

RICHARD PETERS

For Richard Peters, his back-garden safaris are just as enjoyable as those he takes in Africa. And, he tells Keith Wilson, both require very similar techniques...



Profile

RICHARD PETERS SPECIALISES IN PHOTOGRAPHING BRITISH WILDLIFE, OFTEN IN HIS BACK GARDEN.

● Richard is the current European Wildlife Photographer of the Year and last year won the Urban Wildlife category in the Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition.

● He runs workshops at the British Wildlife Centre and shares many of his techniques in his acclaimed eBook, *Back Garden Safari*.

All images: © Richard Peters



Back in February 2015, Richard Peters took a picture in his garden that went on to win awards in two major wildlife photography competitions. Since then he has published his first eBook, become a Nikon Ambassador and quit his day job to become a full-time wildlife photographer. He reflects on an extraordinary year...

Last year you were named European Wildlife Photographer of the Year. How did you feel upon hearing the news?

It was just surreal. You always enter a competition hoping you will get somewhere but I never expected to win. I entered just thinking, 'Let's see what happens,' so to get a phone call to say you've won is just amazing.

Even before this, how important were competitions to you?

Competitions are very important in

the sense that they're recognition of your work. But judging is subjective, so it's important to remember that if you haven't been successful in a competition it doesn't mean your pictures aren't any good. I've entered many pictures and 99 per cent of them have had no recognition at all, but I don't then go away and think my pictures are not of the right standard. The important thing is that you focus on what you want to do and get on with taking pictures. If you take the pictures for yourself, the rest will follow.

Your picture of a fox shadow, taken at night in your back garden, is now famous. How did you get it?

The idea for the picture came about probably six months before taking it. I knew I had foxes coming into the garden and we'd just had some building work done, and we didn't have a security light on in the back of the house, so I was shining a torch out the back each night to see what was going on. One night, this fox came out

from behind the shed and walked through the torchlight and cast this really nice shadow. I thought it would make a really cool photo if I could get the shadow in a picture somehow. I had a couple of goes, but I couldn't get the shadow quite right, so I thought, 'I'll leave it and come back another day'. Four or five months later I thought, 'I'm going to have another crack at this shadow idea.' By this time I had been experimenting with capturing the night sky with long exposures and trying to capture the fox with the sky in the background and the stars, so I thought, 'Right, I'm going to do this shot again, but I'm going to use a wide-angle to get the houses in the background for a bit of context as well as the night sky.'

What sort of wide-angle?

It was a Nikon 18-35mm G lens, the latest version, and I think it was 31mm in the end, the perfect focal length. If it was too wide, you'd start seeing the decking and the fox, so it was about



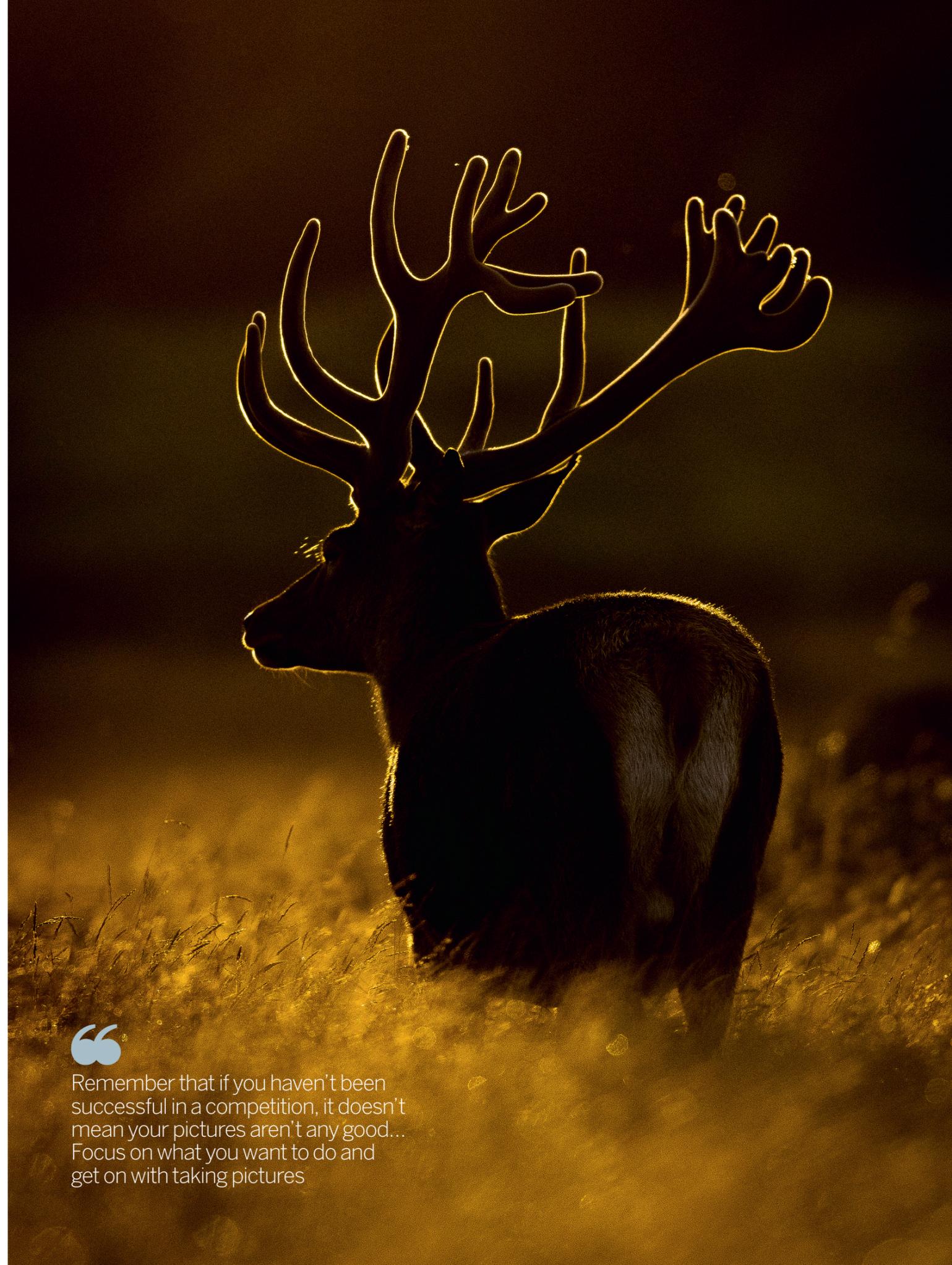
Previous page
SHED RAIDER
Nikon D810, Nikon AF-S 18-35mm f/3.5-4.5G ED, 1/250 sec, f/8, ISO200, 2x Nikon SB-28, Camtraptions PIR sensor



SNOW POUNCE
Highly commended, Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2012
Nikon D7000, Nikon AF-S 600mm f/4G ED VR, 1/500 sec, f/8, ISO400



RED DEER
Nikon D500, Nikon AF-S 400mm f/2.8E FL ED VR, 1/5000 sec, f/2.8, ISO360



Remember that if you haven't been successful in a competition, it doesn't mean your pictures aren't any good... Focus on what you want to do and get on with taking pictures



finding that perfect balance where I knew the fox wouldn't be in the frame but its shadow would be the right size.

Which other lenses do you use?

Starting at the wide-angle end, the 18-35mm, 50mm f/1.4, 70-200mm f/2.8 and the 400mm f/2.8, which I use with the 1.4x and 2.0x converter.

You also had the 600mm f/4. Why did you sell it?

Partly because of the weight and partly because of the size – the new 600mm weighs the same as the 400mm now, but the 400mm is a lot smaller, which means it's easier to travel with, especially on a plane as hand luggage. It's light, it's small, and it's versatile, because you have a 400mm f/2.8, a 560mm f/4 if you put a 1.4x converter on it, and you have an 800mm f/5.6 with the 2x converter. That's probably my favourite lens now.

I guess a lens like that comes into its own on safari too?

Yes, 400mm is the ideal telephoto lens for Africa. I've been out there with a 600mm and it's too much. We had lion cubs once that were probably eight feet from the car and you can't even focus on something that close with a 600mm. That's another thing that's good with the 400mm – the minimum focusing distance is a lot shorter than on a 600mm.

What was your first Nikon SLR?

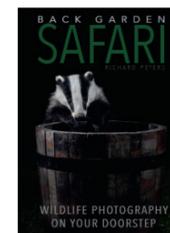
Originally, someone lent me one. I can't remember the model number, but it was a film camera and fully manual and it was silver as well, that's all I can remember! The first camera that I bought myself was an F80. I bought a grip for it and the grip didn't have any buttons, it just made it a bit bigger, an inch taller, and when I put it on I thought, 'Yeah, this looks like a professional camera!' I used that for about six months and then switched to digital; the D100 was my first digital camera, with a 1GB memory card.

That was a lot in those days!

Yeah, one gigabyte seemed huge. I don't think I ever filled the card either!

After the D100, what followed?

After the D100 it was the D200, then the D300, the D2x, D3, D3s, D4,



BACK GARDEN SAFARI
Richard's badgers feature in his eBook



BADGER
Nikon D5500, Nikon AF-S DX 16-80mm f/2.8-4E ED VR, 1/200, f/8, ISO200, 2x Nikon SB-28, Camtraptions PIR sensor



SHADOW WALKER
Winner, European Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2015
Nikon D810, Nikon AF-S 18-35mm f/3.5-4.5G ED, 30 secs, f/8, ISO1250, Nikon SB-28, Camtraptions PIR sensor

D800, which I had with the D4, and then I sold the D800 to get a D810, and then the D4 to get a second D810.

So you prefer the D810's larger sensor to the D4's speed?

As I've matured as a photographer I've gone away from thinking 'Oh look, there's an animal over there!' and then holding a finger down to take as many pictures as I can. Now, I think a lot more about what I'm doing and I'm more picky about when I press the shutter. A lot of my pictures now are dark because I like doing under-exposure and rim lighting. That lighting isn't there all the time, so you have to think more about how you're going to use it to make the most of it. I find myself looking more for the light than the subject, so I don't need the speed so much.

Why are you drawn to that particular style of image?

In one respect it's because it just looks a bit different to the typical thing. For example, if you've got puffins on Skomer island, the typical picture would be to have a bird nicely exposed among some flowers. I still take those, I will always take the safe shot, but I always think there is a way you can make a subject more interesting, and lighting is the key to that. I like mood and atmosphere, I want that nice sidelight or rim light.

Were you inspired to try that style by seeing another example of it?

Yes, there was a picture that sowed the seed in my head. The photographer was Miguel Lasa. I think it was Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2008. It was a polar bear and all you saw was the rim light around the bear. It was just an outline, not the whole body, just the profile of the bear's head and one of the legs. I'd seen rim lighting and backlighting pictures before but that one was big in the exhibition and I thought, 'Wow! That's amazing.' Seeing a familiar subject in a completely different way, that's what stuck with me.

When you go to Skomer for the puffins or the Masai Mara for the big cats, do you pack the same kit?

Basically, yes. I tend not to take too much because there have been times when I've taken everything but the kitchen sink and then not used it, so generally I take the 400mm f/2.8 and both converters, the 18-35mm, and quite often that is all I take. But I've just bought a 70-200mm, and that mostly goes to Africa, because there are times you need the mid-range.

But most of the time it's either one extreme or the other – wide-angle or telephoto?

Yes, but say you've got everything from 18mm to 800mm covered and



LITTLE OWL, BIG ISO

RECENTLY, RICHARD HAD A CHANCE TO TRY OUT THE HIGH-ISO PERFORMANCE OF THE NEW NIKON D5 ON AN OBLIGING SUBJECT...

Do you think the improved performance at higher ISOs is the greatest change to photography of the past ten years?

Yes, definitely. Pictures are being taken now that would never have been taken before. I had a D5 for a month and I printed some pictures at ISO30,000, A3 size, to see if they would be good enough for magazine use, and they look absolutely amazing.

What was the subject?

It was a little owl. There's a couple of images, one at ISO28,800 (pictured right) and the other at ISO30,000, and they look amazing. The shoot was in the evening on a really cloudy day. I think I had a 2.0x converter on; it was f/8 and 1/1000 sec.



you have a scene in front of you, you're going to be wondering, 'Which one of the many combinations shall I use?' whereas if you've only got telephoto and wide-angle, it might lead to you taking a different kind of picture to the one you would otherwise have taken. I find having the extremes sometimes forces you to take a photograph from a different perspective to what you would do normally.

You launched your eBook, *Back Garden Safari*, last year. Why did you do it?

The whole idea was that you can take amazing pictures anywhere. I thought, 'I'm going to concentrate on taking pictures at home because not everyone has the time or the money to travel.' It's important to get over the mindset that you have to travel to somewhere cool to take exciting pictures. While doing this I discovered I had a badger visiting the garden. For over a year I took photos of whatever came into the garden just to show what is possible.

Is there likely to be another eBook?

There's definitely going to be a couple more. I quite like teaching and helping



ATMOSPHERIC PUFFIN
 Nikon D500, Nikon AF-S 400mm f/2.8E FLE D VR, 1/1600 sec, f/8, ISO160, Nikon TC-20E III teleconverter

people, that's what I enjoy about workshops, so I've got a couple of ideas for 'how to' books. Long term, I'd like to do a nice visual book that's just about the pictures, not about the technique. I think that would suit a printed book. 'How to' books are better as eBooks because you can add to them over time, you can update them.

After the foxes and badgers, which common species are you concentrating on now?

If I'm honest, I don't want to say! Just because I don't want someone else to start doing it as well, and I've got a couple of pictures I want to enter into competitions. But what I will say is, there are lots of common species around that people ignore every day. Everyone loves red squirrels, but there are tons of grey squirrels, and blackbirds, jackdaws, sparrows. So I think concentrating on those more could be beneficial because you could present a common subject in a new or unusual way. For example, everyone has seen a puffin in flight with a slow shutter speed to blur the wings, but if you apply that to a jackdaw or a jay it's a type of shot that you maybe don't associate with that species. It makes the shot more unique because it's a familiar technique with an unfamiliar subject, (even though it's a common subject).

You've made several trips to Africa to photograph the iconic species. That's quite a gear change from foxes, so how do you adjust?!

The first thing that's in my head when I'm taking a picture is: 'What's the light doing?' That's the most important thing to me. Africa is amazing, but as ridiculous as it sounds, whether I'm sitting in front of a lion or a jackdaw, if the light is doing something good that's what I'm interested in, that's what I'm thinking about. I'm not thinking, 'I've got a lion sat in front of me', I'm thinking, 'There's cloud in the sky, the sun's going to break through soon and I'm going to get some nice backlighting, so how can I make the most of that?' In theory, it's a gear change to go from your back garden to Africa, but the principle is the same whatever you are photographing; it doesn't matter where you are or what the subject is.

It's about the light?

Yes, I've always got that in my head rather than what the subject is.

Are there specific species that you have tired of photographing?

No. I would say I don't get tired photographing any specific species, rather I get quite bored and complacent just repeating the same scenario over and over again. For example, with the badgers, I haven't taken any pictures of them for a little while now because I've taken a similar picture so many times and from different angles that, to me, there's nothing unique about it any more. I will have to come up with a new way of doing it, like the shadow fox.

Last year, you decided to pursue photography as a full-time pro. Was it the right decision?

Yes! I got to the point where my day job was stopping me from doing more photography. I felt in myself that it was the right time and through various circumstances at work I got the opportunity to make that decision. And yes, it's been great. I had the two big competition successes last year and that public announcement timed well with me going full-time into photography, then becoming a Nikon Ambassador happened six months after that. So everything has fallen nicely into place.

It's been an incredible 18 months. What are you looking forward to most in the coming year?

The big thing for me is doing more workshops and trips and one-to-ones. Because I can take a nice picture, and I know how to use the camera, it's good to be able to impart that knowledge to people. So, I'm keen to teach more because I find it rewarding, especially when you tell somebody something simple and for them it's a revelation. I'm co-leading more trips and will be back to Africa next year and start promoting my one-to-ones more. I want to do more eBooks and come up with interesting ways of taking photos.

So no going back to the day job?

No way!

See more of Richard's work at www.richardpeters.co.uk

TIPS FROM THE WORKSHOPS

RICHARD HAS MET MANY PHOTOGRAPHERS OF ALL AGES AND ABILITIES ON HIS WORKSHOPS, AND HE'S NOTICED SOME COMMON – EASILY OVERCOME – MISTAKES

Are there errors that people typically make, regardless of their level of experience?

Yes, for sure. I get a range of people with different levels of experience, but often most people will just use the centre focus point, so they will always have the subject in the middle of the frame. Or they are not looking at the background. The background is as important as the subject because if the subject is in nice light or doing something interesting but there's a telegraph pole in the background then it ruins the picture. So it's interesting to see how people think, especially when they're starting out; all they're concentrating on is the subject being in the middle of the frame and being sharp. Also, a lot of people starting out don't realise you can move the focus points. You can switch the camera off Auto and put it into a setting where you can move the focus point yourself.

NEXT MONTH: TALES FROM AFRICA WITH FEDERICO VERONESI

