

MACRO PHOTOGRAPHY for WILDLIFE

Locations

It is a good idea to join either Worcestershire or Warwickshire Wildlife Trusts. Membership of one entitles you to visit the other as well as other Trust regions. Both publish catalogues of their reserves, with maps and what you are likely to find. Note however that some sites have restricted access which must be respected.

Locally I would recommend:

- The fields between Solihull VIth Form College and Brueton Park. The second field on the left from the College car park has wild Snakeshead Fritillaries and further down, cowslips. There is a lovely show of summer flowers in the next field - unfortunately, not public property but still accessible. There is a range of butterflies and the park is one of the best sites for Orange Tips.
- Clowse Wood near Earlswood Lakes is very good for Fungi as is Hay Wood (at Chadwick End), especially near the car park.
- Snitterfield Bushes - just short of the village can be entered from either side of the road and offers something all year round.

Looking further afield remember that South and South-West facing slopes are richest. You might consider:

- Cotswolds limestone areas too difficult for tractor access – look for close contour lines on the OS map
- Also try commons; Cleeve Common near Prestbury and just North of Cheltenham is particularly good. There is a cul de sac leading into a track with limited parking that reaches close to the “three masts” marked on the OS map. A footpath crosses a little way short of the top and going right – away from the three masts - leads you towards a butterfly reserve with the widest range of species, it is good for flowers as well.
- The many dales in the White Peaks of Derbyshire and Staffordshire – my favourite is Lathkill Dale.
- Sand dunes where they are managed and not overrun are promising. Those on Holy Island in the North East are outstanding and those on the Gower Peninsula are equally good.
- Chalk runs across East Anglia through to South Devon with likely being on steep slopes or clearings surrounded by wood.
- My favourite county is Dorset, the Downs arising east from Studland Bay are all good, look as well at Iron and Stone age Forts. However you will need local knowledge since from a Natural History point of view sadly some have been neglected.
- Whilst limestone and chalk offer a greater range of flora and fauna, all wild areas offer something. Seaside rock can be alive with Thrift and Sea Campion in May and June, lichen is always colourful.
- At the same time of year, damp rocky areas with acid soil are habitats for insect eating Sundew, Bladderwort and Butterwort.

Practical points

Always inspect before you set up equipment. Try to photograph from the footpath or sheep trod where available. Some of the rarest plants are protected from rabbits etc, and thus may be difficult to photograph. Where they are not, be mindful that even the rarest plants can be numerous in the right conditions and be careful where you stand. “Gardening” should be kept to a minimum and make sure the surrounding vegetation that gave it protection is put back after you are finished.

Best conditions are a warm, still day. For flowers it is best to be slightly overcast since contrast is too high in sunshine until late afternoon. This also works well for butterflies, provided there is sufficient light, or you use flash. From about 4 pm butterflies “nectar” and settle nicely on flowers, especially the thistle family and bramble.

In general dragonflies are best found in late Summer. Some butterflies produce three broods. April on a warm day is good, May offers some of the specialised butterflies, a wider range appears at the end of June through August and early September.

Equipment

For flowers and fungi, you will need a good tripod, a small reflector, cable for the shutter and low power fill-in flash. A 100mm macro lens is best for most subjects, the experts prefer 300-500 mm lens to improve the background in flower photography but such lenses are difficult to use in the field with camera shake being one problem, and they are too long for butterflies. Also consider a wide angle lens (24mm or wider) for habitat shots since some flowers and fungi make excellent foreground subjects.

For the smaller butterflies you will probably need flash, though this may not be necessary with newer digital cameras coupled with a vibration-free lens and a higher ISO setting. Ring flash is no help

You will require a bracket to hold a low power flashlight on both sides of the camera, in all, two feet apart. Manfrotto make one – it is quite expensive - as are the cables that link to your camera. This set-up will minimize but not eradicate the problems mentioned above, it's also a pain to carry around.

Top tips

1. Use aperture priority on most occasions (f11- f22). Beyond that flare will degrade the image.
2. Make sure the image is square to the subject to conserve depth of field.
3. Expose for the brightest part of the subject, I still use centre- weighting, requiring -1 1/3 stops and sometimes more for high contrast subjects.
4. Check the histogram to confirm exposure. Getting the exposure right for a high contrast subject such as the Red Admiral often leaves the background under-exposed even without flash.
5. Some reflected light is nearly always necessary to lift the shaded areas of the subject. Fill-in flash may be necessary, but watch out for unwanted highlights.
6. When using a cable shield the viewer to prevent stray light spoiling the image.
7. Camera shake may be a problem especially with longer exposure and telescopic lenses. Mount the camera as close as possible to the hub of the tripod and it consider using mirror lock up.
8. Flower photography is dogged by movement caused by the wind. Take plenty of images and hope one comes out all right or try to use a portable windshield.
9. Background is important to show the habitat but often this is neighbouring grass and weed which we are trying to keep out of the picture.
10. Larger butterflies can be taken without flash if you have an image stabilizer. Square up to the subject and if the wings are open it too will align towards the sun. You are left with only a portion of the frame before you cast a shadow at which point it flies away.
11. I set the magnification appropriately, say 1/3, hold my breath and lower deliberately till it is in focus. Manual focussing gives more options on the point of focus which varies with the situation, i.e. set of the antennae, position of the legs.
12. Towards evening, all butterflies will roost with closed wings and you can use the tripod.
13. Using two TTL flashlights, on a bracket, one set to -1 stop to give more natural lighting, you can record the Hair Streaks – little more than 1/2" across and the Small Copper. The Common Blue will rest with open wings in dull light. Aperture should be f22 for the smallest ones.
14. Whether you use flash, focus manually or use autofocus, the critical matter is keeping square to the subject, otherwise wing tips will not be sharp.

Identification books

- Collins publish very good handbooks
 - Insects of Britain and Western Europe includes some spiders
 - Wild Flowers of Britain and Northern Europe
- The Hamlyn Guide by J A Thomas: Butterflies of the British Isles

- Pan Books by Roger Phillips: Mushrooms and other fungi of Great Britain and Europe. Note many fungi cannot be identified on appearance alone the habitat often gives a pointer to identification.