2.8 macro

### ▲ Julie's comment

"Studley Grange has other wildlife besides butterflies, and when Heather spotted this bearded dragon she knew it was a chance to give me some broader tips on animal close-ups. She explained that this side-on view worked well to make the most of the available depth of field, but that it was important to take time to move around the subject and explore different angles. By getting really close, I filled the frame with the lizard's head while throwing the background completely out of focus. Heather told me to leave a little space to the right of the head for the creature to 'look into', just as you would with a human portrait, to stop the composition feeling unbalanced."

### ► Fill the frame

Julie drew the line at snakes, but she was happy to approach this lizard for a close-up



### KILLER KIT OF THE PROS #4 Home-made Reflector

The most useful kit isn't necessarily the priciest, and sometimes costs very little. "I carry a notebook in my bag all the time," says Heather, "however, I've covered it with aluminium foil so that it can be used as a reflector, bouncing light back into darker areas of a scene. This proves particularly useful in direct sunlight. Foil gives a bright, sparkling light, while a matt white surface gives a softer, more diffused effect. It's a great way to control the lighting without having to carry any extra gear."



### KILLER KIT OF THE PROS #5 Wimberley Plamp

Anyone who's tried close-up wildlife photography will know that nature isn't always obliging. Plants grow where they want to, regardless of how this might interfere with your composition! My Wimberley Plamp (£30) enables me to move stems out of the way, or place them where I want them in the frame, without causing any damage.



### ▲ Stable shooting

If you're not using a camera support, switch on your lens' stabilisation system if it has one. You'll really see the difference at slower shutter speeds



### EXPERT INSIGHT

## Look at all the angles

Julie's subject offered many facets, including the textures of its scales and spine, its expressions and the shape of its head. It's a good idea to try vertical compositions as well as horizontal ones. You never know what's going to work best, or, if you're taking photographs for a commission, what the client will like.



## Pro tips for great macro shots

When you're working with tiny subjects, it's almost impossible to point, shoot and come away with good results. You really need to think about composition and lighting, and also about the way you behave around nervous wildlife...

- 1** Select good specimens. If a macro shot is worth taking then it's worth taking well. Avoid butterflies with tatty wings, flowers that are wilting and vegetation that's been munched.
- 2** Study the structure of the subject to work out the best way to light it. Shiny leaves or beetles will reflect light, so avoid direct flash. However, translucent wings or leaves will look more dramatic if they're backlit.
- 3** Fill the frame! There's no point taking a macro shot if there's acres of space around the subject. Be aware that insects or frogs can crawl out of the frame if you approach too close too quickly; by using a longer zoom or macro lens you'll gain a greater working distance.
- 4** If you're spending a few hours taking one subject, whether it be butterflies or flowers, vary the camera angle and composition. For example, take shots of butterflies with their wings open, head-on, feeding and maybe mating. Don't forget to take a mix of vertical and horizontal shots.

**5** Switch on image stabilisation if your lens has that option: this will reduce camera-shake when you're shooting handheld. Dispensing with a tripod provides more flexibility for reacting to changes in a subject's position.

**6** Use a support for sharper shots. On warmer days, butterflies will have flown out of shot by the time you set up a tripod, so a monopod is a better option. However, recently emerged insects have to rest until their wings have dried out, and a tripod allows slower shutter speeds and fine-tuning of the composition.

**7** Keep backgrounds simple. Look beyond the subject to make sure there's nothing distracting in the shot. If there is, move slightly to one side to alter the camera angle.

**8** Dress in layers if you're visiting a tropical butterfly house. Whatever the weather outside, tropical butterflies won't survive in low temperatures, so it will be warm inside! Be prepared to take off outer layers so that you can work in comfort. ►



# SHOT OF THE DAY

## Julie's comment

"It was a great day, and I feel I've learned so much from it. At first, I think I was a little tentative about getting up close to the subjects, but Heather showed me how much impact you can have by filling the frame. She also explained how to control the very shallow depth of field, and how to pay attention to the background so that it complements a subject. Towards the end of the day I took a series of shots of an owl butterfly feeding, and I'm amazed at the detail. I also remembered to follow one of Heather's golden rules – don't crop off the antennae!"

## Heather's verdict

"I was really impressed with the progress Julie made through the day. She understood what I was trying to explain to her, and by the end she was starting to find and compose her own images without any help from me. The best shots of the day really surprised her, I think, because she said she wouldn't have thought of attempting them before her Apprentice training. Her best image was taken from the side, and perfectly captures the head and proboscis of a butterfly feeding on an orange. Precise focusing is essential when you get as close to your subject as this, and Julie got it just right." ■



Exposure: 1/160 sec at f/5.6; ISO 800 Lens: 105mm f/2.8 macro



## THE APPRENTICE...

Name **Cavan Scott**  
Camera **Canon EOS 450D**

Cavan Scott is 38-year-old freelance writer, editor and producer from Bristol. He's a big fan of the great outdoors and nature. He bought his D-SLR to photograph the wildlife and birds he spots when walking in the countryside with his family. A self-confessed 'bird brain' when it comes to camera technology, he asked for our assistance to improve his avian images.

# “From fledgling snapper to high-flying photographer”

Learn how to shoot birds like an expert with award-winning wildlife pro Ben Hall

## THE PRO...

Name **Ben Hall**  
Camera **Canon EOS-1D Mk IV**

Ben is a 33-year-old award-winning professional wildlife photographer from Stockport. He's been pro since 2003 and has won several British Wildlife Photography awards. He runs regular wildlife photo workshops for groups, and one-to-ones, around the UK. Visit [www.benhallphotography.com](http://www.benhallphotography.com) for more details and to view Ben's stunning portfolio. ▶





### KILLER KIT OF THE PROS #1 Tele prime lenses

To get close-up shots of easily scared birds you'll want a telephoto lens to fill the frame with your feathered subjects. Ben uses Canon's pro L-series EF 500mm f/4L IS USM telephoto prime lens with his EOS-1D Mk IV; however the Mk II is around £8,500, and the Nikon equivalent is similarly pricey. You don't need the most expensive lenses to get great shots; Canon, Nikon and other manufacturers offer top-quality lenses that are both more affordable and lighter (and so easier to shoot handheld without needing a monopod or tripod). But if you do want to take a high-end lens for a spin you can hire one for a shoot or trip – try [www.lensesforhire.co.uk](http://www.lensesforhire.co.uk).



### BEN'S TIP

#### Bird spotting

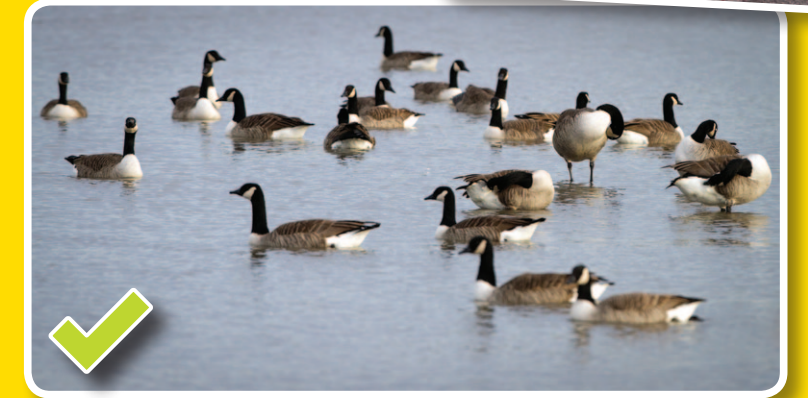
"I travel around the globe to photograph all sorts of birds and wildlife, but for this photoshoot we went to the Slimbridge Wetlands & Wildlife Trust (WWT) centre in Gloucestershire. There are nine WWT centres across the UK and they're great locations with a variety of species and big hides ideal for any keen bird photographer. Go to [www.wwt.org.uk](http://www.wwt.org.uk) to find your local centre," advises Ben.



### BEN'S TIP

#### Don't shoot too wide!

"Many newcomers to bird photography try to capture the whole scene before them; focus on individual flocks in a scene instead for a neater shot," advises Ben. "Otherwise the eye will be left to wander awkwardly around the frame, with no clear focal point to fix on to."

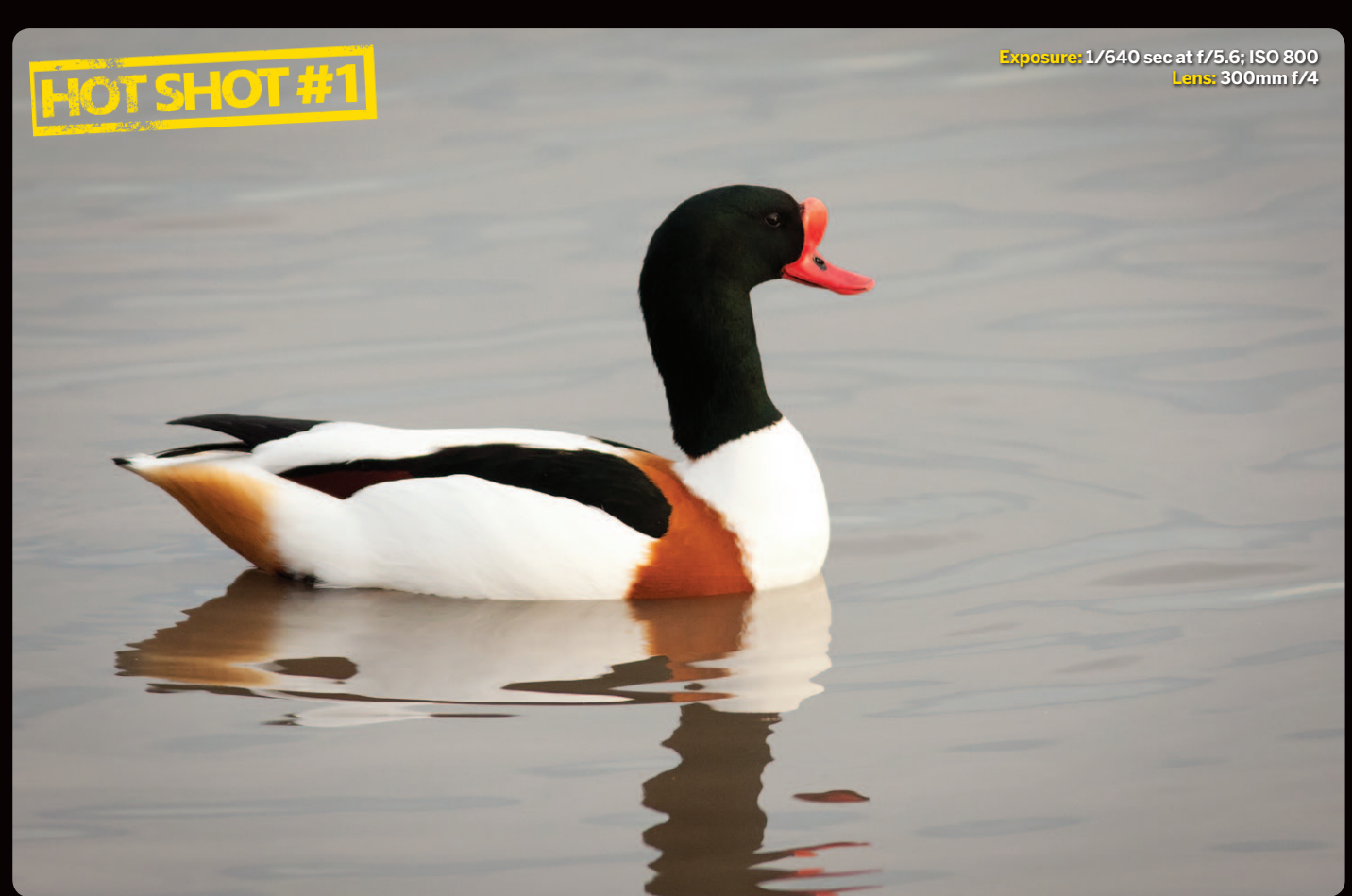


### ▼ Cavan's comment

"I bagged this shot from inside one of the big man-made hides at Slimbridge. I had to stand to shoot down from the opening, and from this angle I've managed to make the most of the shelduck's reflection. In Shutter Priority mode, I set a fast shutter speed of 1/640 sec and, on Ben's advice, set ISO to 800, obtaining a wide aperture of f/5.6 to blur the background water. There was soft, low morning light, diffused by clouds, so I've avoided harsh highlights on the plumage." ▶

### HOT SHOT #1

Exposure: 1/640 sec at f/5.6; ISO 800  
Lens: 300mm f/4



## Technique assessment

# Does Cavan have an eye for the birds?

After popping off a few test shots, Ben offered Cavan a couple of settings suggestions to help improve his images...

### Switch to Shutter Priority mode

"When photographing birds, your shutter speed selection is key, so I advised Cavan to break out of auto mode and to use Shutter Priority mode," says Ben. "In this



mode you set your shutter speed, and the camera automatically sets an aperture to produce a standard exposure. Start off at around 1/500 sec to freeze the birds in motion."

### Manual ISO

"Cavan had been relying on the auto ISO setting on his D-SLR, but this proved quite erratic and didn't always set the best ISO for the shot," says Ben. "I got him to manually set his ISO for each shot. Your settings will depend on the light levels, but for the cloudy conditions we were we shooting in, we regularly had our ISO at 800 to increase the sensor's sensitivity to light and ensure that we were able to capture a good exposure."





### CAVAN'S TIP

#### The crop factor...

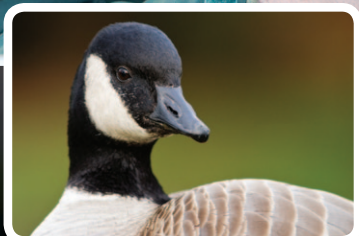
Most consumer-oriented D-SLRs have a smaller image sensor than so-called 'full-frame' sensors used in pro cameras (which have a sensor the same size as a frame of 35mm film), and this 'crop factor' has an effect on the focal length of your lenses. To work out the 'effective focal length' (EFL), you need to multiply the focal length by 1.5x (or 1.6x on Canon cameras) – which is a bonus for shooting wildlife when you need to get close. "My 450D's 1.6x crop sensor meant I could use a 400mm lens and get an EFL of 640mm," says Cavan.



### BEN'S TIP

#### Be aware of backgrounds

"I encouraged Cavan to try and get some really tightly composed portraits of the birds while wandering around Slimbridge," says Ben. "I always capture a variety of wider and tighter compositions on shoots. The tones and colours of backgrounds behind your bird's heads will make or break these shots, so reposition yourself until you have the best possible background."



### EXPERT INSIGHT

## Invest in good glass

Although spending over a grand on a lens (see Killer Kit of the Pros #1) may seem a lot, it's important to remember that your D-SLR is only as good as the lenses you use with it. "It doesn't matter if you have a 50-megapixel camera – if your lenses aren't the best quality, you won't be able to capture the best-quality images," says Ben. "Better lenses have great build quality, wider constant apertures (which enable faster shutter speeds for sharper shots), faster and more accurate autofocus systems, better image stabilisation, and manual focus override; they can also capture more realistic colours and tones." It's best to see lenses as an investment – and good lenses hold their prices well on the second-hand market.



### ► Cavan's comment

"It was fun and challenging photographing birds in the air," says Cavan. "With my camera set to AI Servo (Canon's continuous AF mode) and the drive mode set to continuous, and a big telephoto lens, I felt like a rear gunner firing at the moving targets! Ben suggested we reduce our shutter speeds to 1/400 sec to capture a little movement in the wings of the Bewick's swan. With ISO still at 800, this dropped the aperture to f/8, providing more depth of field and a better chance for a sharp shot of the entire bird in flight. I used +1 stop of exposure compensation to brighten up the white swan and light sky."



### BEN'S TIP

#### Bird behaviour

Study different birds, and watch their behaviour to catch an original shot that reveals the true character of your feathered subjects," says Ben. "I like to watch birds for a while before I start shooting to see if they're doing anything interesting – preening in the water, balancing on one leg, twisting their head into a unique pose, or perhaps singing – which will help to make a better shot."



Ben carries Canon EOS-1D Mk IV and 1D Mk II bodies, plus the following kit in his Lowepro Pro Trekker 300 AW backpack:

- Canon EF 17-40mm f/4L USM
- Canon EF 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6L IS USM
- Canon EF 500mm f/4L IS USM
- Canon EF 100mm f/2.8 USM Macro
- Canon EF 1.4x Extender

- Neoprene camouflage lens covers
- Gitzo 3541LS carbon fibre tripod
- Manfrotto ball-and-socket head
- Benbo Trekker two-leg monopod
- Canon angle-finder
- Stealth Gear bean bag



### Setting sunlight

## HOT SHOT #2



### Flat light



Exposure: 1/400 sec at f/8; ISO 800  
Lens: 300mm f/4

### KILLER KIT OF THE PROS #2

#### Tripod

Big telephoto lenses weigh a ton, and you'll often be sitting around waiting for the right moment to take a shot, so you'll want a good tripod to take the weight off your arms. "I use a sturdy Gitzo 3541LS carbon-fibre tripod and Manfrotto ball-and-socket head, which enables me to support and manoeuvre my big 500mm lens and still track birds in flight," says Ben.



### BEN'S TIP

#### From soft to sharp shots!

"Birds are fast-moving, twitchy creatures," says Ben, "so you'll need to use a fast shutter speed to freeze their movement and obtain sharp shots; aim for shutter speeds of between 1/500-1/1000 sec. You should also be aware that when you're shooting in Shutter Priority mode, if your shutter speed is slow, your aperture will become narrower (our shot was taken at 1/100 sec at f/11). This will increase the depth of field and keep more of your backdrops in focus – which means your birds won't stand out in the scene as well as they would if you were using a wider aperture, such as f/5.6." ►

### Sharp – 1/1000 sec



### Soft – 1/100 sec





## HOT SHOT #3

Exposure: 1/800 sec at f/4; ISO 800  
Lens: 300mm f/4



### ▲ Cavan's comment

"I nabbed this shot of a Canada goose while we were walking around the WWT centre. Ben suggested that I kneel to get down to the bird's eye-level, and I used a 300mm (EFL of 480mm) lens to fill the frame, while keeping some of the foreground foliage in the shot to give the impression of spying on the bird. I dropped the aperture down to f/4 which, combined with the long focal length, has really knocked the background foliage out of focus to help the goose stand out in the shot. I also used +2/3-stop exposure compensation to brighten up the photo. The little catch-light in the bird's eye really helps this shot!"

### KILLER KIT OF THE PROS #3

#### Teleconverters

Teleconverters (or extenders) can affordably increase the reach of telephoto prime and zoom lenses. "I use a 1.4x extender on my 500mm f/4 lens to transform it to 700mm – it loses a stop but I can still shoot at f/5.6, wide enough to blur backdrops," says Ben. The 2x extender doubles focal length, but you lose two stops. Note that extenders are only compatible with certain lenses.



### CAVAN'S TIP

#### High-speed continuous drive mode

"My old 450D was struggling to keep up with the fast-moving action so I borrowed a EOS 7D," says Cavan. The 450D only has a high-speed continuous drive speed of 3.5fps (frames per second), whereas the

meatier 7D pumps out 8fps, and the difference was dramatic. "My success rate improved dramatically," says Cavan. "The 7D's 19 autofocus points really helped,

I also preferred the weight of the 7D in my hands, and it felt better balanced with the telephoto lenses. I want one now!"



### KILLER KIT OF THE PROS #4

#### Double bean bag

Bean bags are great for supporting your big tele lenses if you want something smaller and more mobile than a tripod when you're out shooting birds. They're ideal for draping over fences, walls or car window sills, and for low-level shots when you need to shoot close to the ground and your tripod can't go low enough. "I use the excellent Stealth Gear double bean bag (£35, [www.warehouseexpress.com](http://www.warehouseexpress.com))," says Ben. "It has a handy strap for carrying – and I fill it with bird seed in case I need to feed the birds to get them to come closer for a shot!"



### EXPERT INSIGHT

#### Autofocus modes

D-SLRs have three main autofocus (AF) modes. On Canons these are One Shot AF, for shooting subjects that aren't moving; AI Servo AF, for tracking and shooting moving targets; and AI Focus AF, which aims to automatically switch between One Shot and AI Servo if your subjects can't make up their mind! "For photographing birds in flight I advised Cavan to switch to AI Servo AF to help him keep up with the birds," says Ben. In this mode the AF beep doesn't sound when you've achieved focus, so you need



to trust your camera. Use AI Servo with High Speed continuous drive mode (see left) and you'll get winning shots!"

### BEN'S TIP

#### Watch the birdie!

"When you're panning to shoot birds in the air, be aware of tall trees or distracting elements in front or behind the birds; these can confuse your autofocus, and you'll get sharp backgrounds and blurred birds," says Ben. "I also manually set the central AF point for flying bird shots; it's more sensitive and accurate. You can crop in Photoshop later to put the bird off-centre for a better composition." ▶





# SHOT OF THE DAY



## Cavan's comment

"Lying on my front to get down to water level, I'd been watching this snow goose wash and preen itself, and fired off a series of shots when it turned to look down my long lens. I could then pick the best image, and I felt the movement and position of the wings was the strongest in this shot. The 1/800 sec shutter speed was fast enough to capture the bird's head sharply, and to freeze the water splashes."



## Ben's verdict

"Cavan's got a winning action shot of a snow goose here. By getting down low, he's minimised empty foreground [1] and achieved a strong composition with the dark background of the riverbank [2], helping the bird stand out. He's done well to get a shot with the head still and sharp [3], and his fast shutter speed has frozen the bird mid-wash, while capturing the movement of the wings [4]." ■

Exposure: 1/800 sec at f/4; ISO 800  
Lens: 300mm f/4



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