

Robert Canis

All images: © Robert Canis



Robert Canis Profile

- After studying photography at Paddington College, London, Robert worked as an assistant photographer and technician before stepping out on his own, aged 22.
- Since then he has established himself as one of the UK's leading landscape and wildlife photographers with a primary focus on his home patch in north Kent.
- In 2014, Robert was awarded the Royal Photographic Society's Gold Medal. Other honours include awards in the International Garden Photographer of the Year, Bird Photographer of the Year and British Wildlife Photography Awards.
- His work has been widely published in British and European photo titles as well as *BBC Wildlife*, *Birdwatch* and *Country Walking* magazines.
- Every year, Robert leads photo workshops across the UK, as well as tours to Norway, Finland, The Faroe Islands and Prague.

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According to Robert Canis, when it comes to shooting landscapes and wildlife there is no place like home. While also a seasoned photographer of northern Europe's natural wonders, he tells Keith Wilson why he prefers photographing the marshes and woodlands close to where he lives in north Kent...

It's mid-winter and there is snow on the ground in north Kent. Deep and crisp and even. More importantly, it's still cold outside, below zero in fact, and the skies are clear and blue.

For Robert Canis, these are perfect conditions to photograph widgeon, Brent geese and other wildfowl wintering over the Elmley Marshes on the Isle of Sheppey, a short drive from his home. Robert's enthusiasm for this low-lying terrain has not waned since the 1980s when he began birdwatching and started taking pictures of a landscape that entranced Charles Dickens in his classic *Great Expectations*.

"I was over on the marshes early this morning and it was absolutely beautiful," he says. "It was pretty cold because it lies right on a tidal channel called The Swale and the wind was quite breezy, but I think there are few more evocative sights than geese flying over a marsh at dawn in winter."

Of course, Robert has the pictures to prove it. Also, having lived and worked here for over 30 years, he has an extensive knowledge of the wildlife to be found, and the subtle variances in lighting brought by the seasonal changes to these sodden lands and mudflats. But weather conditions like today aren't as

common as they used to be, so we bring forward our interview by a couple of hours to give Robert time to return to Elmley to capture the last light of the day skimming over the marsh's frost-bitten grass and reeds...

What's the main attraction now?

There are lots of waterfowl because the northerly winds have pushed them all down. It's a great place for Brent geese, there are many thousands of them and the tide is just right now because they are feeding on the eelgrass and then they're coming into land to feed on the fields.

Do you think conditions like this – sub-zero, heavy frosts and snow – are becoming rarer?

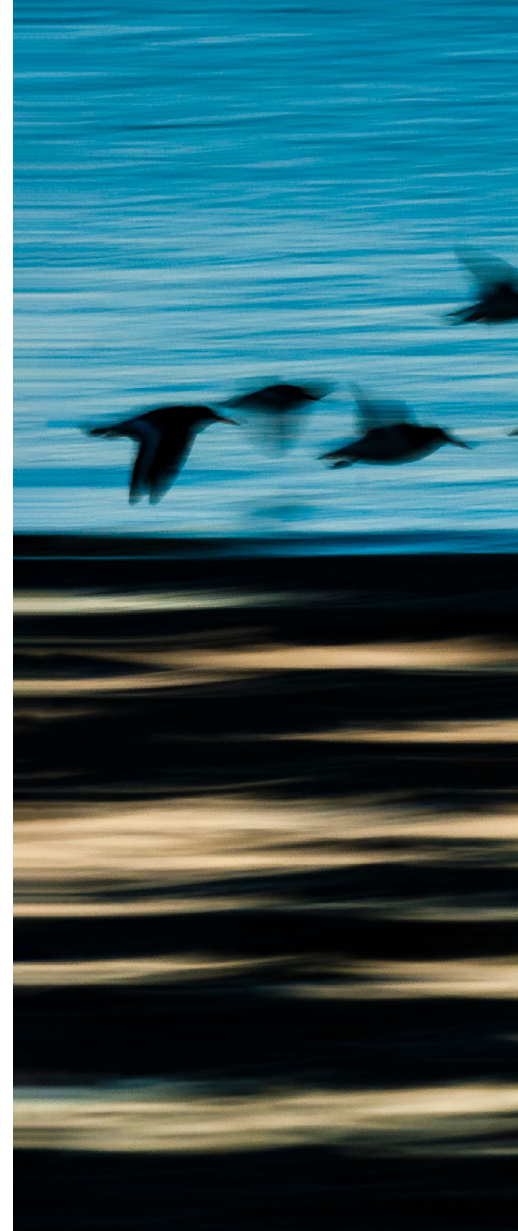
Absolutely. I've only got to look back at my archives. I have been photographing the Elmley National Nature Reserve since my 20s and rime frost and freezing conditions were far more commonplace than they are now. I'm just happy that I have dedicated so much of my time to that area of marsh and photographed it when conditions like these are so few and



There a few more evocative sights than geese flying over a marsh at dawn in winter

Previous page:
The Northern Lights over Muonio in Finnish Lapland – captured during one of Robert's first tours.

Below: Robert used ICM and multiple exposures to shoot Oare Marshes.



far between these days. Back then I took every opportunity I could to shoot the landscape and the birds.

I believe that your very first photographic experience was as a young lad on the marshes.

It was, yes. I have written proof because at the time I had a copy of the *Reader's Digest Book of British Birds*, with the picture of the tawny owl on the front. I was 10 and I was introduced by my mother to a local natural history photographer and, up until his passing in the early 2004, he was my mentor. He had an encyclopaedic, Packhamesque and Bill Oddie-like knowledge of birds.

What was his name?

Ted Coleman. He was unparalleled in terms of his knowledge and he instilled in me an ethic of no picture is worth the wellbeing of the subject. He introduced me to Elmley Marshes. He knew the owners and he took me over there birdwatching.



I wrote down all the species I identified in the back of that book, which I still have. Sadly, he passed away when he was 73. He died on the marshes, but it was a place he loved, so I guess if there was anywhere that he wanted to go it would be there.

Are the marshes also a great location for photographing landscapes as well as birds?

Completely. You could almost take out the birds and you would still have this amazing place where you can decompress, particularly in the

Above: A parcel of oystercatchers, over Shellness, Isle of Sheppey, shot with a slow shutter speed and panning.

south-east. Although not strictly speaking wilderness, it's as close as we're going to get in the south-east when you've got an area which is more than 3000 acres. I understand that it's the largest area of coastal grazing marsh in the south of →



NIGHT FLOWERS

THERE IS MUCH MORE TO LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY THAN CAPTURING WIDE-ANGLE VISTAS, AS ROBERT DISCOVERED WHILE EXPLORING A LOCAL WOODLAND AT TWILIGHT...

Looking at your photos of woodland flowers at night, I'd still call them landscapes, but they're clearly not done with a wide-angle?

True. I get bored quickly so I undertake projects. It gives me a focus and a direction and a motivation. I think a body of work is much more interesting for the viewer and for the photographer than random pictures. The twilight project came about because I wasn't seeing many images of flowers taken at that time of day. Instead, most are taken at a

time to show off the colour. I just happened upon the technique one evening when it got too dark for me to photograph it any other way. It took me a couple of years to do that project, I started from scratch.

Which lenses did you use?

They were all shot with either the 200mm manual focus macro lens or the 105mm macro lens, which I've only just put into retirement! I've had that since I was 19 or 20. Both are very old Nikon lenses.



England, and you have this 360-degree panorama of these enormous skies and mudflats.

It sounds captivating.

Just a couple of months ago, I was speaking to Philip Merricks, who owns the reserve and he referred to a survey that was carried out of several hundred birdwatchers as to their lasting memory once they leave the marshes. Hardly any of them mentioned the birds, it was all about the landscape.

It's a landscape that Dickens wrote about, so it has historic and romantic appeal as well?

Yes, absolutely, and it's hard not to become nostalgic here in Kent. Elmley has always been a personal project, along with the whole of the north Kent marshes. Even the country lanes here are quintessentially English because you have these little cottages and these lanes where the hedgerows and the trees arch over.

Is this a favourite time of year for your photography?

Yeah, it means I don't have to get up so early, I'm not 20 anymore! In the winter, I love walking along these country lanes where the trees are in their skeletal forms and you're hearing the rooks call and it's a crisp, cold night and you can even hear the church bells chime. In my experience of travelling around Europe there's nowhere like it. If I was to choose two times of the year, it would be winter and May, that period when the days are lengthening and where there are lots of flowers and birds and insects and you get these lovely mists.

What other types of birdlife do you often get to see there?

The Isle of Sheppey has got to be one of the best places in the UK for raptors. On a winter afternoon, you can see hen harrier, merlin, common buzzard, short-eared owl, barn owl and peregrine.

You also spend a lot of winters photographing in Finland, the Faroes, Norway. What is it about those places that attracts you?

Finland really started it for me. I can trace it all the way back to when I studied at Paddington College in London for a couple of years when



I'm never happier than when confronted with as few elements in the landscape as possible

I was reading an article by Hannu Hautala, the Finnish nature photographer. Here was somewhere within Europe that you could get amazing pictures of bears and whooper swans and wolverine. It had never previously occurred to me that there was a country within Europe that had this plethora of wildlife and it was real wilderness.

Yes, a lot of wilderness...

You have all this wildlife in Finland with good populations of bear and wolverine and lynx, which they don't necessarily have in other Nordic countries. Compared to Norway, it is a very understated country; Norway has its fjords and huge mountains, whereas Finland has this rolling fell-like landscape with remote peat bogs.

What about the Arctic light?

There's something very special about the light in the north, in the winters particularly. I love having this blank canvas to work with in snowy conditions where you can pick out these little motifs and these brush

strokes in the landscape. I find that really appealing. I'm never happier than when I'm confronted with as few elements in the landscape as possible. Hannu Hautala was the first to do that. While everybody else was obsessed with shooting close-up and everything big in the frame, there was this chap in Finland in the '70s and '80s photographing great tits, tiny in the frame amongst a forest of birch trees. It sent a powerful message to me.

It is a minimalist approach, isn't it, seeing beauty in one small detail?

Yeah, completely. There were a few photographers before him that also had this artist's eye, and then following him were Jim Brandenburg and Frans Lanting, but Hautala was one of the first.

What lenses would I find in your camera bag?

In the camera bag, if I'm not doing workshops, I tend to use my old prime lenses: a 20mm, 24mm, 28mm and a 50mm. I love the mechanics of it. I also carry a macro lens, fisheye, 14mm, 70-200mm and 200-400mm.

The mechanics... but is it also because you prefer the compositional restraints of the single focal length?

Two reasons. Firstly, when used wide open, primes are pretty much unparalleled quality-wise. They tend

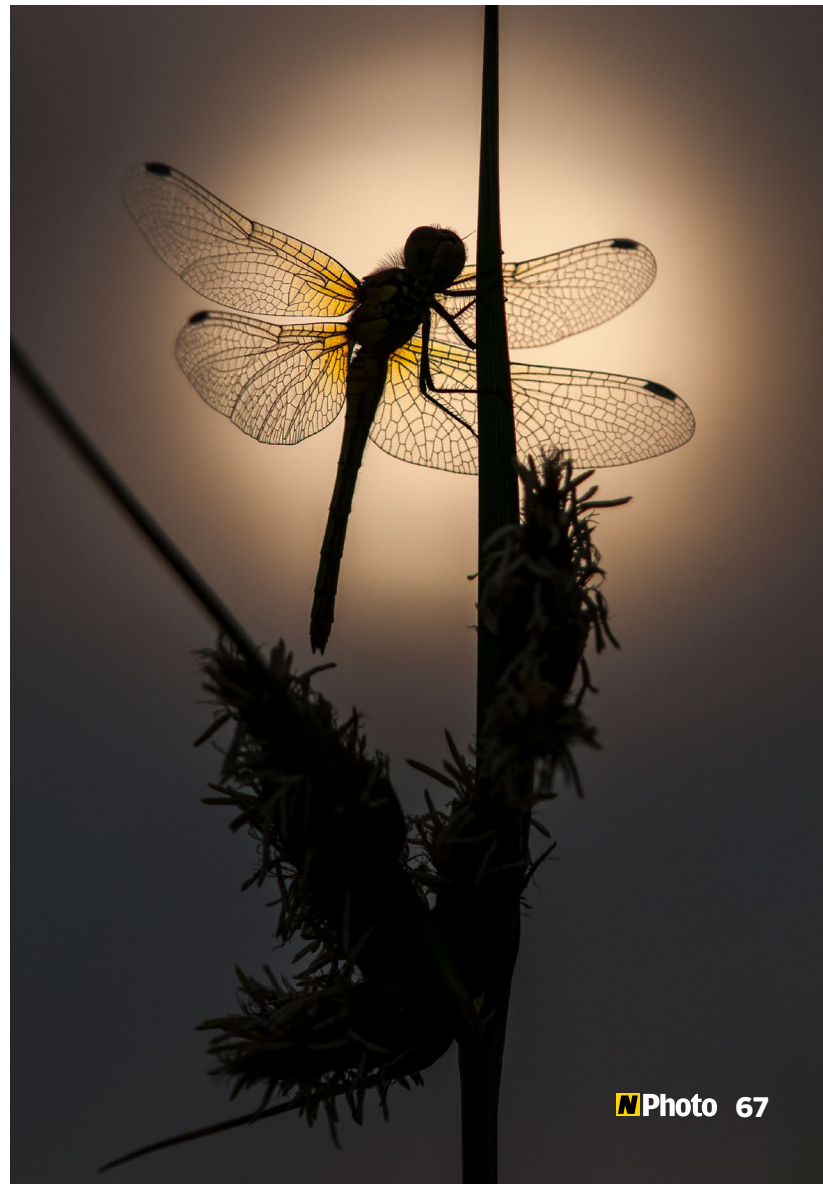
Above right: White-tailed eagles fighting in Bialowieza in northern Poland.

Far right: Still conditions are vital for photographing invertebrates on the Isle of Sheppey.

Right: Frozen reed mace at Elmley, part of the Isle of Sheppey.

Below: A storm is clearing over Elmley.







Above: After weeks of preparation, Robert finally came face to face with this red fox.

to focus much closer, so you can get these beautiful wide-angle landscape images but with differential focus running through the frame. Also, you get these nice hyperfocal distance scales marked on the lens, so you can focus blind. I just love the quality of these old lenses as well. They may not be as sharp or have the same edge-to-edge definition, but they have this very soft, natural vignette, which you wouldn't know was there, and it draws your eye into the frame, so I rarely try to correct it in post.

Good point...

But when I'm doing workshops, I tend to use the zoom because your time is more restricted and I don't want to lose time changing lenses when my attention should be on assisting the clients, so I reserve primes for my own work.

What camera are you shooting with now? Have you gone mirrorless?

The D850. I haven't gone mirrorless yet. I look at the Z 9 and the Z 7, and I think: "I'm a poor old nature photographer, I just haven't got the funds!" I've spent years building up all this gear and then mirrorless comes along and I've got to sell it all!

But not quite yet...

I'm using a D850, which is probably the best camera Nikon has ever made. It's just beautiful. Before that, I had the D810 and that was okay, but it wasn't really a wildlife photographer's camera, which was brought home to me while photographing black grouse displaying in Finland. Oh my god, I wanted to throw the damned thing in the snow! It was slow and it was constantly buffering. The following year I took a D850 with an XQD card and it was bang, bang, bang, no problems keeping up with it.

Have you tried using any of Nikon's mirrorless cameras yet?

I have used a mirrorless from time to time but I still like that what you see through a DSLR is what you see in reality. You don't get this change of viewfinder display as you alter your

exposure, which you do with mirrorless cameras. So, if I wanted to deliberately overexpose by two stops, as I have done with some high-key images, well you can't then see through a mirrorless camera because the viewfinder goes with how you're exposing for the scene, whereas with a DSLR it just remains the same because it's simply the settings that are changing. On the other hand, as far as wildlife photography is concerned, I think the DSLR is dead.

Why's that?

If nothing else, it's the noise of the damned things. Again, this was brought home to me whilst photographing grouse. Next to me I had someone using the Z 6, completely silent, and there was me with my Gatling gun going off in the hide – bang, bang, bang. The grouse would stop, look at me, and all the while the woman next to me was merrily photographing away, silent.

You're right, the silence is a winner for wildlife photography.

Completely. I think if you're working primarily on landscapes and flowers then there's probably no need to change over. I've only ever changed



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camera equipment when I've felt that it was absolutely necessary.

You had a mentor, but who else has inspired your photography?

Besides the nature photographers I've mentioned, Josef Sudek is also a very inspirational photographer to me. You can see his work resonating through so many photographers beyond him, and yet I was amazed recently when there was a discussion on Twitter about photographers people look up to, and nobody mentioned Sudek or Koudelka, another Czech photographer, or Fay Godwin, who is probably the greatest landscape photographer Britain has ever produced. I adore her work.

Why is that?

I guess because a lot of it was done in Kent and Sussex. She had this amazing artist's eye and way of interpreting. I know one of her projects for Natural England was to photograph Reculver, and rather than coming back with a pretty picture, she produced a photograph of caravans with washing strung up between them and Reculver Towers in the distance! She was vilified for that picture but what a genius approach to popular tourist resort.

So is it all about having a different perspective?

* **LIKES & FALSE IMPRESSIONS**

LIKE MANY PHOTOGRAPHERS, ROBERT USES INSTAGRAM AND OTHER SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS, BUT NOT WITHOUT RESERVATIONS...

What do you think of the role of social media in photography these days?

I have this love/hate relationship with it. I post images on it because I probably wouldn't be noticed by people like yourself if I didn't have some sort of social media presence, but also because it shows the beauty of my immediate area, which I hope others might take something from.

It's become an essential means of marketing...

It does have a big influence on wildlife and landscape photographers in that it's become more about likes. Social media plays a part in

the type of imagery that's reproduced. On YouTube, there's a great documentary about Fay Godwin when she's speaking about postcards and how they give a false impression of the British countryside and, after looking at them for a while, she said it's a bit like having too much cream! I get that when I look at some social media sites or a photographer's website and it's filled with nothing but sunrises and sunsets. It's a false impression of the planet in which we live. When a photograph has soul, when it resonates with people, where they feel as though they are there, that I hope is ultimately what most photographers are after.

Yes, with nature photography you have got to show either a species in depth or use a technique that's never been done before. It's getting harder; you only have to see the standard of the nature photography competitions to see that the bar is so high now. I've never been any good at producing commercially saleable images. Since I was a teenager, I was only ever interested in photographing those subjects that I was comfortable with doing.

Below: Robert has been watching a badger sett near his home for close to 40 years.

Next Month
Hermelino 'Kino' Aquino, fashion photographer

so I still haven't got a picture of a kingfisher or a very good picture of a tawny owl, or tigers, or any of those things.

Does that matter to you?

It doesn't matter. Having your subject close to home is so beneficial, both in terms of acquiring this encyclopaedic knowledge of the species and the seasons, but also being able to return time and time again when the weather is right. I mean, having this renowned reserve for which they have given me unrestricted access the past 30 years, for that alone I can never thank them enough.

It definitely sounds like your favourite place to shoot?

I can't possibly imagine how your favourite place could be the other side of the country – or another country entirely! If you want to produce a truly cohesive body of work and one that will hopefully stand the test of time, you can't do that if you just dip in and out of a place. I love going to Finland and Norway and all these amazing places, and I'm grateful that I'm able to do it, but nothing compares to sitting in my local woodland and waiting for a badger's head to pop out of a hole, or being out this morning surrounded by 10,000 wigeon over the marsh. It's who I am, it's a part of me. It's in the blood. **N**

