

Shetland is one of the wildest of the BBC's *Wild Isles*, and **Richard Shucksmith** was the photographer who got the call to help with the shoot. So how does he film orcas hunting seals or gannets diving for fish, when he's not hiding camera traps from Historic Scotland? Keith Wilson finds out...





# Richard Shucksmith



## Richard Shucksmith Profile

- Born and raised in Lincolnshire, Richard was working as a bricklayer when one day he packed up his tools at the end of a job and vowed never to return.
- A keen fisherman and obsessed with aquatic habitats, he went to Brooksby College in Leicestershire where he studied fisheries.
- Richard went to university in his late 20s, studying marine biology at the School of Ocean Sciences at the University of Wales, Bangor.
- While completing his PhD in marine ecology at the Scottish Association of Marine Science, he spent much of his spare time scuba diving and tracking otters in Mull.
- In 2011, Richard was the overall winner in the British Wildlife Photography Awards. His images have also been awarded in the Scottish Nature Photography Awards, Ocean Arts Photo and the Underwater Photographer of the Year competitions.

[www.shetlandphototours.co.uk](http://www.shetlandphototours.co.uk)



**I**t had barely been three days since the TV screening of the first episode of the BBC's *Wild Isles* when Richard Shucksmith was inundated with phone calls, text messages and a steady stream of emails. Trying to suppress a smile across his weather-beaten face, the Shetland-based wildlife photographer and filmmaker says in his understated way: "Yes, it has been a little bit hectic."

Frankly, this shouldn't be a surprise given that it was Richard and his colleague, Nick McCaffrey, who shot much of the astonishing footage showing a pod of orcas hunting seals in the waters off the Shetland Isles while working with the crew from Silverback Films.

"I loved working with Silverback," he says. "Some of the cameramen they've got are among the nicest people I've worked with. They're true naturalists, so into wildlife and what they're doing, very knowledgeable and fun to work with."

And yet, despite working on this assignment in five-week blocks for nearly three years, Richard's first chance to see the final cut of his edited footage was as one the millions of other viewers who tuned into BBC 1 at 9pm on that Sunday evening in March to watch Sir David Attenborough's flagship new series.

## What was it like watching it on TV along with the rest of the nation?

It's interesting because you go home at night and look through the day's footage and you know when the shots have been nailed, but there's loads of shots that don't make the cut, which are just as good but they don't fit the storyline. You're never 100 percent sure what the final edit will be like, so it's nice to see the whole thing play out. You might see part edits but I never, ever see the final edit because I'm not in Bristol to see how they've pulled it together.

## Is this a highlight of your life as a marine photographer?

In a way, yes, because Sir David Attenborough's narrating it and that will never happen to me again. I'll probably never get that opportunity again to make a programme where Sir David Attenborough is narrating.

## How long is it from the first brief to when you can say it's in the can?

It all starts with everyone getting in touch and you end up having all these meetings, leading up to



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**Previous page:** A pod of orcas surfaces off the coastal black cliffs of Shetland. A shutter speed of 1/8000 sec has frozen the spray from a whale's blowhole.

**Below:** Orcas surfacing and tail fluking off the Shetland coast, shot from a boat with a Nikon 200-400mm zoom.

**Right:** A gannet about to swallow a mackerel as it plunges into the cold water of the North Sea.



whether you do the shoot or not by playing out all the scenarios of whether it's doable. Anything with boat work is costly and if you factor in any underwater stuff it becomes an even bigger cost. So, there's a lot of chat before it even starts and about picking the best dates. It can be a year or a year and a half from when you start talking to when the shoot even gets going.

## How long were you shooting for?

We did 10 weeks on the boat in the end. We did five weeks the first year, which was purely orca. The first shoot was crazy, it was really difficult. Literally, the guys from Silverback were coming on the ferry with the boat, all the Cineflex camera gear, while me and my colleague, Nick McCaffrey, were out with the orca pod filming them! There was lots of messaging going on and it







## \* Z 9 FILMING ADVANTAGE

**RICHARD MOSTLY SHOOTS WITH A D4 BUT THE Z 9 IS LIKELY TO BE HIS NEXT CAMERA BECAUSE OF A VERY CLEAR DIFFERENCE IT PROVIDES FOR HIS FILMING...**

### Have you tried the mirrorless cameras?

Yeah, I have a Z 6 and I'm contemplating going down the Z 9 route. It ticks a few boxes because it does ProRes RAW, so I could take that underwater in the housing and film with it and the footage would be acceptable to a lot of big production companies. I know that Nikon, Canon and Sony all have their own Codex related to video, but if they go down the ProRes RAW route, it is more amenable for a lot of production companies because it's like a negative, a bit like shooting in Raw. It is amazing the colour correction that you can achieve with ProRes RAW in a video editing app such as Adobe Premiere.

got to that evening and we left the orca at this certain spot for Nick to pick up again at first light. I said: "I'll meet the guys off the ferry in the morning to get all the gear sorted and set up on the boat and then we'll meet up with you and we'll be straight onto orca."

### But it didn't quite go to plan?

Well, at five o'clock in the morning, Nick's on the orca already and he's filming them, getting some amazing drone footage, and we're both thinking, 'This is great, this is going to work, he's on it!'

### Was this your first time or had you photographed orcas before?

Yeah, quite a bit. The very first drone footage of orcas in Shetland was shot by myself and Fergus Gill, a long lens guy, back in 2016. Drones were just starting to become popular.

### Now, are they essential for capturing wildlife footage?

100 percent, yeah. And you can go on an orca shoot in Shetland and there might be six or seven people there with drones now. I'm surprised there hasn't been a collision! They're all focused on the orca so they're not looking at where the other drones are. It hasn't happened yet, but I suspect there will be an accident with drones one day.

### In Shetland, you're also well known for your photos of otters and diving gannets. Why do you like those two species so much?

When I was a kid I was fishing all the time and I used to catch fish and photograph fish. I've always been mad on water and fish, and as I grew up I ventured towards the marine side of things. I love the coast. It really is home for me. →



## Are you a native of Shetland?

No, I was brought up in Lincolnshire. That's where I did a lot of fishing. We used to get to the coast, to Donna Nook, and see the seals pupping. It all revolves around water, my life. I love water and I love being under it, I love seeing what's going on. And I love seabirds. For me, seabirds always feel like freedom; they've got the whole ocean and they can go wherever they want.

## You are a marine biologist, but was photography an interest when you were a student?

Yeah, I took photos with my Dad's old 1960s Pentax and we used to take photos of all the fish that we caught. The digital era changed everything. It made it much simpler – you could see your results straight away. Then, with social media, the whole photography scene changed so much. Some may argue for worse, but I would say for better.

## As someone who shoots video and stills, what's the ratio been?

I've been talking with close friends and I've been saying I need to get back to my roots. It's lovely filming for these big companies but you work your ass off, you go for it really hard, but then you hand all the footage over and it's gone! I know loads of beautiful footage will never get used, so, working with social media, one side of me is thinking maybe it's time to create something where you can film a lot more yourself and do stills and use this footage in a better way.

## You have a real empathy for the animals you photograph, particularly otters...

Yeah, I love otters. One of my ex-girlfriends said: "What is wrong with you? Why do you have such a fascination with otters?" Obviously, we split up because she didn't get it! Joking aside, it's like gannets, they're amazing when you watch them dive. What I love about gannets is that when you watch them swim and dive underwater, people wouldn't believe how they use their wings and how they swim. They're so hydrodynamic.

## Tell me about how you photograph those demanding situations...

Many seabirds have become reliant on by-catch. So, when it came to



shooting gannets underwater, in the ideal world you'd want to go out and find a natural scenario where you've got a big shoal of mackerel with gannets diving on it. But we have still not managed to get that to work because it's just so hard to be in the right place at the right time.

## I can imagine. How do you overcome the difficulties?

We thought, let's mimic a fishing boat by doing discards. We tried it a few times in the early days but the gannets wouldn't dive. You'd throw a few fish, they'd dive a bit but they'd never really get going. The following year my friend Matt Doggett was coming up; he's a diver and I said to him: "Let's go round the back of Noss, in Shetland, take 60 kilos of mackerel with us and, after the dive, let's see if we can do something with the gannets." This was the end of April, and we threw a mackerel in and the gannets went nuts. We threw a few more in and they just went crazy.

## So, how did your technique change this time to produce results?

What I learned was that you needed to be hidden as a diver, so we'd have

**Above: Early one morning, Richard captured this female otter bringing an octopus ashore to feed her cubs.**

**Above right: Hungry gannets dive in a frenzied search for fish thrown from the boat while Richard waited underwater with his Nikon D4 and Sigma 15mm f/2.8 lens.**

**Right: A Nikon 600mm f/4 telephoto was used to capture this yawning otter in the fading light of a February evening.**

five-metre lengths of rope on the boat and we put loops in it so I could put my arm through a loop and hide under the boat. We dropped fish over the edge to get them to dive quite close and they went mental. Also, April is when they come back to the coast, they're finding their nest sites, finding their mates, but the inshore fish have not yet come so a lot of the mackerel and herring are still offshore. They don't want to leave the nest sites because they're waiting for their mates and holding their territory – and during that time they're getting hungry!

## Yes, they must be, but you were there ready to feed them?

Suddenly, we turn up with a few fish and they just went crazy because they're really hungry at that time of year. We carried on doing it through the summer, and 90 per cent of the time it worked that year. Now, there are two boats that go out of Lerwick around the back of Noss taking tourists to see the seabird cliffs. One of the boats takes half a bucket of mackerel with him to get the gannets diving so the passengers can watch.

## When did you move to Shetland and what was the reason?

Well... I joke about it. I was living on the west coast of Scotland, in Oban, doing a project that summer on seabird islands of Scotland, so I was going to all the remote islands. I went to Mingulay, I visited St Kilda, I saw the Shiant Isles, I went to Orkney. →



**I want to be out in the field, not behind my computer**





RICHARD SHUCKSMITH







I spent a couple of weeks on each and I came up to Shetland in July. I'd just got off the ferry when my mum phoned me and I told her that I was on Shetland, adding that it was as bleak as hell and that I couldn't wait to get back to the west coast!

#### **How long ago was this?**

Fifteen years ago. I then went to a petrol station to fill up with diesel and, as I'm filling up, this car pulls up and this woman gets out and I shouted: "Oi, Rachel! I was at uni with you in Bangor in north Wales." We used to dive together and she asked me: "What are you doing here? I never expected to see you here." We got chatting and she asked if I had my diving kit with me. I told her that I was working but could meet up to go diving. A few days later we met up and went diving and then we went for dinner at the restaurant...

#### **I know where this is going!**

...and then one thing led to another and now I'm married to her with two kids. That's entrapment!

#### **So, you've been with Rachel for 15 years now, how long have you been with Nikon?**

Apart from the day when I used my dad's old Pentax, it's been all Nikon.

#### **What equipment were you using to shoot on the Wild Isles?**

Any still photography, I'm shooting



**I told mum Shetland was as bleak as hell and I couldn't wait to get back to the west coast!**

**Above: A family of otters rest in a bed of seaweed on a summer's morning in Shetland.**

on my Nikon D4 in a Nauticam housing. All the footage is filmed on Red cameras.

#### **When underwater with the D4, what lens do you use for gannets?**

I use a 15mm Sigma fisheye. That gets used a lot underwater because of its ability to close focus. Underwater, you need to cut down the distance between you and your subject and the 15mm Sigma enables you to focus on the subject almost on the end of your port, it's amazing for that. Outside of that, I use a 16-35mm Nikon as well. I tend to swap depending on what I'm shooting and what I'm trying to achieve underwater.

#### **And so I suppose otters would be more long lens work?**

Yeah, I have a 600mm f/4 that I use a lot of the time. I love that lens. Otters





\* **CAMERA TRAPPED**

**SHETLAND IS SUCH A SPARSELY POPULATED PLACE, BUT EVEN HERE A CAMERA TRAP CAN'T GO UNDETECTED FOREVER FROM THE MEN FROM THE MINISTRY...**

**How long have you been using camera traps?**  
On and off, quite a few years. Where I live, at the bottom of the garden of my house the sea's there, and off this point there's this little island with an old broch, which are these old structures from over a thousand years ago. I put a camera trap on there and it's been there for years. This year, I got an email from Historic Scotland asking whose camera trap that was?

So I was totally honest and told them that it was mine and asked what the problem was. "You need to apply for this licence and you need to fill in these forms, and you need to do this..." I asked them: "Jeez mate, it's been there for seven or eight years, no one's said a word, what's wrong with it?" So, I got into a little bit of trouble with Historic Scotland, but I think we've ironed that out now and I can leave it!

**What sort of things do you get up to when you are at the screen?**

The basics, highlights... what's in Lightroom? I have to open up the menu to see what I use. That shows you how much I use it! The people who are really good at post-processing can make images pop, but I think there's a funny trade-off with reality. I'm a bit old school and I like a bit of reality instead of overdoing it, and a lot of people do overdo it. I think that social media has pushed some of that.

**Yes, some images are so colourful and clear, but where is the dust in the air or debris in the water?**

Yeah, completely. People can make it too clean. I know people who will shoot an image underwater and they'll sit for several hours getting rid of all the backscatter. I just haven't got the patience or the will to do that. It's unreal. What's wrong with a bit of backscatter? There are particles in the water, sometimes you dive and there's a lot. It's just how it is.

**What's your next shoot, will you be working again in Scotland?**

It's in Shetland, a shoot for *National Geographic* working with Bertie Gregory. It will be a lot of underwater stuff – otters, seals and general underwater scenics.

**What's the story? Can you divulge anything to our readers yet?**

Ah, I can't I'm afraid, but it's a three-week shoot and it's a bit unpredictable, so I can only guess how it the project will g



**What's your single best piece of advice for a young, would-be wildlife photographer to make a success of it?**

You have to follow your heart. If you follow your heart, you will always do good. If you try doing what other people want you to do, then you'll end up doing things that you probably don't want to do. If you follow your heart and put your love into it and work at it, people will be able to see that and you will come good. **N**

**Next Month**  
Rachel Bigsby,  
Nikon Creator  
and wildlife  
photographer

are very different. In recent years, I haven't updated my stills cameras in any shape or form.

**Do you have a complete set of lenses between a 15mm and 600mm as your toolkit?**

No, you use the right tools for the right job. The 600mm I love because it's the right one for shooting otters onshore. For underwater, I use the 105mm macro. The 16-35mm is also nice for underwater stuff and for filming too. Obviously, the 15mm Sigma fisheye for its close focusing ability. Outside of that, for wide-angle shots of otters I'll use one of my camera traps with a 20mm Nikon prime lens or even a 16-35mm.

**Do you have to spend much time in post-production?**

As little as possible. I want to be out in the field, not behind my computer.