

Spring into action

With spring finally upon us, it's time to dust off the camera and get outdoors. Our experts share their top tips on shooting all manner of spring-related subjects

Flowers and foliage



Annette Lepple

Annette is an award-winning photographer and writer specialising in gardens and flowers. She has written two books and is a regular contributor for a number of magazines. To find out more, visit www.personal-eden.com.

I'VE ALWAYS been in love with nature and started photography in the early 1990s when I had my first garden in Ireland. It has opened up a whole new world to me. I'm a 'light junkie' and happiest when I'm out shooting in magical light. Light is so important and will make a picture shine like no other component. I don't want to present a scene or a flower as it is but how it feels to me, so a lot of my images are very emotional. This approach seems to work as a lot of them have won awards in contests such as International Garden Photographer of the Year (IGPOTY). It's important to keep exploring and reinventing yourself.

1 Magical light

I strongly believe that you can only create special images if you're passionate and prepared to make a real effort. The quality of light is as important as your subject. My favourite time is early morning because the light has a pure, innocent feel that cannot be beaten. This often means getting up in the middle of the night to be somewhere else in time for the shoot, but when it all falls into place it's one of the most rewarding things in the world. Of course evening light has its own qualities.

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2 Break the rules

I think a lot of rules are useless and only contribute to restricting imagination. If you've learned the famous photography rules, it's time you broke them to set your spirit free. Photography is a way of painting and it's up to you to fill the images with soul and make them tell a story. You can be as 'techy' as you like, but you'll only be able to touch others if you see with your heart. It's also by leaving your comfort zone that you will grow as a human and as a photographer.

3 Be creative

A great way to keep one's photography fresh is to work with creative or vintage lenses, which can be very challenging but a lot of fun once you get the hang of it. Or try making your own creative apertures – it's easy! Play around with different patterns and backgrounds to find out what works best for each subject. Or try your luck with intentional camera movement. It's much more satisfying to create special effects with your camera than with Photoshop.



4 Change your perspective

So many people just stand and take images without moving. We've got arms and legs, so keep moving – crouch low down, explore different positions and open yourself to fresh views and perspectives. The vantage point you choose has a big effect on the message or mood of an image. Shooting from above evokes different emotions to shooting from below. Getting rid of 'seeing conventions' will dramatically add to your photos.

6 Be observant

Pay attention to the background and surroundings of your subject and make sure you isolate it well, so that you don't end up with distractions. The closer the background is to the subject, the more it'll stand out in the picture, so to achieve a pleasing background choose a subject that is already isolated. Make sure that the image isn't too busy and keep things simple. Be respectful, don't pull up or trample on flowers, but removing twigs or a blade of grass is acceptable.



5 Bokehlicious

Something that is as important as special light is the bokeh. A great bokeh makes my heart sing! The kind of bokeh I'm looking for depends on the subject. Some look best with a subtle, creamy bokeh; others can do with something zingy like this vase with Cosmos. For a subtle, calm effect you have to make sure that the background isn't too close to your subject. Explore water droplets, leaf reflections and dappled light through foliage. It's a matter of experimenting to see what works best.

7 Slow photography

Good flower and nature photography can't be rushed. Take your time observing the environment and the light. I love using my prime and manual lenses because they slow me down, make me concentrate and focus. To be able to capture the dreaminess of a lot of subjects I usually lie on the ground and use a beanbag, but when they are higher up I use a tripod which not only assures accurate focus and composition, but also slows me down.



KIT LIST



▲ Beanbag

This is very handy for stabilising the camera when shooting on the ground, and being light it can easily be taken anywhere.



▲ Manual lenses

Lenses such as Helios or Lensbaby are challenging to handle but can be used to create painterly, dreamy images. Working with live view helps, as focusing is often tricky because of a shallow depth of field.



▲ Telephoto macro lens

A versatile lens that can be used for close-up work as well as garden scenes and landscapes is ideal. A maximum aperture of at least f/2.8 is a must and is a great help in low-light conditions.

Insects



Andrew McCarthy

Andrew is a photographer and professional ecologist whose awards include a BWPA 'Hidden Britain' category win in 2018. Andrew is also an Olympus Mentor. See more of his work at www.andrewmccarthyphotography.com.

I HAVE been fascinated by insects ever since I was a young boy and, in recent years, have spent many hours photographing them. In addition to the simple pleasure of creating great images of these intricate and often very beautiful creatures, photography can help highlight the environmental challenges insects face and can raise awareness of how important they are to human well-being. Insects can be challenging subjects to photograph at times though as they are often small and well camouflaged, but there are a number of simple techniques you can follow to help improve the quality of your work.



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8 Plan for success

Plan trips and become familiar with sites that work at different times of the year and for different types of species. Insect habitats include wetland, woodland edge and scrub mosaics with

bare ground. Birch and willow often support larvae whose presence is given away by partially eaten leaves. Scan vegetation slowly for resting insects and view the same patch from different angles to double check.



9 Stay local

Staying local means you can make the most of good weather. Become familiar with local nature reserves and research your target species beforehand to prevent wasting time searching unproductive habitats when

conditions are ideal for photography. Gardens make excellent photographic studios: establish nectar-rich plant species, dig ponds, make habitat piles and leave rough unmanaged corners – all are great habitats for insects. Invest in a moth trap!

10 Set the alarm clock

Insects are difficult to approach in hot weather so shoot during the cooler, early part of the season and get up early in high summer to find dew-covered specimens and adults emerging from their larval cases. Searching for butterflies that have settled to roost before sunset can save time the following morning. Use low backlight during the 'golden hour' light to reveal wing-and-body translucence.



11 Watch the weather forecast

Keep a close eye on weather forecasts and look for high cloud with light or no wind. The lighting in such conditions reveals surface detail and texture well, and you will also be able to use faster shutter speeds and smaller apertures for greater depth of field. If the sun comes out and you need fill-in flash keep it subtle; use low manual power as auto pre-flash can disturb wary insects.

12 Always aim for critical sharpness

Keep shutter speeds high (around 1/250sec) to ensure pin-sharp shots. Aim for reasonably small apertures – f/8 is a good starting point on a full-frame camera – but not so small that diffraction softening becomes a problem. Wind can cause subject movement, in which case increase ISO, use a wider aperture, or stabilise vegetation by using clamps on a small second tripod or ground spike. Alternatively get creative and shoot with a shallow depth of field through vegetation to create out-of-focus effects.

14 Try focus stacking

If the wind is light try focus stacking if your subject remains still. Some cameras have automated stacking functions that make this type of work easy from a tripod; alternatively shoot overlapping shots by incrementally rotating the lens barrel by hand. Stacking allows wider apertures, which can result in cleaner backgrounds. Process images with specialist software such as Helicon Focus and Zerene Stacker; both are intuitive to use.



13 Aim for clean and simple compositions

Shoot from a low viewpoint and frame your subject against a clean background wherever possible. If you need to move vegetation out of the way do it carefully and reposition plants afterwards so the insect remains hidden. As a general rule, align your sensor with the plane of your subject to get as much of it in focus as possible. A tripod enables precise adjustments; focus manually, use depth-of-field preview or use live view for critical focus.

KIT LIST

Macro lens

A macro lens with a long focal length of around 150mm or a close-focus telephoto zoom such as the Canon EF 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6L IS II USM or Olympus M.Zuiko Digital ED 40-150 f/2.8 will allow you stay further back and minimise disturbance.



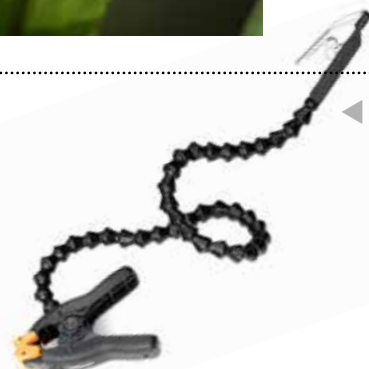
Tripod and geared head

A good tripod with a specialist macro arm and good quality head is essential. I use a ball head but many macro photographers swear by the fine adjustments offered by a geared head.



Stabilisers

Wimberley Plamps are invaluable, but you will need a separate ground spike or small second tripod to attach them to. Alternatively make stabilisers from knitting needles, gaffer tape and clothes pegs.



Landscapes



Paul Mitchell

Paul specialises in landscape and woodland photography and is a Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society. His award-winning images have featured in many publications and books. Visit www.paulmitchellphotography.co.uk.

SPRING officially starts in mid-March and ends in mid-June. This time period can encompass the last throws of winter to blazing summer days, thus giving the photographer some of the most diverse photographic opportunities of the year. This change is most notable in the open landscape, woodlands and coastal margins. Weather conditions in spring can also be very unpredictable and one can often experience four seasons in one day. As most landscape photographers can testify, the longer days also mark the return of that dreaded early morning alarm call.

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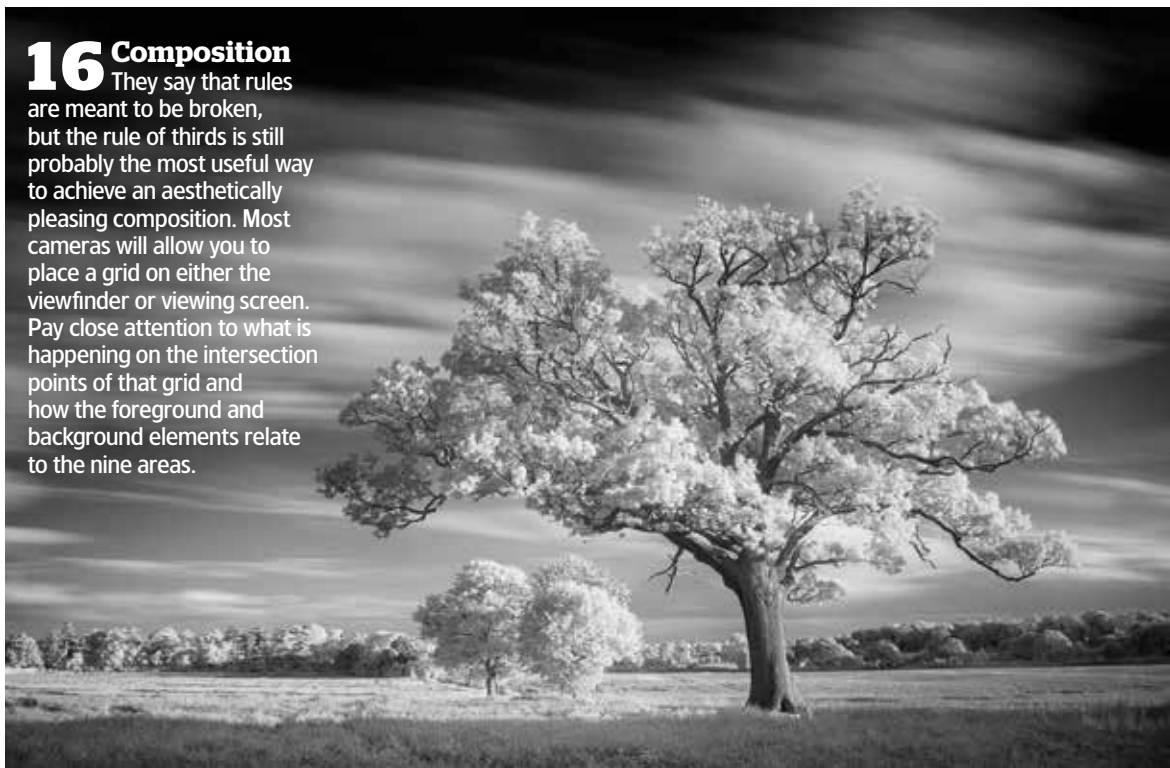


15 White balance

I always try to encourage clients to move away from using auto white balance as it is invariably inconsistent and, in the majority of cases, will add an unappealing blue cast. I tend to find that the 'daylight' or 'cloudy' setting is better suited for landscapes. Of course if you are shooting raw, you always have the option to change it post-capture.

16 Composition

They say that rules are meant to be broken, but the rule of thirds is still probably the most useful way to achieve an aesthetically pleasing composition. Most cameras will allow you to place a grid on either the viewfinder or viewing screen. Pay close attention to what is happening on the intersection points of that grid and how the foreground and background elements relate to the nine areas.



17 Stay local

Very often, people travel far and wide for images but forget what possibilities exist on their own doorstep. Study OS maps of your local area and make note of local woodlands, heathlands and public footpaths running through open countryside. Having somewhere local also gives you the advantage of reacting quickly to the changing weather conditions and certain times of the day.

18 Weather watching

Become an avid weather watcher and try to predict what the conditions are likely to be. A passing weather front could herald a good sunrise or sunset, for example. High pressure, clearing skies and light winds could be a recipe for mist or fog. The weather can be unpredictable, which is why I refer to a selection of weather apps and combine the relevant information.

19 Aspect ratios

Try and break away from the usual 2:3 aspect ratio. I find that 2:3 works well for straight landscape images but don't discount 16:9 for a slightly wider, panoramic feel. I sometimes use a Micro Four Thirds camera, which has a 4:3 ratio, which is perfect for portrait-oriented landscapes. The square or 1:1 ratio is ideal for bold graphic images that include centrally placed elements.



20 Be creative with depth of field

Add perceived depth to your images by using a wide aperture. This technique works particularly well in woodlands, where you can isolate an individual tree or branch by having a soft background. I often make one image at f/11 and another at f/2.8 and decide which I prefer later.

KIT LIST

Geared head

Geared heads allow for precise, incremental, three-way movements which allow me to fine-tune a composition without having the additional task of tightening the head.



L bracket

I've only had one for a short while but using it has been a revelation. It enables you to quickly swap between landscape and portrait mode and keep the centre of gravity central to the tripod, essential when using a heavy lens.



Viewing frame

Walking around with a simple viewing frame (can easily be made from black card) can be a quick and easy way to determine a potential composition without unpacking your full kit.



21 Choice of focal length

Most people's initial response to landscapes is to use a wideangle lens as this pretty much replicates what they see. This can be an advantage when at the coast or in the open countryside. Using a longer focal length can help isolate parts of the landscape, especially if there are distractions such as over-bright areas. They can also compress elements within a scene, creating patterns and rhythm.





Wildlife



Mark Sisson

Mark has been a full-time wildlife photographer for over 15 years. He has had several books published. He also co-owns/runs the largest UK wildlife photography holiday business, Natures Images. See www.natures-images.co.uk.

BEING A January baby I do love winter, but spring as a season offers so much in terms of wildlife photography, and in particular the opportunity to seek out and begin potential projects that might run for many weeks: the best way to work, capture different images and develop a serious portfolio. It is that time of the year when courtship and the breeding seasons begin and wildlife consequently settles into more predictable behaviour – and where it can be found, field craft, observation, an understanding of the law, patience and hopefully great images are the order of the day (or should I say, season).

22 Wherever you are, get low

Unless you are working from a considerable distance away and the angle is in your favour, all wildlife images are best taken at the same height as your subject: nothing is more effective than being at eye level, and conversely nothing looks less so than an image taken from a steep downwards angle. For birds on the water, a lower level makes the water more mirror-like in terms of reflections, and on land it creates the opportunity for some 'mush' at the bottom of the shot (out-of-focus foreground) which is creative, too.

21 Spend time watching behaviour

This is key to wildlife photography as more time spent watching leads to a better understanding of behaviour and better anticipation – responding to what's happening is often too late if the action is momentary in the first place.

Only by watching a pair of great crested grebes for several spring mornings did I eventually spot where they decided to nest, resulting in a six-week vigil from then on as that year it was a photographable location. It hasn't been for nearly 10 years since, so it was well-rewarded observational time.



23 Get up early

Not only is this the best time of the day as far as light is concerned, but it is also the time when wildlife is at its most active and predictable. Brown hares for instance are at their busiest around dawn before looking to settle in their form for the majority of the day. When crops are short they are at their most visible, and time spent watching their movements will reveal favourite paths from fields they are feeding in, creating the opportunity to get in place and well-hidden, waiting in anticipation.

24 Get to know the law

As we move into breeding season for birds or reptiles like snakes that start to emerge from their winter quarters, then it's important to understand just what regulations are in place to protect them. There is a hard and fast rule which should be applied at all times: the welfare of the subject is always more important than the photograph. The easiest place to check up on the rules is the RPS's *The Nature Photographers' Code of Practice*, which is available on the RPS website.



25 Always think composition while shooting

There is nothing hard and fast here but it pays to keep the rule of thirds in mind when it comes to composition, especially making sure that your subject is looking into the resultant space. This means getting comfortable with moving your focal point around as you shoot. But once you start doing this routinely rather than relying on cropping for composition, you will start to see pictures so much better and also learn to anticipate how your subject is going to move and behave.

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27 Be an early visitor to seabird colonies

We have fabulous seabird colonies in the UK many of which are accessible with a bit of planning. While everyone always wants the classic shot of a Puffin with sand eels that comes at the height of summer when the chicks have been born, there is potentially more variety of behavioural images (and a lot fewer visitors) at the beginning of the season as birds return to re-establish relationships, tidy up burrows and rebuild nests. It's my personal favourite time to be in this environment.

26 Give real consideration to your backgrounds

One of the benefits of long lenses is that they compress perspective, and if the background behind your subject is a reasonable distance away they will render it clean and smooth; as you position yourself to shoot, look behind your subject and see how it is working as the canvas. Slight positional movements can change the colour (green bushes or brown trees), totally changing the mood of the image. Don't be afraid of texture as it can add context, but make sure it works around your subject and doesn't cut through it in a distracting manner.

KIT LIST

Right-angle viewfinder ▼

This helps significantly when you are able to get your camera and long lens close to the ground and even more so when shooting low over the water. It takes a bit of getting used to, so practise at home first.



Binoculars ▼

This might seem like an odd piece of kit for photography, but given the importance of observation at this time of the year, a good pair will allow you to do so from a distance causing less disturbance to the wildlife.



Rain cover ▼

April showers are rightly renowned, so a good cover for your camera and lens is essential. I use a LensCoat RainCoat Pro and it provides excellent protection. Hence, this is not something to skimp on for obvious reasons.

