

CAIRNGORMS

BY PETER CAIRNS



CAIRNGORMS NATURE
PHOTOGRAPHER
insights

About Peter

Based in the heart of Scotland's Cairngorms National Park, Peter Cairns is an award-winning nature photographer and writer with a deep fascination for our relationship with the natural world. Peter has travelled extensively, especially in northern Europe, and covers a diverse range of topical conservation stories from wildlife tourism to the potential return of wolves ... and most things in between.

Peter authors regular illustrated features in photographic and countryside magazines and has co-authored five books on Europe's wildlife and our relationship with it. He was one of the co-founders of the widely acclaimed Tooth & Claw predator project, from which the Highland Tiger initiative sprung. In 2006, Peter became a founding director of Wild Wonders of Europe, one of the biggest nature photography initiatives ever undertaken.

In 2008, along with colleague Mark Hamblin, Peter formed The Wild Media Company, a Social Enterprise that uses visual media to communicate a range of topical conservation stories. The most ambitious undertaking to date has been 2020VISION of which Peter is Project Coordinator.

Peter has served as a director of Wild Scotland, the body representing nature tourism in Scotland, and is a Senior Fellow of the International League of Conservation Photographers.



Introduction

The Cairngorms. I love this place. I mean I really love this place. But it's difficult, if not impossible, to do it justice in words, or indeed, in pictures. The Cairngorms is Britain's largest National Park covering over 4,500 square kilometres. It occupies 6% of Scotland's land area and is home to its most extensive tracts of native woodland. 4 of Scotland's 5 highest mountains are found here and its unique mosaic of habitats is home to 25% of the UK's threatened wildlife species – red squirrels, capercaillie, ospreys and wildcats to name a few. In short, the Cairngorms is a place of superlatives, a place like no other.

I've lived and photographed here for nearly 20 years and am still struggling to properly get under the skin of the place. Like I say, it's difficult to do it justice but in trying, I've spent many hours, days and even weeks cooped up in cramped hides, wading through stinking bogs and waiting endlessly for the right light with only a million midges for company. It ain't the Serengeti out there and photographing the Cairngorms' rare and charismatic wildlife, teasing out the spirit of the landscape, takes time and perhaps a bit of hard-earned knowledge. More than anything however, I believe that to photograph a place like this, you need a real desire to do so, a desire to tell a story. In the case of the Cairngorms, that story is complex and is as much about people as it is about nature.

In this book I've chosen 50 of my favourite images. I'm not holding them up as the ultimate showcase for the Cairngorms, but as a reflection of some of my most cherished moments and the emotional ties that are so often made at the moment of pressing the shutter. For the photographer reading this book, I'll provide the basic details of how I took the image but in many ways that's irrelevant and I really hope you'll be more interested in why I took each picture.

Ultimately I hope this collection of images serves as an invitation to others to come to the Cairngorms, to breathe in its air and to absorb its spirit. If you do this, you'll find it much easier to put your own creative stamp on this most spectacular of our National Parks.



Peter Cairns

Foreword

Half a century is a mere shutter click in the life of the Cairngorms. But for me it is 50 years of life, work and play in Britain's largest National Park. I am privileged to be Chairman of the Park Authority and to be asked to provide the foreword for this ebook.

I have long admired Peter Cairns' skill behind and, increasingly, in front of the lens, as an advocate of how people and society can benefit from wild places and wild things. And, as I turned the pages, I found myself on my own personal journey to places I have long enjoyed and amongst wildlife I have seen.

The memories flood back: lying on long hot summer afternoons in that very spot where Peter captures the essence of a Cairngorm winter day above Loch Avon; climbing out of a snow hole into a freezing world of whirling white or awakening in a high bivouac to find myself on a rocky island adrift in a cloud sea. It is these contrasts that fix the Cairngorms into my soul.

A good photograph makes a point; the great ones in this book provoke human emotions and make statements about our values. As a steward for future generations of Cairngorm people, this book reminds me of my own responsibilities. I hope this book will prompt your thoughts and perhaps inspire some of your future Cairngorms journeys - with or without a camera.

Duncan Bryden

Convener (Chairman), Cairngorms National Park Authority



A word before you begin...

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CAIRNGORMS NATURE

Cairngorms Nature is an informal partnership, open to all. It's an opportunity for people and organisations from all backgrounds to come together with one thing in common – a love of the wildlife in the Cairngorms National Park and the desire to do something to protect it. Find out how you can get involved at www.cairngorms.co.uk.

Our vision is that...

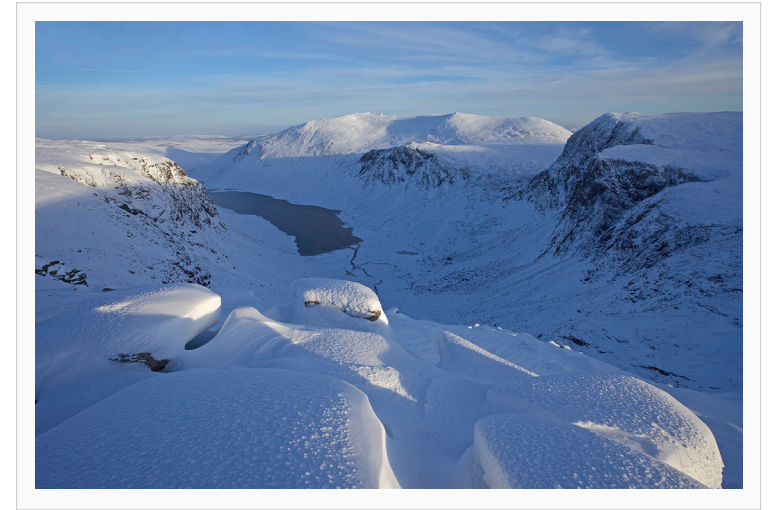
...nature in the Cairngorms National Park will be cared for and treasured by all who live and work here and all who visit. Natural habitats, rich in distinctive species, will be even more diverse, even more resilient and even better connected than they are today.





Loch Avon in winter

Grampian mountains, Cairngorms National Park



This is one of the classic views within the Cairngorms, a view that encapsulates the spirit of the National Park. The mountain massif, which dominates the skyline throughout much of the Park, is its beating heart, its soul, its reason for being.

Walking in these hills can be challenging and is not without its dangers, in winter especially. I'd walked up through Coire-an-Lochain in perfect conditions and was continually photographing the wind-sculpted snowscape ahead of me – ice-encrusted rocks against a snow-blasted tundra landscape stretching to the horizon. Almost by mistake I arrived at the head of Loch Avon and immediately realised the potential. Treading carefully so as not to spoil the virgin snow,

I frantically framed up with the sun dipping quickly towards the horizon.

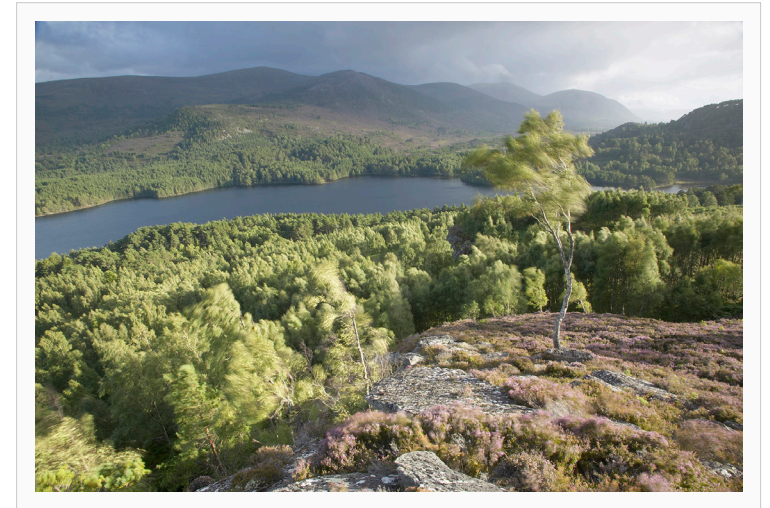
I was kicking myself for not allowing more time and within minutes, the sunlight faded and with it, the magical shadows articulating the foreground rocks.

As I made my way home that evening, arriving back at the car in the darkness, I reflected on what it is that draws so many people to these mountains. Perhaps they just feed us and as John Muir once said: "We need to feed our soul as well as our bellies." How true.



Storm brewing over Loch Gamhna

Rothiemurchus, Cairngorms National Park



Although this is quite an old image now, I remember everything as if it were yesterday. Late summer often brings brooding skies over the Eastern Grampians and climbing the path to Ord Ban above Loch Gamhna, I could see the late evening light parting the clouds and lighting up the forest foreground.

The wind was strong once I left the birchwood and I knew straight away that the shot I wanted was one that recorded the movement in the trees, which emphasised the approaching storm. The combination of indigo sky above verdant vegetation is a magical mix and a splash of flowering foreground heather sealed the deal.

Rothiemurchus forest is one of the few surviving tracts of the ancient Caledonian pinewood and here, in collaboration with neighbouring landholdings at Glenmore, Invereshie and to the south Glenfeshie, ambitious plans are afoot

to re-establish a contiguous forest where nature holds sway. As fingers of forest reach out and touch those of other forests, wildlife will be able to move more freely and over longer distances.

I remember looking out over Loch Gamhna on this blustery evening and thinking of the animals that lived in the forest beneath me – capercaillie, red squirrels, pine martens, perhaps even wildcats. I couldn't see them but I knew they were there and sometimes that's enough.



Red deer stag in blizzard

Alvie forest, Cairngorms National Park



Red deer are a contentious animal. For some, Britain's largest land mammal is the very essence of Scotland, a cultural symbol and the mainstay of many rural economies – deer stalking and venison sales keeping people in jobs and families in homes. For others, red deer numbers have spiralled out of control and in the absence of natural predators, their grazing has caused an ecological desert – open moorland bereft of trees and native shrubs.

No one wants to see a landscape without deer but their value, as well as their health, surely relies on a robust environment in which they can find good quality food and shelter. Controlling numbers and facilitating the regeneration of native woodland is essential for a wide range of species and will undoubtedly benefit deer as it does elsewhere in Europe.

Putting the complex politics aside, this stag is only accepting of my presence with the help of a local deerstalker. Using the skills and experience of local land managers to get close to wildlife – and paying them accordingly – is one way of contributing to fragile rural economies and underlining the economic value of wildlife.



Floodwater tapestry

Loch Insh, Cairngorms National Park



I find that very often photography is a state of mind - sometimes you're in the mood, often you're not. On this day in early winter I somehow felt compelled to take pictures, to create. Without a particular subject in mind, I went wandering – not something I can often find the time to do – with a pretty much open mind. It had rained continuously for what seemed like forever and the River Spey had burst its banks creating pools amidst the riparian woodland of birch, willow and alder.

Paddling around the edges of Loch Insh I came across this complex reflection, which seemed initially disorderly and without an obvious focal point. The more I looked however, the more I realised that this was not a picture that relied on

visual structure, but one which celebrated the subtle hues and myriad tones of a winter woodland. Wet lichens weaved against a backdrop of pinks and purples perfectly reflected in the dark, peaty waters held me captive for a whole afternoon.

It's only when you really look, or more accurately when you see, I mean really see, that images like this become obvious. I've been back many times to this spot to try and improve on this picture but somehow, I've never managed it. Perhaps I need to be in the mood.



Red squirrel jumping

Invereshie forest, Cairngorms National Park



There are some creatures that just beg to be photographed. I've been putting out winter food for my local red squirrels for over 10 years and during that time, several generations have become accustomed to the sound of clicking cameras from hides I have permanently sited in the forest.

A few years ago a photographer friend suggested I should try and get the squirrels to jump, so we set about engineering exactly that. What this image doesn't reveal are the strategically placed posts baited with prime hazelnuts, which encourage the squirrels to jump from one to another. I've even added plastic tubing to the posts to prevent the squirrels climbing rather than jumping – sometimes it's simply a battle of ingenuity!

The forests of the Cairngorms and beyond to the north, are the UK's last stronghold for this charismatic rodent with numbers estimated at around 150,000. So far the northerly march of the grey squirrel, so detrimental to red populations further south, has been arrested but for how much longer? And can we really keep 'controlling' greys on the edge of red squirrel strongholds? Forever? Nobody wants to see red squirrels disappear but in my view, some brave decisions surrounding their long-term survival need to be made. In the meantime, I have lots more ideas to photograph this icon of Scotland's pinewoods and hopefully in doing so, keeping its tenuous hold on survival in this country, in the public eye.



Frosted winter birches

Muir of Dinnet, Cairngorms National Park



In many ways birch trees are the arboreal equivalent of gulls or corvids – opportunistic and adaptable. As a pioneer species they can grow quickly on exposed soil and like animals, which become ‘too successful’, birches are often perceived as invasive and in need of control. The truth is that birches are our second most biologically diverse native tree (after oak) and often prepare the ground for a forest that may take 1,000 years to evolve. Ecological characteristics aside, birches offer endless photographic potential.

At -15c and cloaked in a freezing mist, the delicate branches of this birch forest were individually coated in a layer of hoar frost, turning the whole scene into a winter wonderland. I knew from experience that attractive as the

wider landscape appeared, it never quite translated in camera, so I honed in on sections of the forest. On the face of it the forest is random and without structure but with time, graphic patterns start to emerge; nature is rarely as chaotic as it might seem.

I spent several hours alone in the forest that morning reflecting on the demise of these birchwoods across Scotland and realising how lucky I was to have such a playground close to home.



Autumnal birch woodland

Craigellachie, Cairngorms National Park

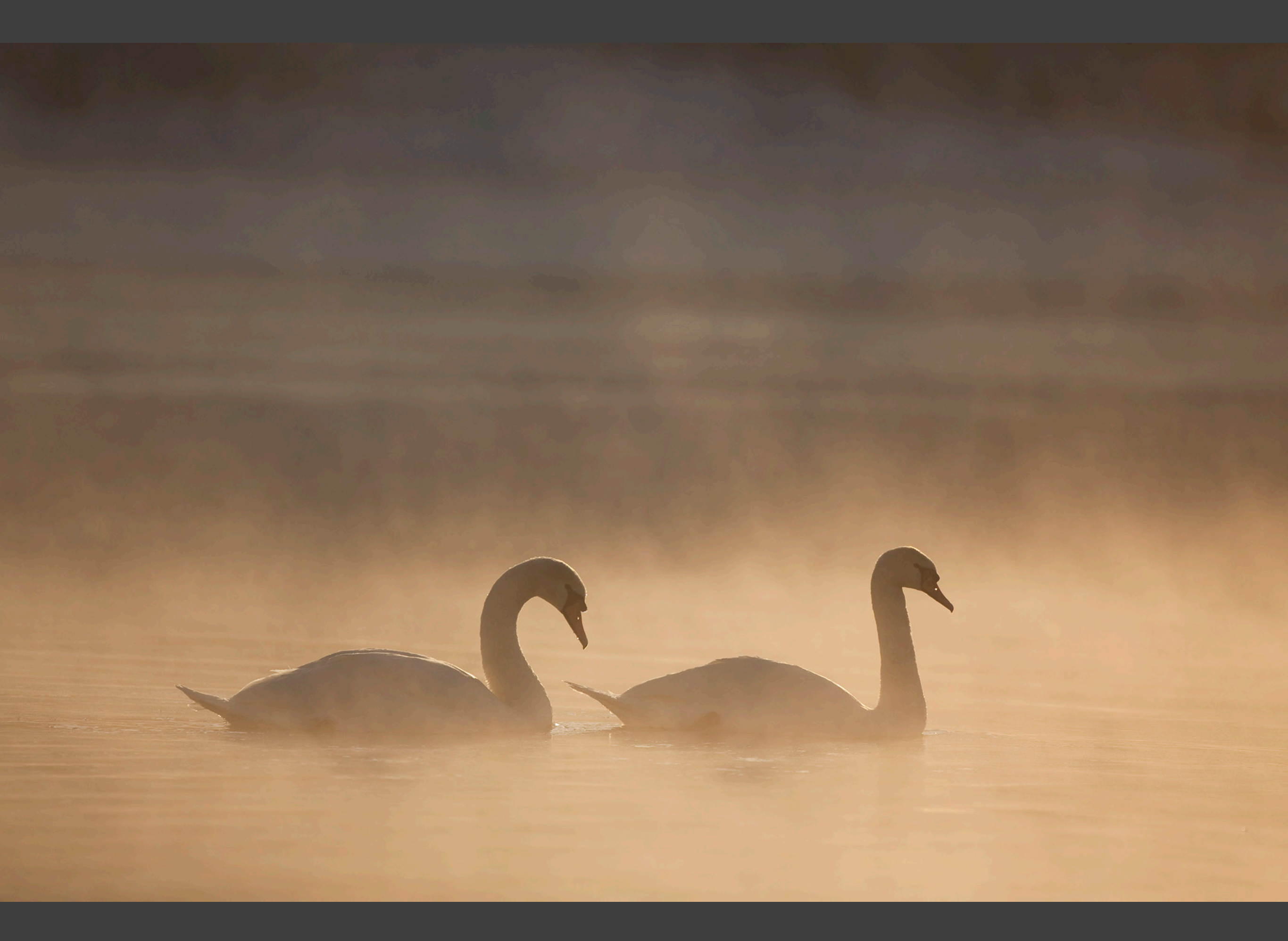


This little gem of a National Nature Reserve is tucked away behind the town of Aviemore and is little known to most casual visitors. A short walk takes you into the most exquisite birch woodland where in autumn, the colour can be as good as anywhere in Scotland. Despite many visits, I find myself not only gravitating back to the reserve repeatedly, but to the same spot. Note to self: Don't warn others against creative constipation then fall victim yourself!

On this particular day the breeze was sporadic; it whispered rather than yelled and although the autumn colour was at its height, I was uninspired having captured this scene umpteen times before. I dabbled however, and some months later I took a shine to just this image with its hint at impressionism. I still would have preferred more movement in the trees – reason enough for going back!

The Cairngorms lays claim to many superlatives when it comes to its portfolio of natural heritage, but one of the factors that makes it such an inspiring place, is the relative abundance of native woodland: no less than 25% of the UK's entire resource is found here, along with the species that depend on a vibrant, rich forest. It should be remembered however, that woodland cover in Scotland is still far less than most other European countries.

As our understanding of natural processes has developed in recent decades, a pressing need to join up isolated fragments of woodland has emerged. In many parts of the Cairngorms it's already happening but over the entire Park, it relies on people from different backgrounds coming together and rebuilding a forest that functions as it should. That's not easy and it isn't quick but people can do great things when they put their minds to it.



Mute swans at dawn

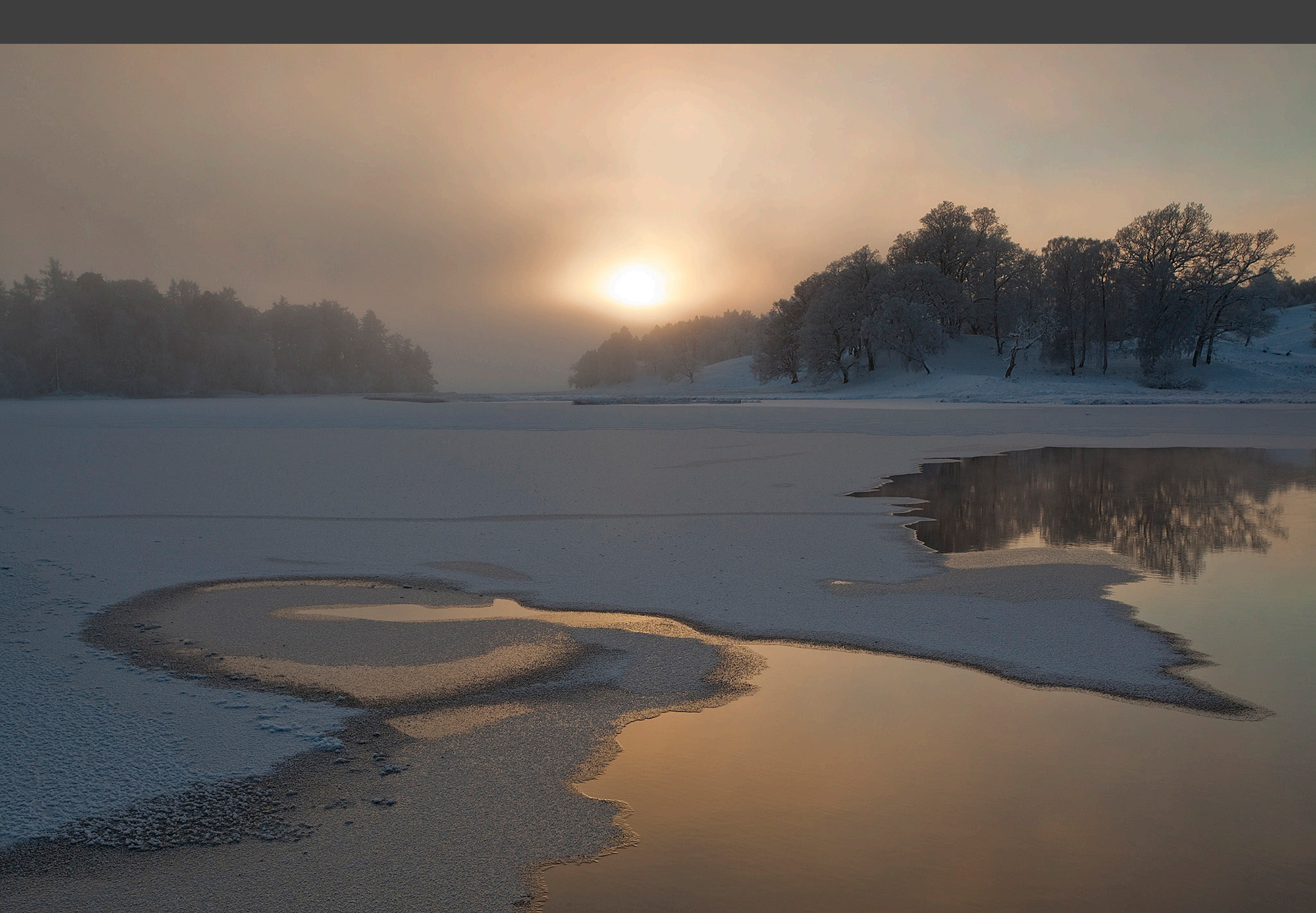
Loch Insh, Cairngorms National Park



In most parts of the UK, mute swans are accustomed to people but in the Cairngorms they retain a wariness that is perhaps surprising to visitors. On this freezing morning in late December however, much of Loch Insh was frozen, forcing the swans into the dwindling patches of open water. At -23c working conditions were tricky but I could see that once the sun broke through the dawn mist, the swans would be bathed in glorious orange backlighting.

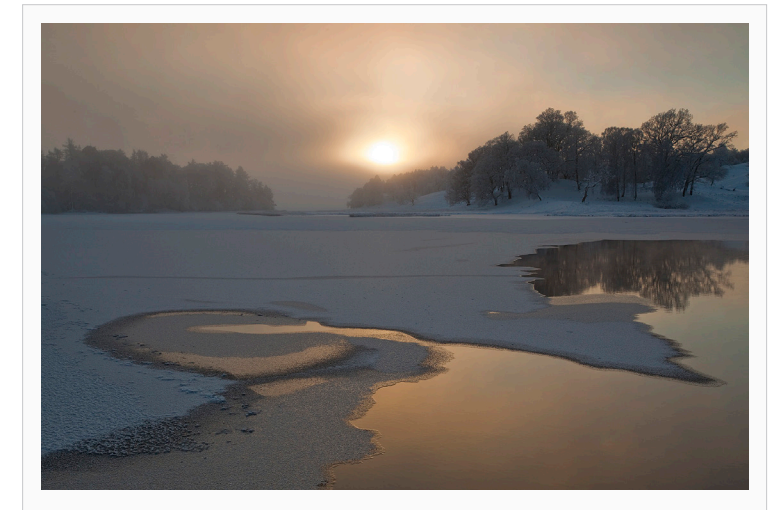
Conscious of my presence, the swans paddled back and forth and I waited until they both came into the same plane of focus with space between them, providing comfortable separation, before pressing the shutter.

With such a well-photographed subject, exceptional lighting turns the ordinary into the more than ordinary and this morning was all about the exceptional. Hoar frost coated the lochside birches and alders, ice groaned as the sun slowly tempered the frigid air and from afar, whooper swans, migratory cousins of our stay-at-home mute swans, could be heard trumpeting their contact calls as they too sought out patches of open water in which to dine. These are the mornings that stay with you, the memories that etch themselves on your soul, the reason why the Cairngorms is the Cairngorms.



Winter sunset

Loch Insh, Cairngorms National Park



Every photographer has their favourite place, somewhere they return to time and again in full knowledge that it will deliver. Loch Insh is just a couple of miles from home and it's my favourite place. I have wandered its shoreline in every season and at every time of day, and so when conditions are good, I know instinctively which part of the loch will work best.

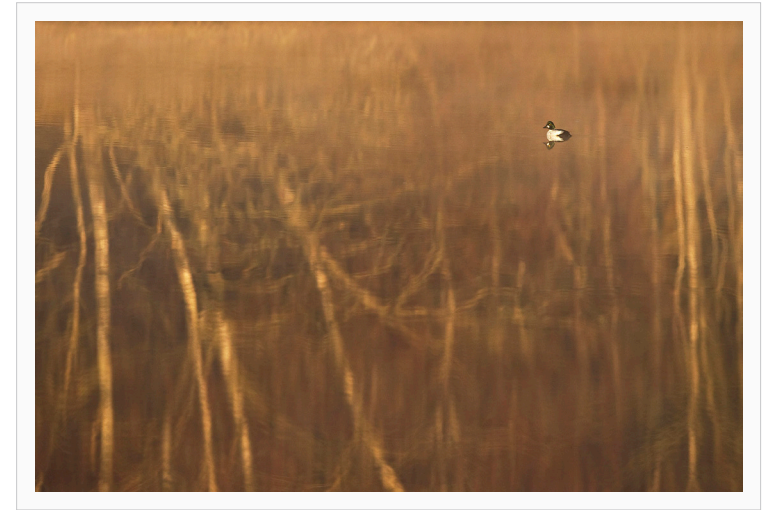
This shot was taken on Christmas Day. In the late afternoon tendrils of mist started extending and retreating as darkness descended. With the rest of the family full of wine and good cheer (read asleep), I sneaked out and headed for the loch. In the silence I made just a few exposures before the orange glow of sunset submitted to another freezing night.

Looking at this scene it's hard to imagine that in just a few month's time, the loch will be full of life with rasping goldeneye drakes, piping oystercatchers and ospreys quietly repairing their nest on the wooded island to the top right. The Cairngorms is special at any time of the year.



Goldeneye drake

Loch Vaa, Cairngorms National Park

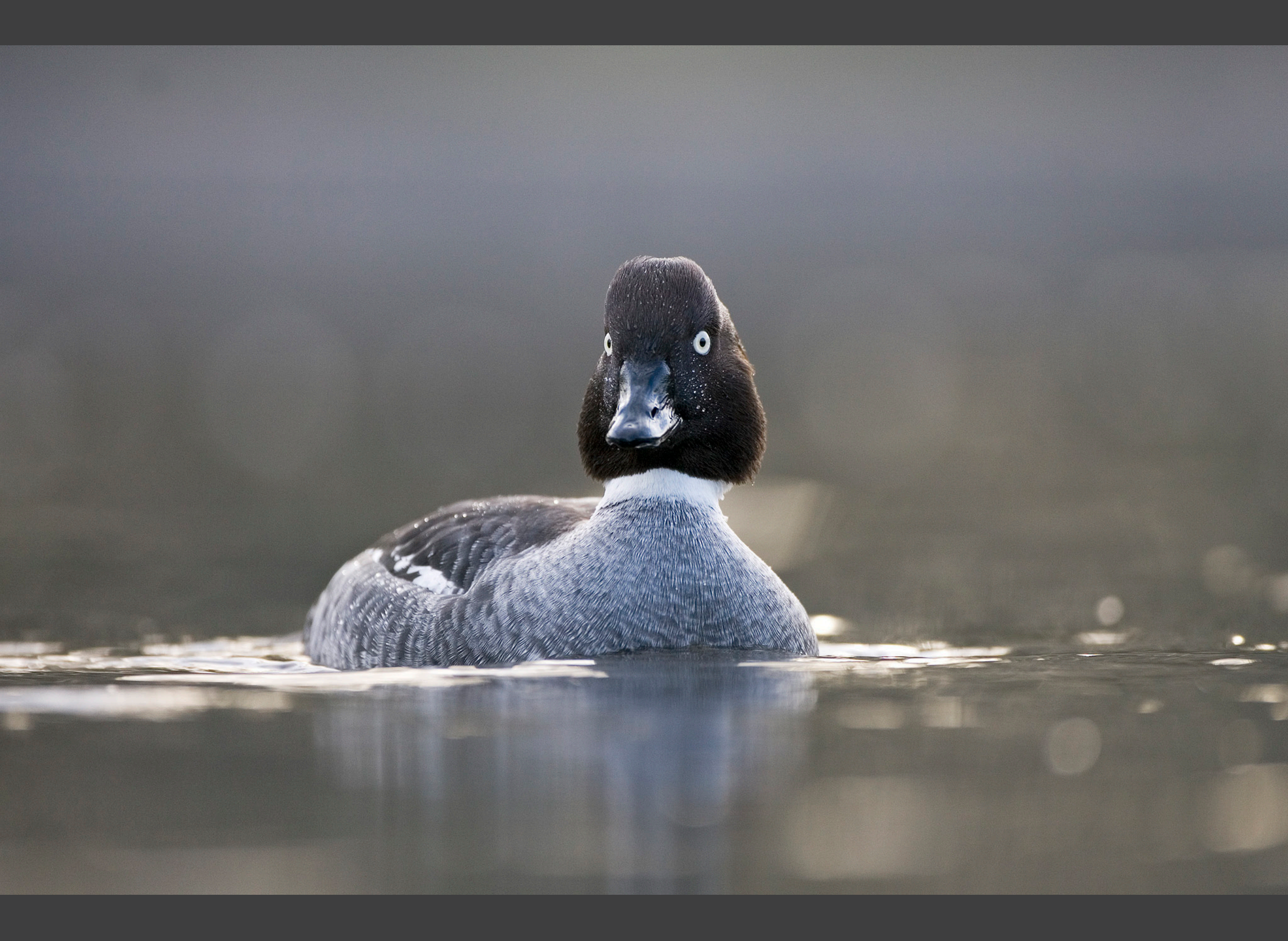


These rare northern ducks have bred in the Cairngorms for the last few decades, readily taking to artificial boxes put in place by dedicated volunteers and landowners. The boxes resemble the goldeneye's nest of choice – a natural tree cavity. With the core population centred around Loch Insh and the River Spey, the dapper males are often found displaying on early spring mornings, their unmistakeable rasping song echoing across mirror-calm lochs.

For this image I chose to position the bird in the top right of the frame to ensure the rich dawn light illuminating the lochside birches, was reflected in the loch itself, its subtle tones providing a nice foil for the striking plumage of the duck. Had I positioned the bird to the bottom of the frame, I'd have had

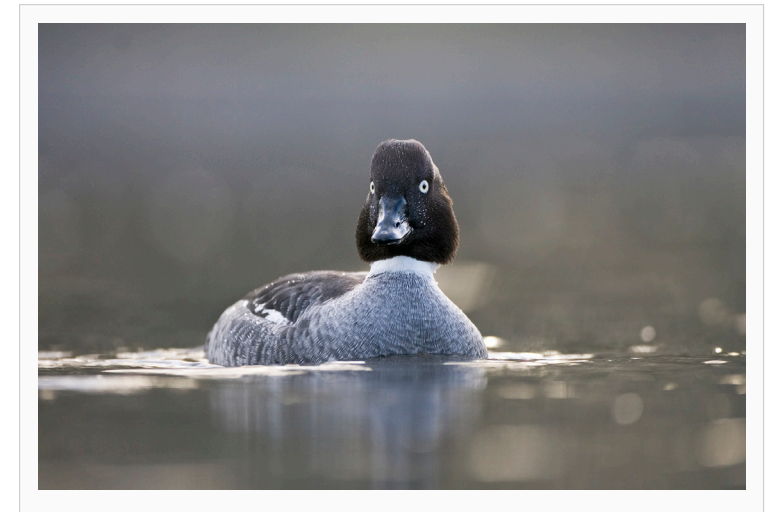
to include the shoreline itself, which would have competed for attention. This type of image will never win any camera club prizes but increasingly, I seek out compositions, which suggest, rather than explicitly reveal, where or how the subject lives. It's a difficult trick to pull off with regularity but at least here in the Cairngorms, the ingredients are in place.

Goldeneye breed extensively across Scandinavia and for me, it's the flavour of the northern boreal forests which is so palpable in the Cairngorms. On mornings like this, the taste of the north is sweet.



Goldeneye duck

Uath Lochans, Cairngorms National Park



The previous image hints at my increasing indifference towards full-frame portraiture but when an opportunity like this presents itself, it has to be seized. Uath Lochans in Glenfeshie is just a stone's throw from home and on a cool, spring dawn can turn up myriad image-making possibilities. I'd previously photographed both goldeneye and red-throated diver here, silhouetted in a dawn mist but on this occasion, although the lochans were flat calm, they were bereft of much atmosphere.

My floating hide was hidden nearby following a previous shoot so I grabbed my chest waders and manoeuvred myself into a corner of the loch. Surprisingly for this normally wary species, the female came over to check out what had just

slipped into the water. With a lovely low perspective from my water-level hide, I captured a few intimate portraits before she decided that further attention was unwarranted.

One might argue that it's a lot of trouble to go to for an ostensibly drab bird, but for me, goldeneye are much more than just a local duck: they're symbolic of a wildlife return, an ambassador for a fresh relationship between people and wildlife. In this context, they're an integral part of the Cairngorms story, their very presence the reward for those people who set out to secure their future several decades ago.



Snow-encrusted willow thicket

Insh Marshes, Cairngorms National Park



Any photographer will tell you that the main problem with being a photographer is finding the time to photograph! It was late afternoon and I'd had a bellyful of sitting behind a computer. With no particular target in mind, I went for a walk – a rare treat and something I sorely miss from my early, less frantic days as a photographer.

Years ago I read a lovely book called *Beyond Order* by celebrated Swedish photographer Jan Tove Johansson. In it, Jan Tove celebrates chaos in nature, or at least what seems like chaos to our eyes, so well trained to look for structure and order. When I came across this monochromatic scene, I was immediately reminded of *Beyond Order*, because that's what this is. There is no obvious visual anchor, no formal structure, no colour, no light, and no repetitive patterns so often employed by photographers. If I'm honest I'm drawn to the

disorderliness, the chaos, the fact that here in parts of the Cairngorms, nature still holds sway and these willow thickets, frowned upon as 'scrub' elsewhere, are just doing their thing.

As I wandered around the wet meadows that border the River Spey, my mind turned to the potential of this place as a home for beavers, recently reintroduced into Scotland on a trial basis. Beavers love willow and for sure they would have an impact here. Allowing nature to operate without prescription requires a rewiring of our minds, a shift in our perspective, a willingness to 'let go'. These marshes could support beavers. And cranes. And hunting sea eagles. The question is are we ready for *Beyond Order*?



Whooper swans in a blizzard

Loch Insh, Cairngorms National Park



I've got to be honest; I'm a bit of a weather forecast addict. I watch and listen to every conceivable forecast platform and whenever there is a consensus on the likelihood of snow, my palms get sweaty and my mind starts racing as to what the photographic possibilities might be. It pays to have a plan in place but it also pays to be flexible.

During a flurry of snow in late winter, I'd been out looking for red deer but without much success. Heading home I spotted these whooper swans and could see immediately that if they swam in front of the island on Loch Insh, thereby providing a dark background against which the falling snow would show up, a decent image was to be had. Despite a steady procession of walkers and birdwatchers around the loch, these birds, which travel each winter from their

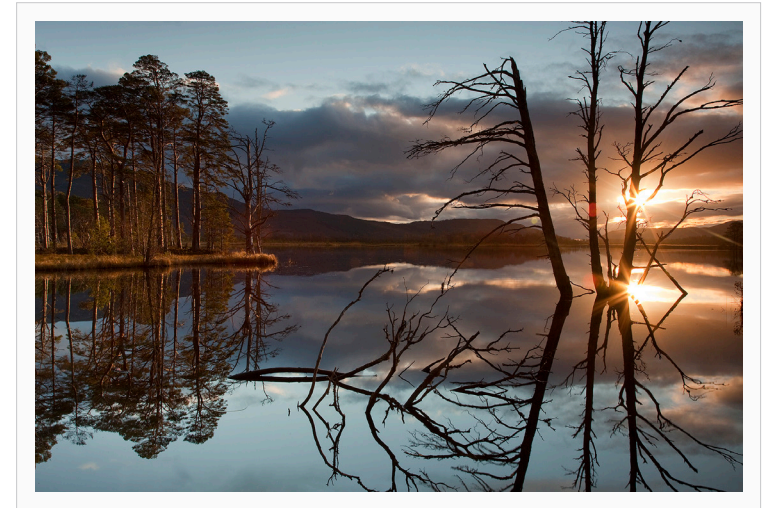
Icelandic breeding grounds, are wary so I slowly made my way to the lochside and waited...and waited...and waited. Finally, I got just a few images when the snow, the background and of course, the swans, came together.

I've always been a great advocate of getting to know your local area intimately; it allows you to better interpret and understand what's going on at different times of year. These swans will be bound for Iceland in March but providing Loch Insh continues to provide them with what they need, they'll be back.



Caledonian sunset

Loch Mallachie, Cairngorms National Park



This picturesque loch, a short walk through the forest beyond Loch Garten, offers myriad opportunities at most times of day and in many different lighting conditions. Many photographers are drawn to the stand of pines that surround one side of the loch and offer fantastic reflections in the peaty water. These dead pines, drowned many years ago, offer an alternative interpretation when silhouetted against a dramatic sky.

Bit by bit Abernethy Forest, which surrounds Loch Mallachie, is expanding. The RSPB is working hard with a wide range of organisations to facilitate natural regeneration of the pines to allow the forest to spread. It's great news for specialist species such as capercaillie and crested tit, it's great news for

climate change but it's also great news for local people. Abernethy is a place to stretch bodies and minds, a place of solitude, a haven for the weary. These forests are much more than just trees.

The walk back to the car is always lighter with a few decent images in the bag. To be fair, the photography on this particular afternoon lasted only minutes and had I not already been in position, I wouldn't have got this shot. Sometimes you just have to take a chance.



Greylag goose in rain

Glenfeshie, Cairngorms National Park



I've never been a species chaser and a shot of something common in great conditions does more for me than a record shot of something rare. These greylag geese breed close to home and spend much of the winter helping themselves to the nutrient-rich grass on my neighbour's farm.

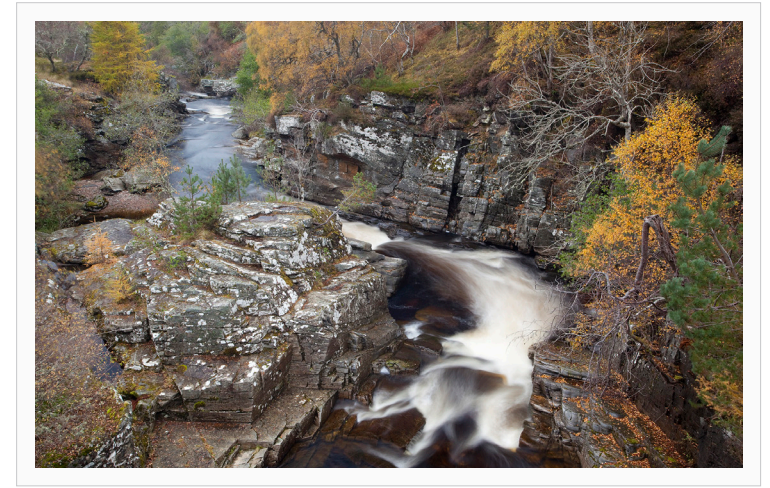
I was photographing them backlit in the soft winter sun when it suddenly started raining. I always maintain that there's no such thing as bad weather just good weather and interesting weather. This sudden deluge was very much the latter but to make the most of it, I knew I had to get low and shoot against a dark background in order to highlight the rain. Yes it was uncomfortable and yes I got (very) wet but it was a small price to pay.

Most geese leave Britain at the end of winter to breed further north but the Cairngorms supports a growing population of greylags, which stay all year. It has to be said that geese have a mixed reputation, with farmers in particular, but their evocative cronking captures the essence of the north, and quite simply our lives would be poorer without them; without all the species who make the Cairngorms their home.



River Tromie in autumn

Cairngorms National Park



I've driven past this scene between Insh and Kingussie countless times and although it's always pleasant, I hadn't really expected anything from it photographically. Now don't get me wrong, I'm not holding this up as anything special but I do like the subtle combination of saturated autumn colour and the winding shape of the River Tromie.

About a mile downstream from where this shot was taken, the River Tromie flows into the Spey and then north through Insh Marshes. When I'm taking images like this, I'm not looking upon the individual image as a trophy, but as a component within a wider portfolio or story. Just as the River Tromie is connected to the Spey and the river's myriad life forms, I try to connect my images to one another to allow a more meaningful story to be told. In other

words I try to practice photographic ecology – documenting not just the ambassador species and blue chip landscapes, but also the bits in between – the glue, which holds the story together.

Story is something that characterizes the Cairngorms more than most places. The constantly evolving story between people and nature is something that fascinates and often bemuses me. As we become better informed, our understanding of nature and the services it provides, is very different to what it was just a generation ago. Just as forests are much more than just trees, rivers like the Tromie are much more than just water.



Osprey in downpour

Glenfeshie, Cairngorms National Park



I have to admit I've got a bit of a thing for ospreys. Not only are they spectacular birds, but their story of recovery is one of great symbolism. From a recolonisation in 1954, their numbers have steadily grown to over 200 pairs in Scotland and increasingly, ospreys are finding their way back to historical strongholds in England and Wales for the first time in a century or more. They are a conservation success story; an island of hope in a sea of despair. Moreover, they are a symbol of how nature responds when we allow it to.

Around 10 years ago with the help of renowned raptor expert Roy Dennis, I put up an artificial nesting platform on the River Feshie close to my home. Within two years a pair of ospreys had bred; the same pair have returned from Africa each year ever since and have raised chicks almost every summer.

Ospreys have become something of an avian soap opera with the lives of individual birds tracked on the internet by tens of thousands of people who like me, not only recognize the symbolism of their story, but are humbled by their perilous annual migration to West Africa and back, and by their loyalty to both mate and nest site. They are though just a piece in a bigger, wilder jigsaw, a jigsaw that depends on the efforts of lots of people to not only protect ospreys but the rivers and wetlands they rely on. Like all conservation efforts, the osprey's story isn't confined by lines on a map; it doesn't end when they leave the Cairngorms National Park. Conservation is a global challenge, which needs to be met by a global army.



Osprey fishing at dawn

Rothiemurchus, Cairngorms National Park

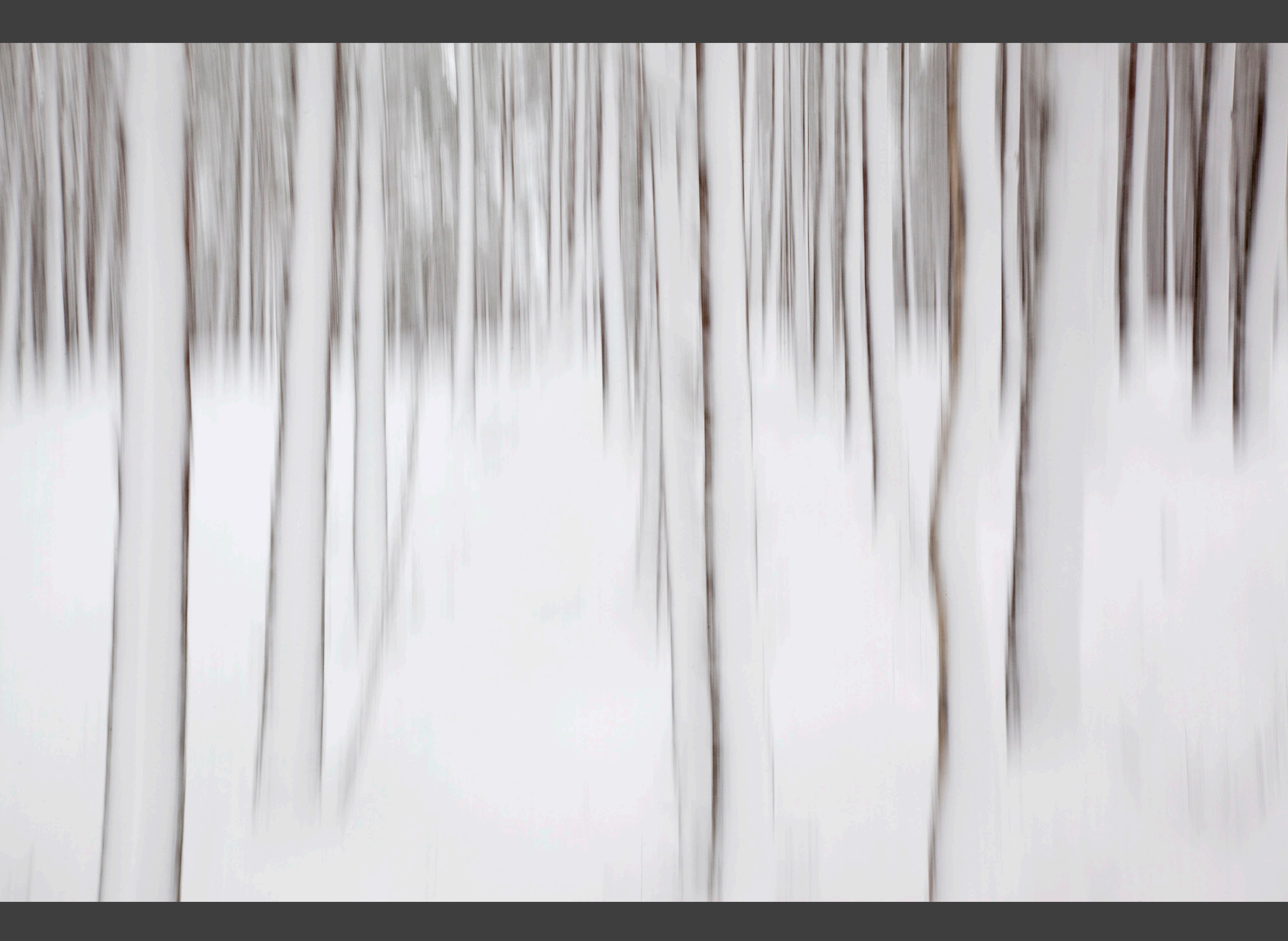


A few years ago the trout fishery at Rothiemurchus opened its doors to photographers. The site has been a favoured fishing ground for ospreys for decades, but now, one of the fishery's ponds is dedicated solely to photography. This is just one of an increasing number of purpose-built facilities for wildlife photographers and enthusiasts. The growth in nature-based tourism has put an economic value on birds like ospreys and many businesses throughout the Cairngorms are now built upon the increasing public appetite to get up close with charismatic wildlife.

It had been a frustrating morning with near-perfect conditions but despite several birds circling, no dives. As the sun got stronger, the light was becoming contrasty, when suddenly the radio crackled and my guide – watching from some distance away - alerted me to an osprey overhead. Within seconds the

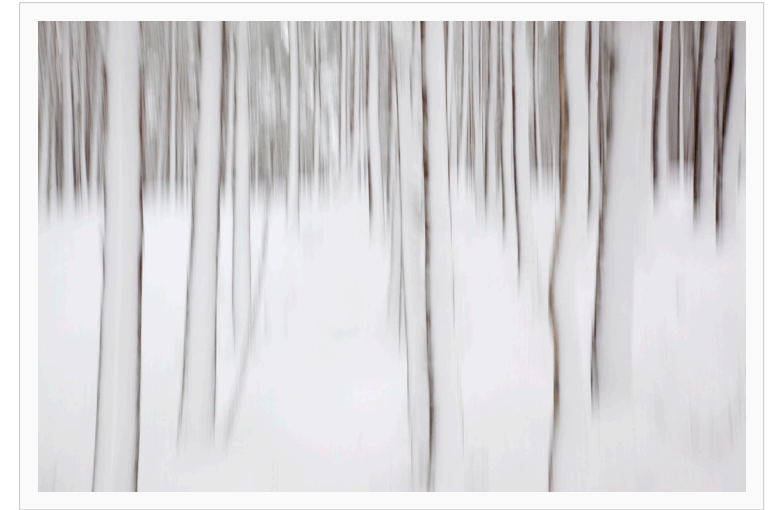
bird was in the water, plunging bullet-like from above. With a fish gripped in its talons, it paused on the surface, manoeuvring its heavy load prior to take off. The flat-calm peaty water provided a perfect canvass for a mirror image of this spectacular fish hunter.

In a flash, the early start, the cold, the boredom, the anticipation dashed by disappointment – all of that was forgotten and as silence returned to my hide, I couldn't stop smiling.



Impressionistic winter forest

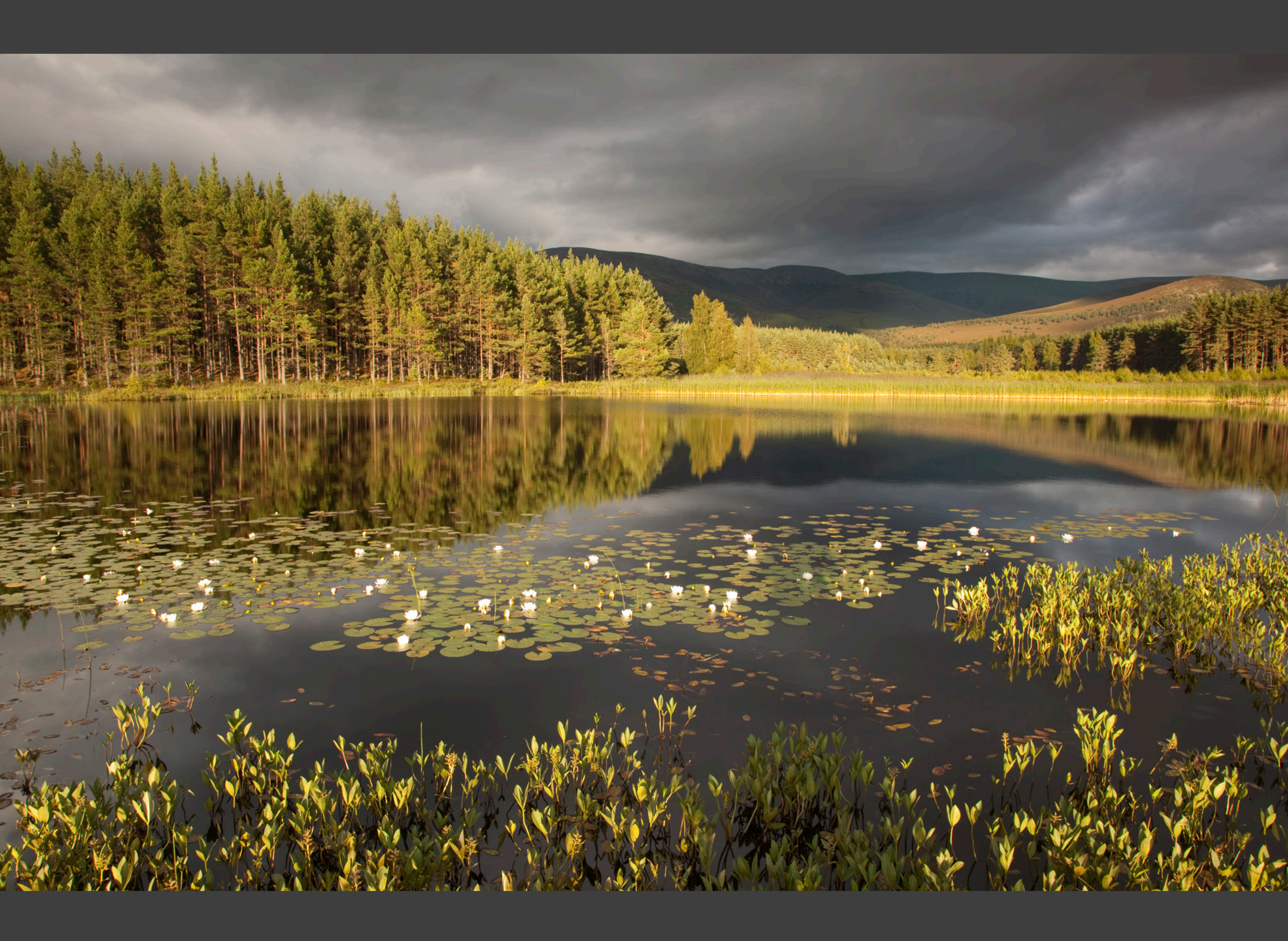
Glen Tanar, Deeside, Cairngorms National Park



The forests of the Cairngorms are changing. Post-war plantings of native Scots pine forests are now maturing across the National Park and despite their industrial origins, are now playing their part in forest connectivity and aiding habitat-deprived species such as capercaillie and red squirrel. Recent forestry policy at a local and national level has changed beyond recognition to reflect a growing understanding of forest ecology. In many of the Cairngorms' plantation forests, under-storey species such as blaeberry are prospering whilst birch, alder, willow and rowan are all regaining ground and contributing to forest diversity.

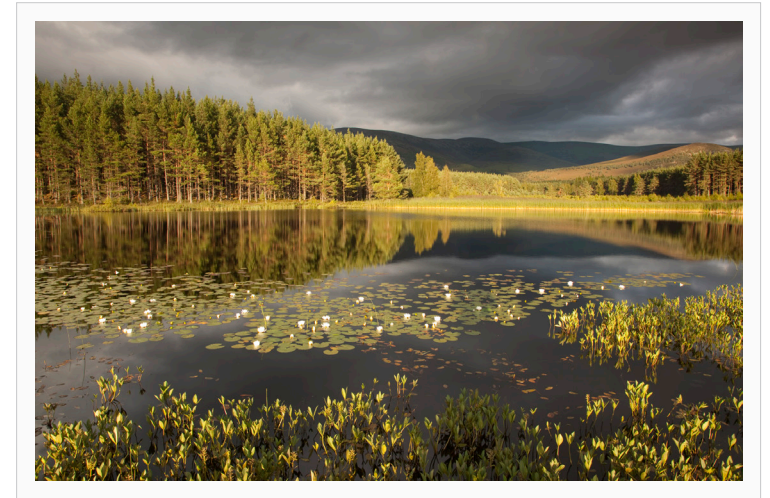
Several hours of blizzardous conditions had coated each and every pine in this forest with an even layer of wind-blasted snow. By emphasising the graphic patterns within the forest, I hoped to celebrate texture and form rather than produce a more literal interpretation.

Planting of native woodland is something everyone can get involved with. Communities, farmers, landowners and conservation bodies, all working to improve The Park's biodiversity, always welcome volunteer tree planters and if you own even the smallest of gardens, why not stick a rowan or a birch in the ground and do your bit!



Summer storm brewing

Uath Lochans, Glenfeshie, Cairngorms National Park



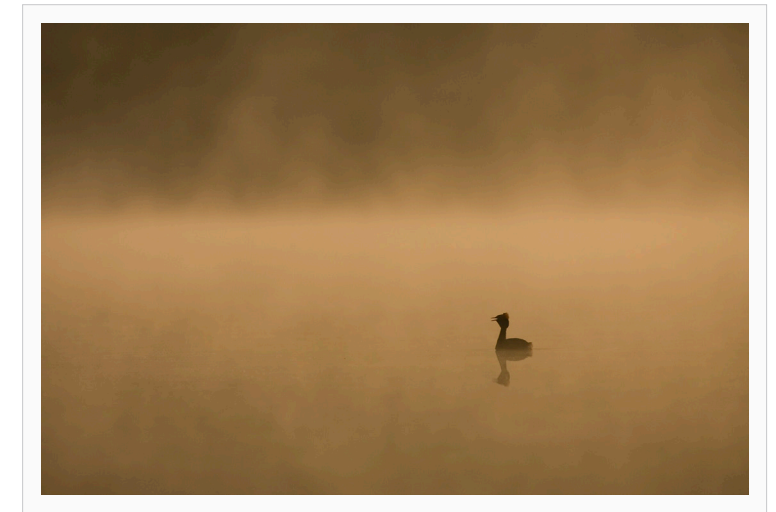
I hadn't set out to take pictures on this particular evening in July but seeing the storm clouds gathering, I knew that there was potential for dramatic conditions in a nearby forest wetland. The evening was hot, humid and still and in July that means one thing: midges. I've never been one for balaclavas, hats or in fact anything that claws at my face or head (despite the fashion at the time I never did get my ear pierced as a teenager), so midges are not something I easily tolerate. I set myself a 20-minute window for the light to appear – anything beyond that and I knew I'd either have to leave or hang myself such was the ferocity of the midges that evening. Everything has its place in the world (except midges!). Fortunately the sun pierced the clouds in time and lit the forest against the brooding backdrop of the hills beyond. Job done.

On more relaxing evenings at this series of lochans I've witnessed some memorable sightings such as otter cubs playing, a pine marten sniffing my boot and a golden eagle circling overhead. So reminiscent is this bog woodland of Finland or Sweden that it doesn't take a huge leap of imagination to catch the briefest of glimpses of a stalking lynx. The role of apex predators in the forest ecosystem is now much better understood and in my view, there is little to be lost from having lynx back and a huge amount to be gained.



Slavonian grebe at dawn

Cairngorms National Park, Scotland

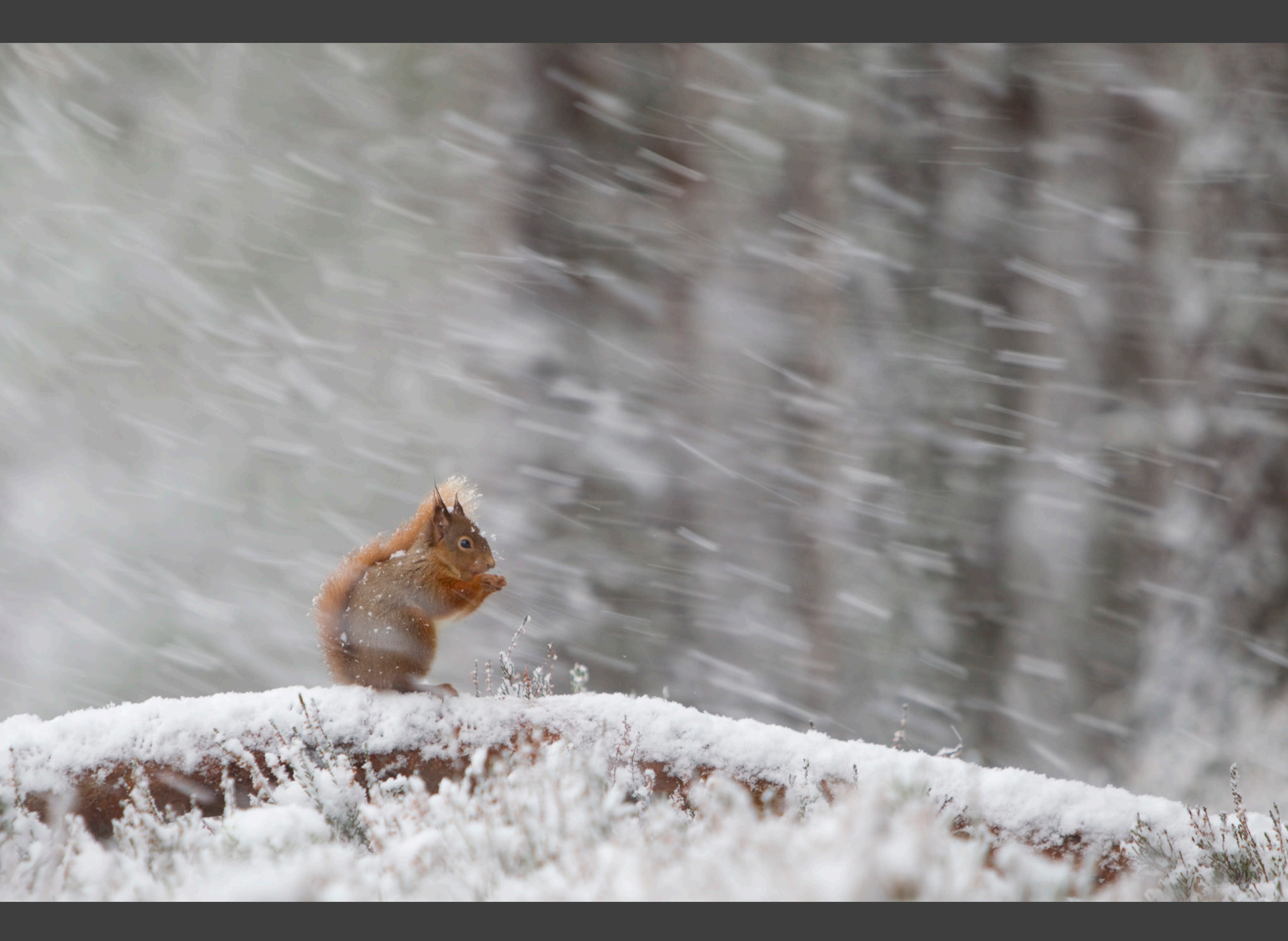


As you might have detected from other pictures in this book, I'm a sucker for simple, graphic images, which are defined more by the conditions in which they were taken, than by the subject itself. As far as subjects go however, there are few more glamorous to a wildlife photographer than the Slavonian grebe, a rare northern breeder, which holds onto a tenuous grip in a few secluded, sedge-lined lochs in northern Scotland.

This was one of those mornings. Clear skies overnight had laid the foundation for a veil of mist that enveloped loch and river. The breeze had not yet woken and the silence was peppered with the drumming of woodpeckers and the

distant bubbling of black grouse. Slowly the blue mist turned orange, backlit by a weak April sun. These are the moments to savour; these are the moments that make your life better, richer.

For an hour the warmth of a new day did battle with the freezing night air and during that hour, I shot many images. More importantly however, I refuelled my spirit and as the mist dispersed and the breeze predictably picked up ruffling the loch, I headed home with a camera full of digital pictures and a head full of lifelong images.



Red squirrel in blizzard

Inshriach forest, Cairngorms National Park



Let's face it; red squirrels have been photographed very well over the years by several generations of photographers. That doesn't make them easy and without the decade-plus of supplementary feeding that I've invested, images like this would be nigh on impossible to achieve.

On the back of this fallen pine branch is a small tin full of hazelnuts. The squirrel knows the nuts are there because he comes to the same spot every day. The only difference is that today, I'm sat in my sunken hide as a blizzard rages through the forest. I love falling snow so I resisted the temptation to go 'too tight' with the framing and instead zoomed out to include a suggestion of the squirrel's pine forest home. Slowing the shutter speed slightly, I blurred the falling snowflakes but kept the squirrel sharp.

Like ospreys, red squirrels are symbolic. Only a couple of generations ago they were considered a pest with a bounty payable on each one killed. Now, they are a conservation priority. I really hope that this new relationship with

other species, fuelled as it is by better science and wider understanding of that science, lasts longer than 'conservation trends' of the past. If we're serious about red squirrels remaining part of the Cairngorms' landscape, we need to be serious about forest expansion and connectivity. Too often we've leaned towards cherry-picking charismatic species when it comes to conservation funding – it's a much easier 'ask' than long-term, habitat-based initiatives. The fact is however, that red squirrels – and crested tits, capercaillie and narrow-headed wood ants – will only survive if there's a vibrant forest ecosystem in place to allow them to.

Thanks for listening, soapbox going back in cupboard!



Autumn reflection

Loch Vaa, Cairngorms National Park



There was little picture-taking potential when I arrived at this secluded loch, a favourite dawn haunt of mine. The water was rippled, kissed by a light breeze and the light was uninspiring. It's easy under such circumstances to assume you've wasted your time, but often given half an hour or so, the weather will change and opportunities open up. And so it was on this day.

With such a pleasing scene in front of you, it's tempting to consume it all. Very often it's better to pick out sections with compositional rhythm and graphic structure. I wanted to include the small stand of leafless aspen on the right; I also wanted to crop more tightly on the main birch to the left but I couldn't do both without including a distracting stand of birch trunks just out of right frame – you can't have it all!

I wasn't particularly excited with this shot at the time and it languished on my hard drive for several months. Thinking back to the day it was shot however, I remember the clarity of the crisp autumn air and reflecting that beyond their obvious beauty, right in front of me these trees were helping keep that air clean and fresh. You don't have to be a photographer or even a nature-lover, to benefit from these forests; they clean our air, enrich the soil, and provide us with an outdoor gym. Our lives would be poorer without them.



Birch tree detail

Abernethy Forest, Cairngorms National Park



I didn't set out this day to shoot a birch tree but I did set out with an open mind and an understanding that in overcast conditions, I wasn't going to be shooting the big landscape against the dramatic sky. Once you tailor your target subjects to the conditions, you'll use those conditions much more effectively.

Wandering along a remote path in Abernethy, I came across this elderly birch with its lichen-encrusted branches and its dwindling crown of autumnal leaves, which in a day or so would lie on the forest floor. The immediate attraction was the subtle combination of colours and the radial pattern of the tree's boughs. I'm often drawn to these images but I accept that they are very personal and rarely have mass appeal.

Abernethy forest is undergoing something of a transformation with its owners, the RSPB, planning to double the size of the forest to 100 square miles. That doesn't happen overnight of course, especially bearing in mind that the 'forest' reaches right up into the inhospitable realms of the Cairngorm Mountains, but wandering the lower tracks it's easy to see the start of this process with pines, birches, alders and willows sprouting from the ground where for decades, grazing pressure prevented any significant regeneration. Thankfully it seems this birch won't be the last of its kind in Abernethy.



Loch an Eilein lone pine

Rothiemurchus, Cairngorms National Park



This is a very old image now – shot on film perhaps 15 years ago – but it remains one of my favourites. This tree, perfectly reflected in the peaty loch, has been in the crosshairs of many photographers and over the years, I've visited this spot countless times in the hope of improving on this early image. I've come close many times but I've never had just the right amount of mist, just the right amount of light and just the right combination of tones - warm and cool. The tree is not difficult to find; it's the conditions that are more elusive and once again, it's the conditions not the subject that makes the shot.

Rothiemurchus has become one of the most heavily visited areas in the National Park and the walk around Loch an Eilein is an understandable favourite. The Estate provides many facilities for visitors from a range of

well-maintained paths to clay pigeon shooting and wildlife photography. Rothiemurchus has to balance the economic benefit of visitors against a commitment to protect a fragile environment, notably in their case, the ancient pinewood where the likes of capercaillie and pine martens find sanctuary. For me, supporting estates like Rothiemurchus is an important part of 'giving back' and to this end, I can often be found in the Estate's coffee shop at Inverdrue with a cheese scone and a cappuccino. All in the name of giving back obviously!



Pine marten in heather

Glenfeshie, Cairngorms National Park



Pine martens are not as difficult to see as they were even 10 years ago and it's easy to imagine that they're now 'common'. I certainly know a fair few folk who contest there are now 'too many' and blame the crash in capercaillie numbers on pine marten predation. I've never had a satisfactory explanation of what 'too many' actually means (my guess is that it means there are more than there used to be) but whatever your views on pine martens, their recovery, along with that of many other predatory species, is a sign of our changing relationship with nature.

The truth is that these species are bouncing back from an historical low brought about by habitat destruction and excessive hunting. Whether there are now 'too many' is a value judgement.

Now protected by law, young martens can be very confiding and in July when they venture from their dens for the first time, are often active during daylight hours. This youngster, enticed with peanuts and raisins, was active close to my

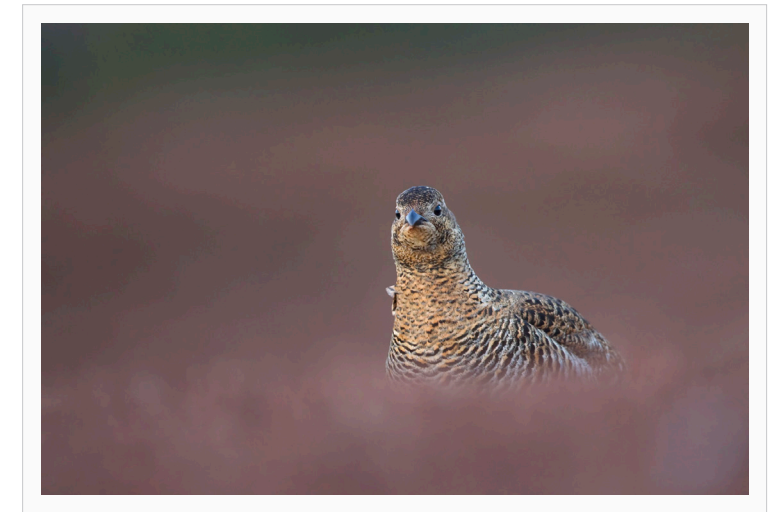
home for a few weeks in late summer and running the gauntlet of millions of midges, I secured a few nice portraits in the flowering heather. Come the autumn, the marten disappeared and was never seen again.

The recovery of pine martens crystallises a question that Park Managers constantly wrestle with: What do we (both residents and visitors) want the Cairngorms National Park to look like? The answer of course depends on whom you're asking but I hope that few would argue that a healthy environment supporting a wide range of flora and fauna is something that makes all our lives richer. Living alongside species that can have an impact on our orderly lives is perhaps a pre-requisite of that.



Black grouse at lek

Braemar, Cairngorms National Park



Black grouse are a blue chip species for most wildlife photographers and the experience of being in the midst of a lek (display) site on a spring dawn is something that will stay with you forever – if it doesn't you should give up photography. Even before first light the birds arrive signalled only by the sound of fluttering wings. Once settled, there unfolds a carefully choreographed ritual with male birds, or blackcock, burbling and cooing as they proclaim their superiority over rivals. There are sporadic punch-ups, some serious, some less so and for the photographer, this is a nail-biting period. It's light enough to see what's going on but still too dark to secure any images. An over-flying raptor, patrolling fox or dawn dog walker could end it all before a shutter has been pressed. The sun peaks over the horizon and bit by bit strokes the lekking grouse.

I'd been in my hide overnight and by 7.00am when the sun finally hit the display area, the birds had already been hard at it for several hours. Only when the females, or greyhens, appeared did things really kick off. The males went crazy

but as the females are much less often photographed, I disciplined myself to focus on one individual who was sat in a dip allowing me to frame her with out-of-focus heather. It's a straightforward portrait when all said and done but what a morning!

Black grouse have been declining in most parts of the UK for decades but here in the Cairngorms, thanks to the efforts of dedicated land managers, there are signs of an upturn in their fortunes. Black grouse 'safaris' are run by a number of groups in the spring and although an early start is needed, my advice would be simple: do it.



Enchanted forest

Insh Marshes, Cairngorms National Park



It was the end of a long wet day and my creative resolve had all but drained away: it was time for home. The deal was sealed when thick, wet snow started falling – not the sort I normally pray for, but dreary, half-hearted snow: going home snow. And then I saw this collection of trees – a few gnarled old birches with a couple of rowans poking their heads just above the canopy. Ordinarily I'd have walked past them but a sprinkling of icing sugar snow, made me stop. The light levels were very low but the autumnal rowans were drifting in the breeze and spots of white on the ground seemed to add a fresh colour dimension to the scene.

For half an hour I experimented with different creative approaches but eventually stuck with just a slow shutter speed and a very slight de-focusing at the end of the 5-second exposure. The result is a nod towards impressionism combined with a hold on realism. For me this image is a simple reminder of a dark, sodden and yet ultimately splendid evening in a local birchwood. Magic can happen anywhere in nature.



Capercaillie in blizzard

Glenfeshie, Cairngorms National Park



Ordinarily capercaillie, the largest member of the grouse family, are secretive birds offering only the briefest of glimpses as they clatter their way out of a Scots pine at the slightest disturbance. Occasionally however, a testosterone-fuelled male will abandon his inhibitions and attack anyone and anything that enters what he considers to be his territory. This is one such bird.

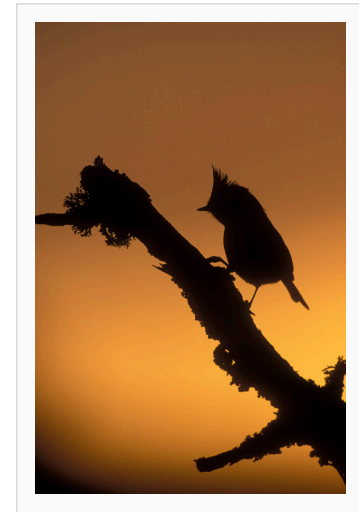
Let's be straight here: Capercaillie are not doing well in Scotland, in part it is believed, due to increasing disturbance. There is then, a hotly-contested debate as to whether, as a conservation-minded photographer, I should be pursuing this subject at all, let alone alerting others through my images, of this bird's presence. That's perhaps a discussion for another day.

With deep snow on the ground I knew that if I could find the capercaillie, there were shots to be had. Rather than repeat what I had covered before, I specifically wanted to use the differential focus of a long telephoto lens to make the bird 'pop' from the muted forest background. The grouse followed me behind a shallow snowdrift and I dashed back to my camera, which was positioned low to the ground to achieve that lovely intimate perspective. Using a shallow depth of field, I nailed a few frames in the driving snow before he resumed his terrorisation of a not-as-nimble-as-he-used-to-be photographer.



Crested tit silhouette

Abernethy forest, Cairngorms National Park



There are a few images, not many but a few, that you never tire of. This is one of my all time favourites; not because it's anything special but because it was the first half-decent shot of a bird that, at the time, I'd only just been introduced to.

Crested tits in the UK are restricted to the pine forests of northern Scotland. Found throughout Strathspey to the west of the Cairngorms, they are bizarrely absent from Deeside to the east in spite of seemingly suitable habitat. The lack of a forest corridor connecting east and west perhaps hints at the bird's inability to break fresh ground.

'Cresties' can be attracted to artificial food during the winter and I have a feeding station close to home. Setting up a perch next to the feeder, which would offer the possibility of a silhouette, I then waited for a suitable winter sunset. The very obvious crest is the signature to this image; I have an identical shot but with a great tit on the perch – it doesn't work half as well. The distinct trilling of a crested tit atop a frosted bog pine in the last light of a winter's day – that's why I take pictures.



Scottish wildcat on the prowl

Inshriach forest, Cairngorms National Park



Seeing a wildcat in Scotland is the Holy Grail for many; even people that have lived all their lives in the remotest corners of the Highlands, have never set eyes on this rarest and most elusive of predators.

About a decade ago a wildlife rehabilitator friend called me with a problem. He'd rescued and brought back to health a Scottish wildcat but couldn't release it where he'd found it. After much deliberation, I agreed he could release the now fit cat close to my home. To ensure the cat had a fighting chance, I agreed to leave food out for several weeks but as it turned out, once the holding pen was opened, the cat was gone. Until about 6 weeks later when a report came from a local birdwatcher of a wildcat having been seen. Sure enough, the cat had turned up and I tempted it with a dead rabbit. For nearly 18 months, I left food out in the forest and the cat became very approachable and as you might have guessed, very photographable.

To this day, the images I shot under this bizarre set of circumstances remain widely used and almost unique. For this image, I placed a piece of rabbit on the forest track directly in front of my camera and lay down. The cat approached

with that look of intent, that look of a predator and I shot a sequence as he walked straight towards me.

One day in the early summer I went looking for the cat but unusually by this stage, couldn't find him. I never saw him again.

The Cairngorms is one of the wildcat's few remaining strongholds and collaboration between conservation groups, landowners and gamekeepers has resulted in a wider understanding of wildcat behaviour. Still rare and still threatened but thanks to projects like *Highland Tiger*, which originated in the Cairngorms, the future for wildcats looks less tenuous than it once did.

If you ever see a wildcat in Scotland, report it then celebrate – it's a once-in-a-lifetime event.



Hen harrier coming to nest

Lairg, Sutherland



This is the only image in this book taken outside of the National Park and the reason is quite simple: there are very few, if any, hen harriers breeding in the Park, despite extensive suitable habitat. That fact is a stain on the reputation of many land managers who do a great job for wildlife and are blighted by a tiny majority who insist on breaking a well-established law, which protects all birds of prey. I have some understanding of why harriers and other raptors are still shot and poisoned, but I can't bring myself to condone it. Some things are just wrong.

Over the years I've always tried to be mindful and respectful of different cultural viewpoints and I hope that might go some way to establishing and preserving solid relationships with researchers, farmers, gamekeepers and landowners. Such a relationship led to this image. I joined a raptor researcher who was monitoring several harrier nests up in the north. Locating a harrier nest isn't

always easy and even when a suitable site is found, a Schedule 1 licence is required before any photography can start. With a licence in hand, a hide has to be worked in to the nest site – each day the hide is moved closer to the nest, each time checking the birds are accepting of it. Only when all of this preparation is done, can photography begin in earnest.

I hope that one day, I can add to my limited portfolio of hen harrier images inside the National Park and that these spectacular birds will be afforded sanctuary from illegal persecution. Just now that opportunity seems some way off.



Mountain hare in winter

Grampian Mountains, Cairngorms National Park



This image is very much a work in progress. If I'm honest I'm a bit bored of full-frame mountain hare images; they're an animal that cries out to be shown as part of its wider habitat. Upon spotting this winter hare I deliberately held back realising that if it ran along the snowy ridge, I could photograph it against the snow-laden corrie wall beyond. In this case luck was with me and the plan came together. That said, I really would have preferred it if the snow had been blowing as so often it does in the Cairngorms: that would have added atmosphere and really emphasised the inhospitable environment where these hares live. Like I say, it's a work in progress.

Mountain hares aren't easy to find and generally speaking, very wary of people. Occasionally however, you might be lucky enough to find a 'sitter', a hare that is seemingly oblivious to human presence. If you find yourself in the presence of

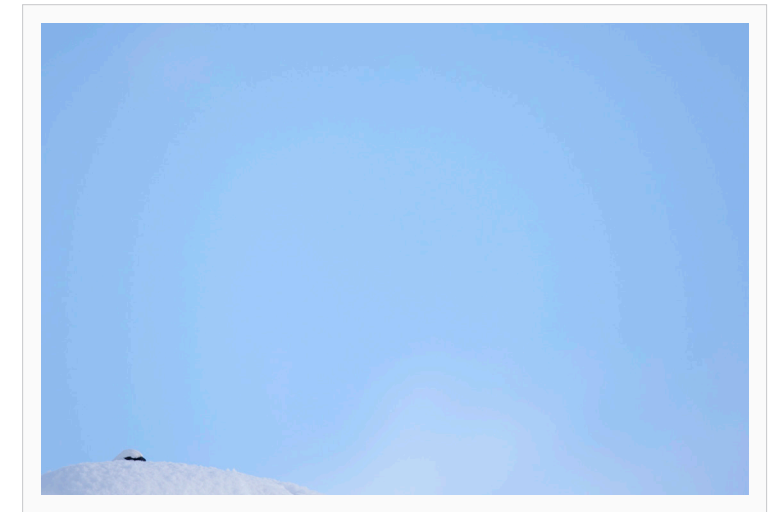
such a hare, it's tempting to get closer and closer but if the surrounding habitat is attractive, try and tell more of a story, be creative with your compositions but more than anything, fill your boots as it might never happen again!

There is some concern over mountain hare populations and research is on-going. In much of the Cairngorms they are the favoured prey of golden eagles so what happens to hares happens to eagles. What was it John Muir said? "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe."



Peeping ptarmigan

Coire-an-Lochain, Grampian Mountains, Cairngorms National Park



These hardy grouse live their lives above around 2,500ft. so if you want to see or photograph them, you have to walk. Uphill.

During the late winter with a careful approach, they are generally tolerant of the odd photographer and many a fine up-close portrait of this alpine specialist can be found. I wanted to try something a little bit different and reveal something of their skulking character.

I often experiment with 'small-in-the-frame' sometimes seeing just how far I can go before small becomes unrecognisable. In this case the cock bird was feeding just the other side of this snow-encrusted boulder and I knew that sooner or

later he'd peep over the rock to check out what I was up to. I wanted this image to be cryptic, even humourous and although I quite like it, there's always room for improvement. The point really is that experimentation is a good thing; sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't but arguably, the world doesn't need any more full-frame portraits so what is there to lose?



Winter Wonderland

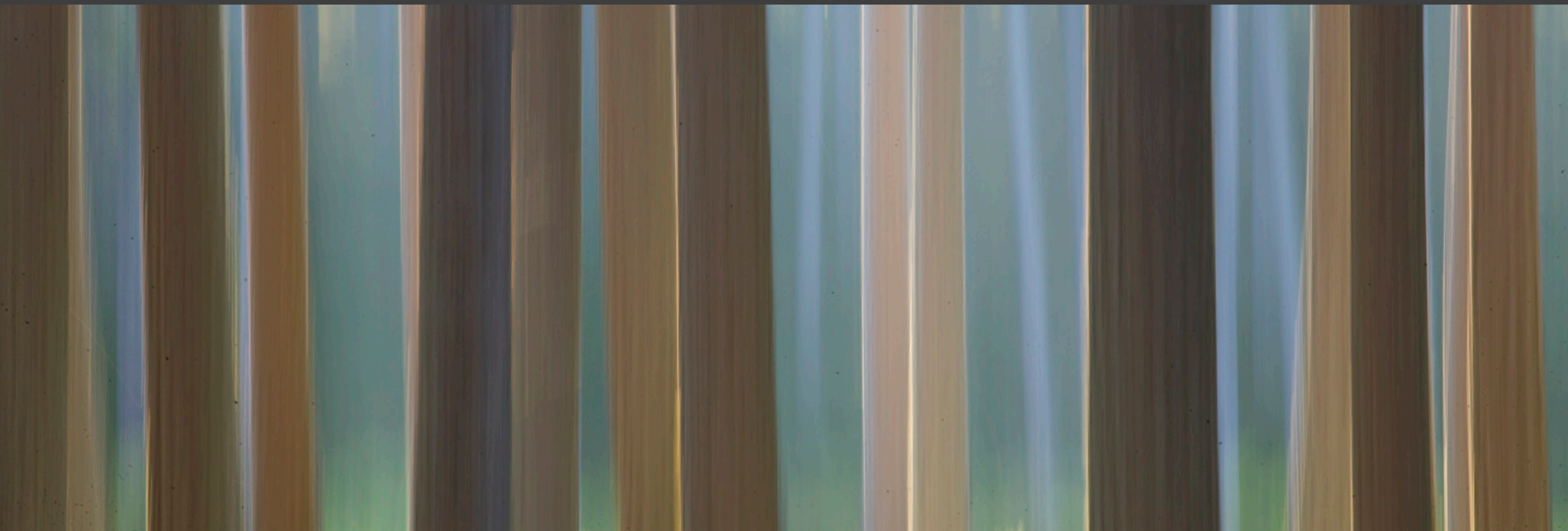
Loch Insh, Cairngorms National Park



As the mist slowly cleared on this freezing winter morning revealing hoar-frosted trees and ice-bound lochs, I went into my usual headless chicken mode as photographic potential sprung up everywhere. Remaining focused under these circumstances is something I've never fully mastered and although I've photographed Loch Insh in all its guises, I just had to stop and capture this scene.

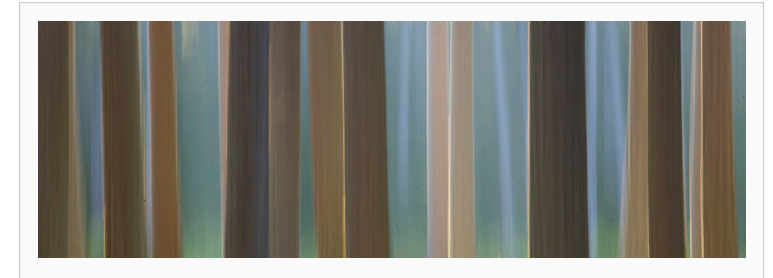
Loch Insh sits at the north end of Insh Marshes, an extensive flood plain fen which borders the River Spey. Along with the restoration of native woodland, wetlands are a priority habitat in the National Park and the Spey, along with its tributaries provides a perfect platform for wetland expansion. In my lifetime I would like to see both beavers and cranes prospering along

the Spey adding to its rich diversity. From an ecological point of view, both could be there tomorrow; the only obstacle is us. Wouldn't it be a mark of our humility if we were able to consider the longer-term societal benefits of a vibrant nature over and above the immediate needs of just ourselves? Standing on the side of Loch Insh listening to the distant bugling of cranes – that really would be something to be proud of.



Backlit pines impression

Braemar, Cairngorms National Park



I'm never as captivated by single-species plantation forests as much as the small tracts of ancient native woodland with all their visual chaos, that persist in places like Abernethy and Rothiemurchus. But just sometimes the graphic, linear trunks of a mature Scots pine woodland, thinned and managed over decades, offer photographic potential beyond that offered by the randomness of a natural forest.

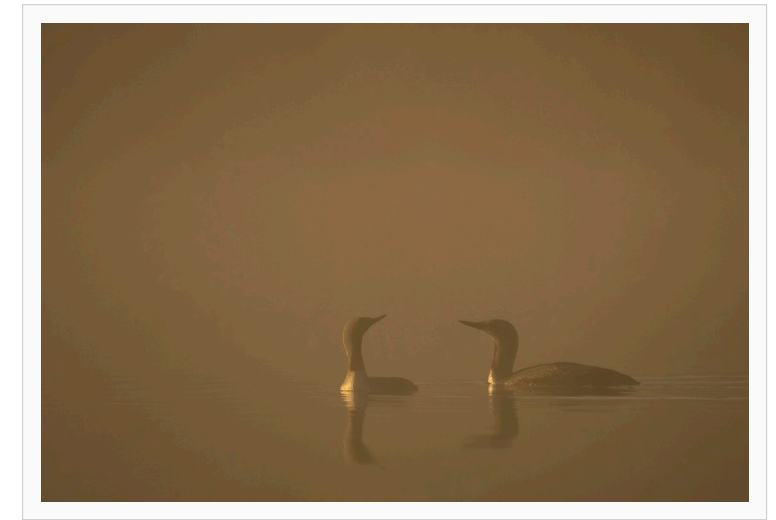
I spotted this small woodland gently backlit by the rising sun on the way to a meeting on Deeside. Initially I drove past it but it nagged at me and a mile or so on, I went back. As is often the case, the image I'd seen when I sped past was not one I could easily recreate in camera and after half an hour of trial

and error, I'd lost the enthusiasm and was set to move on (by now late for my meeting). I tried a 'drag shot' (moving the camera through a vertical plane during the exposure) and although by now I was going through the motions, I was pleasantly surprised with the result. I took another and then another.

The meeting turned out to be a bit of a waste of time but I was pleased with this image and I've since held on to the notion that if I'm visually attracted to a scene, there's a picture in there somewhere.

Red-throated divers at dawn

Cairngorms National Park

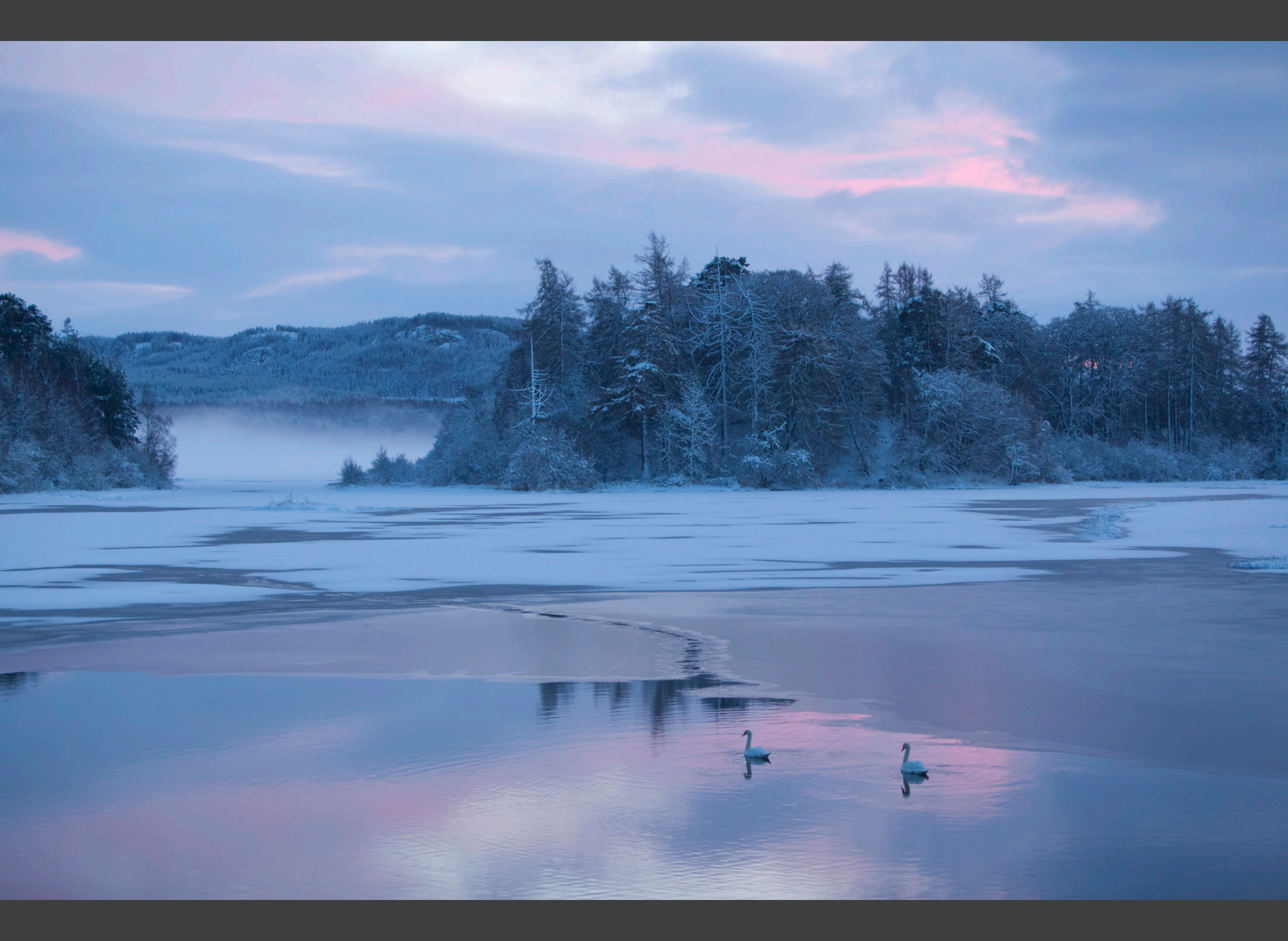


There are some birds that just do it. I'm not sure what 'it' is but I am sure that 'it' calls me back time and again. Red-throated divers are very much birds of the north; they're primeval, they're enigmatic and in Scotland, they're not easy to photograph.

A few years back a pair settled on a loch near to my home (you'll notice I haven't given the precise location in this one instance) attracted no doubt by an artificial nesting platform installed by the landowner. One morning in spring there was that heady mix of sun and mist hanging in the air and I knew

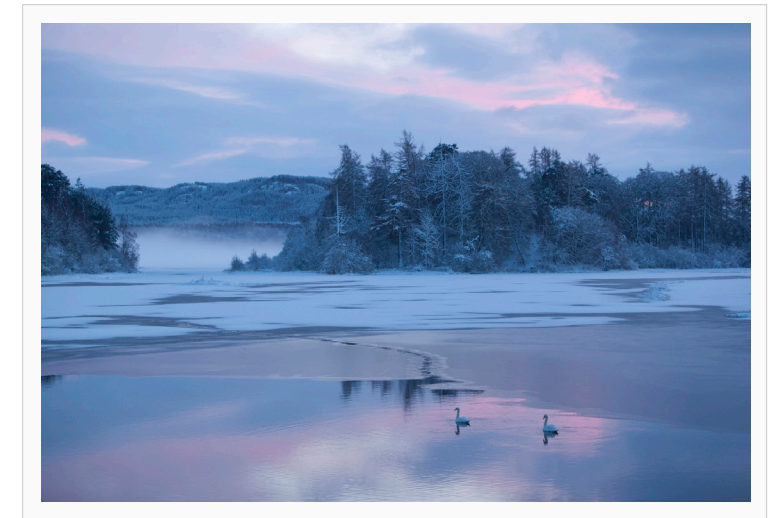
immediately where I needed to be. Divers are wary rather than flighty and although they knew I was there, they went about their courtship ritual and every now and then the forest would reverberate to their haunting, mournful call – the best sound in the natural world for me.

I lay down at the side of the loch and followed them around with my lens. They never came close but it didn't matter: having them occupy a small corner of the frame with the dawn mist filling out the empty space, suited me just fine.



Mute swans at sunset

Loch Insh, Cairngorms National Park



It had been a long and unusually cold winter. Most of Loch Insh was frozen and the swans were confined to a dwindling patch of open water just under the bridge, which crosses the northern end of the loch. As the sun dipped painting the sky a subtle blend of blues and pinks, I knew the best way to capture the scene was from above – above being from the bridge.

At first I was cursing the birds for ruining the perfect reflection but once I'd decided to include them as the main subject, it was a case of waiting until they separated and fell into a harmonious composition. In truth I'd have preferred

them swimming towards me and in the bottom left of the frame away from the ice but as I've said before, you can only shoot what's in front of you.

My son Sam, fourteen and a keen photographer at the time, didn't help this image as he dashed back and forth across the bridge creating a 'bounce' in already low light. The fact is, his image turned out much better than mine!



Storm over Coire Garbhlach

Glenfeshie, Cairngorms National Park



This glacial-carved corrie on the eastern side of the River Feshie affords otherworldly views over the glen and beyond to the hills of the Monadhliath. Shot on commission from the owner of the estate, I was granted vehicle access, which meant I could respond more quickly to favourable weather conditions. 'Favourable' in this case meant very windy and therefore very changeable, a characteristic of July in the Cairngorms.

Sitting in my Land Rover for several hours watching the rain come and go, etched against lifeless skies, I was beginning to wonder whether I'd read the right forecast. Finally as the sun sank towards the horizon, the sky started to break. I wanted drama above all else and ironically after all the rain, I wanted to nail the shot before any blue appeared in the clearing sky. Using the gorge in the corrie wall as a lead in line, I frantically composed the shot, grabbing a frame here and there between the gusting wind.

Glenfeshie is a Highland estate in change as efforts are made to re-establish much of the native woodland, which would have once carpeted the river flood plain up to the altitudinal treeline. Already in Coire Garbhlach, pictured here, dwarf birches and willows are peeping above the soil for the first time in decades, the result in a reduction in grazing pressure. Exciting times.

Glenfeshie is a large estate but this 'rewilding' project on its own is a small drop in a big ocean. Repairing and reconnecting whole ecosystems needs a collaborative effort from everyone who has an interest in the Cairngorms. Conservation today has to be at a landscape scale where even places like Glenfeshie become a small piece in a massive jigsaw.



Great-spotted woodpecker in winter

Inshriach Forest, Cairngorms National Park



For some time now I've been meaning to dedicate some serious time to photographing this colourful woodland engineer. It's not that great-spotted woodpeckers are rare but beyond the obvious portrait, they're not particularly well photographed and especially as part of their woodland habitat.

The woodpeckers close to my home are synonymous with birch and alder, trees that grow fast and die young and which can easily be excavated for food or indeed, nesting chambers. I wanted to 'place' a woodpecker in the birch forest in winter and although again, this is a work in progress (I really needed falling snow), I liked the cheeky pose of this male bird as he checked out the sound of my camera from the nearby hide.

Experienced photographers will know that this is not a chance encounter. On the back of the birch tree there is a tempting blend of fat and nuts which is put in place each day to ensure that when photographic conditions are good, the subject is (almost) guaranteed to put in an appearance. Without the food you could while away many a fruitless day without even a glimpse of a woodpecker. Moreover, without the birch woodland, the woodpecker wouldn't be there in the first place!



Winter blanket

Loch Morlich, Cairngorms National Park



You might have noticed a slight bias towards winter images in this book. In my view, alongside autumn, winter is the best month for both wildlife and landscape photography in the Cairngorms. When the conditions come good, there's absolutely nowhere I'd rather be.

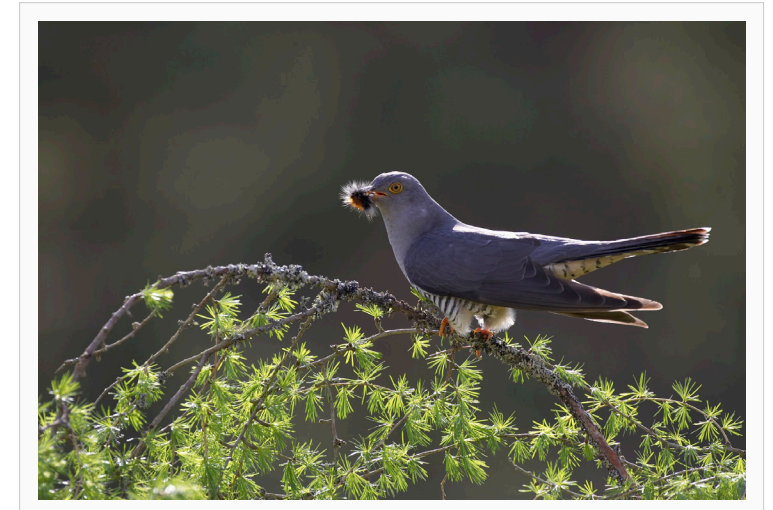
Loch Morlich sits alongside the road to Cairngorm and is therefore busy with skiers on a day like this, coming and going from the mountain. Unsurprisingly, such a scene attracts even the most casual photographers and before long, the edge of the loch is peppered with footprints, dog prints and sledge prints, so get there early!

In late winter the sun sets to the southwest and thanks to the distant hills, is all but down by around 2.30pm. Shooting directly into the low light requires a bit of careful judgment – too early and your image is full of flare, too late and the subtle modelling of the snowdrifts falls flat in the absence of light. I would have preferred more cloud in the sky but even so, it was a wonderful if frantic, ten minutes of photography.



Male cuckoo with caterpillar

Inshriach Forest, Cairngorms National Park



Cuckoos are not necessarily synonymous with the Cairngorms although with an abundance of meadow pipits breeding in the summer and a wealth of herb-rich pasture supporting healthy populations of caterpillars, the attraction is obvious.

I included this image more for the lighting rather than the subject. Let's be straight here, the lighting is far from perfect. I entered my hide in the mid-afternoon hoping for a visit as the sun dropped and the shape of the cuckoo could be described by subtle rim lighting from the rear. In the event, the bird arrived almost immediately so I had to settle for a compromised back-with-a-bit-of-top-lighting. For me, especially given the vibrancy of the larch perch I set out, this is still more visually compelling than by shooting 'with' the light.

This shot was secured by closely watching a pair of warring males over a number of days. Each would have his favourite perch and I simply replaced

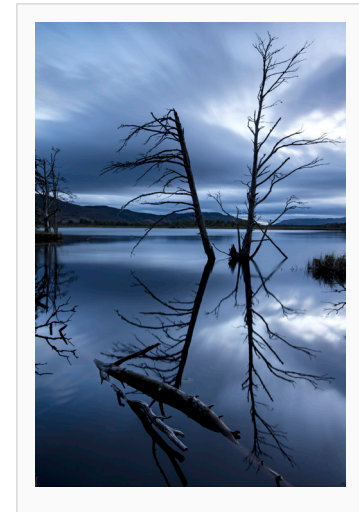
that perch (it happened to be an unattractive fence post) with something more photogenic.

Across the UK cuckoos are in decline and to find out why we need to know more about them – not only here but once they migrate at the end of the summer. Technology has afforded us fascinating insights into the lives of birds that previously we knew little about. Tracking devices are now being fitted to cuckoos to find out where they go and how they get there. Just like with ospreys, cuckoo conservation isn't confined to Scotland or even Europe and if we're to redress their decline, big thinking and big decisions are needed.



Pines in blue

Loch Mallachie, Cairngorms National Park

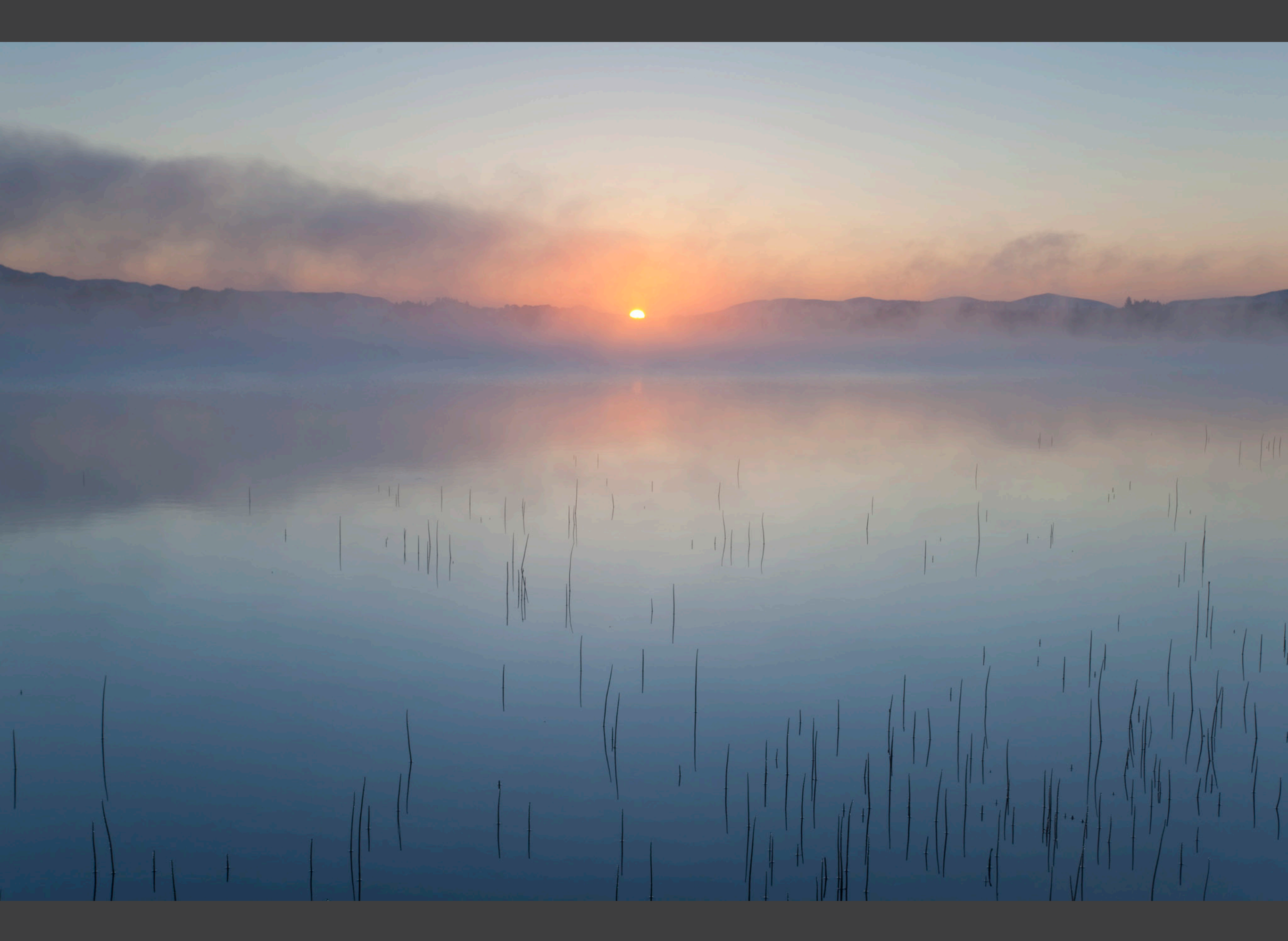


It was one of those days – a Sunday if I recall – when I just couldn't focus on anything. Just to get out of the office, I set off to Loch Garten in the half hope of still water and some sort of colourful sunset. As it turned out I was offered neither so I went for a wander in the forest eventually finding myself at a familiar spot – the shores of Loch Mallachie. There was little in the sky and as the light drained away I sat listening to the silence, broken only by the occasional cronking of overhead geese.

As darkness set in I noticed a break in the clouds and although my enthusiasm had long since waned, my camera was quickly in position and I settled on a 4 minute exposure to blur any cloud movement and smooth out the ripples on the loch. After two exposures, neither of which set me alight, I headed for home.

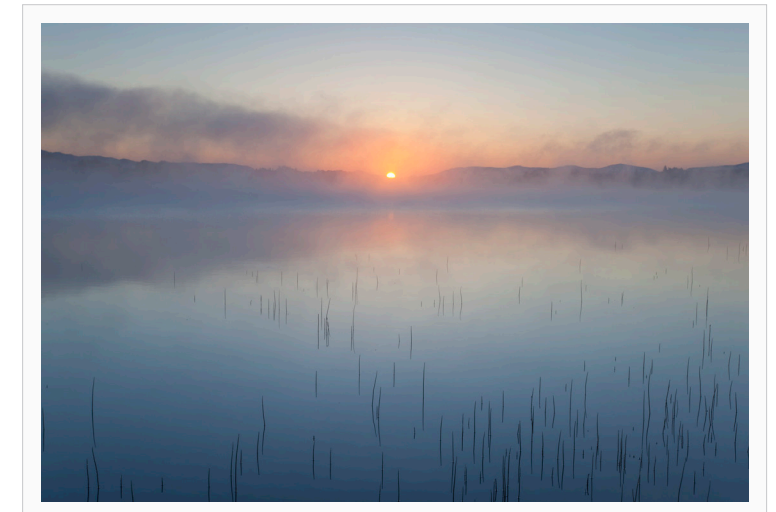
A month or so later this image popped up on my screen. At best it was interesting but with a spoonful of contrast and a cooling of the colour temperature, it grew on me. It's all too easy to pack up assuming the day is done but there's always potential if you keep an open mind.

Ironically on the drive home I got a fantastic sighting of a pine marten – something I'd have missed had I left earlier.



Pastel dawn

Loch Insh, Cairngorms National Park



I'm a weather obsessive at the best of times but from March to May, my meteorological interest goes up a gear or two. Spring is the best time for misty mornings and although I've probably shot far too many such scenes over the years, there's still something about a mirror-calm loch cloaked in tendrils of mist extending and retreating as the morning sun battles to take hold of the day.

The forecast on this late May morning was spot on and that means crawling out of my warm bed before 4am, and with a clear plan in mind. About three minutes after leaving home, my clear plan had changed. The sky was

almost clear so there was no chance of any real sunrise colour. I diverted to the southern end of Loch Insh knowing that the sun would rise at the opposite end of the loch. I waded a short distance into the water to frame a very simple, graphic image with just a smattering of foreground reeds in the bottom half of the image.

I shot just three frames before the subtle cocktail of pastel blue and orange was lost. Fifteen minutes after sunrise the mist had been burnt off and a stiff breeze took control of the loch. Game over.



Mute swan quartet on ice

Loch Insh, Cairngorms National Park



This was a very special morning just a couple of miles from home. Mist carpeted the frozen loch and I watched a small group of both mute and whooper swans wondering what to do in the absence of free-flowing water.

I could see the potential immediately but the swans were grouped together in a huddle preventing a clear silhouette. To compound things, two swans had their heads tucked under their wings. Without any detail, silhouette images rely on strong, graphic lines and really only work for subjects that can be instantly recognised by shape alone.

As the sun gently warmed the day, the mist began to dissipate but the swans remained in a group. I was getting worried that the shot was slipping away and then the silence was broken by a passing train sounding its horn. For once I was grateful for this crude interruption. The swans looked up and parted; now I just needed them all in profile at the same time. To attract their attention I rolled a

small stone onto the ice. Purists might recoil in horror at such unethical practice and I normally wouldn't do it, but I'm prepared on this occasion to hold my hands up, such was the pressing need to nail the shot before the mist gave way.

Later that day the Icelandic whooper swans marooned by the freezing loch, flew south in search of new feeding grounds. Loch Insh remained frozen for several weeks and the next whoopers I saw were flying overhead, honking their contact call, heralding their departure to their breeding grounds. There was a time when I'd be reluctant to admit to a lump in my throat but as I get older, it happens with increasing regularity at the sights and sounds of nature. That morning as I watched the swans heading off to Iceland the lump almost choked me as I silently wished them well.



Winter sunset

Loch Insh, Cairngorms National Park



You'll have noticed by now that I shoot a lot of images around Loch Insh, a picturesque widening of the River Spey as it passes through the village of Kincaig. Whilst it could be argued that I need to extend myself more, having a site local to home that I can reach quickly when conditions are good, makes for high picture-making potential.

Winter sunsets can be spectacular at the southern end of the loch. This one was nice but not as good as I've seen previously. A tad disappointed, I experimented with a very long exposure to blur the cloud movement. The result was a symphony of soft pinks and strident indigos, which reflected more of my interpretation of the scene at the time.



Autumn storm approaching

Rothiemurchus Forest, Cairngorms National Park

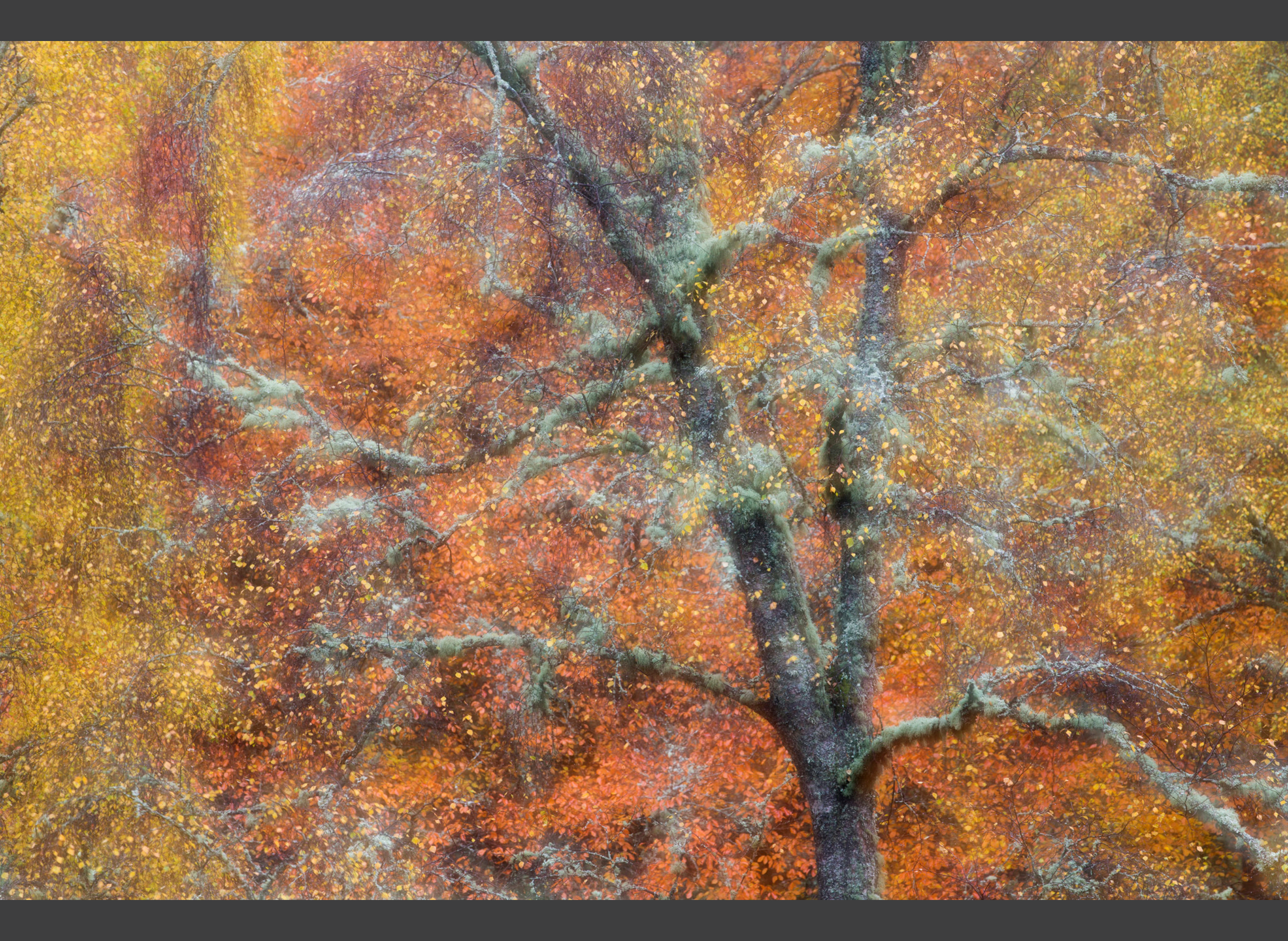


These sorts of days can swing either way but I've been photographing long enough to know that between the squalls, which screech across the Highlands at this time of year, there can be momentary magic.

On this day in late October the weather was fickle (a polite term for what it was really like) with wave after wave of driving rain sweeping in from the west. Standing on this exposed viewpoint above Loch an Eilein for hours on end was less than appetising but with the birches wearing their autumn finery, I knew there was a chance of some splintering light setting them on fire against a brooding sky. It took a while and in truth, cold and wet, I was about to descend to the relative comfort of lower ground.

It only took a few minutes. The rain stopped – just about – and a shaft of light squeezed under the cloud base to illuminate the woodland. Beyond over the hills, the landscape remained shadowed providing the differential lighting that I'd waited for.

This type of photography can be frustrating and many times, yields no results but my advice would be to take a chance: take a chance and stick it out. Sometimes, just sometimes, you get lucky.



Autumn birch abstract

Ballater, Cairngorms National Park



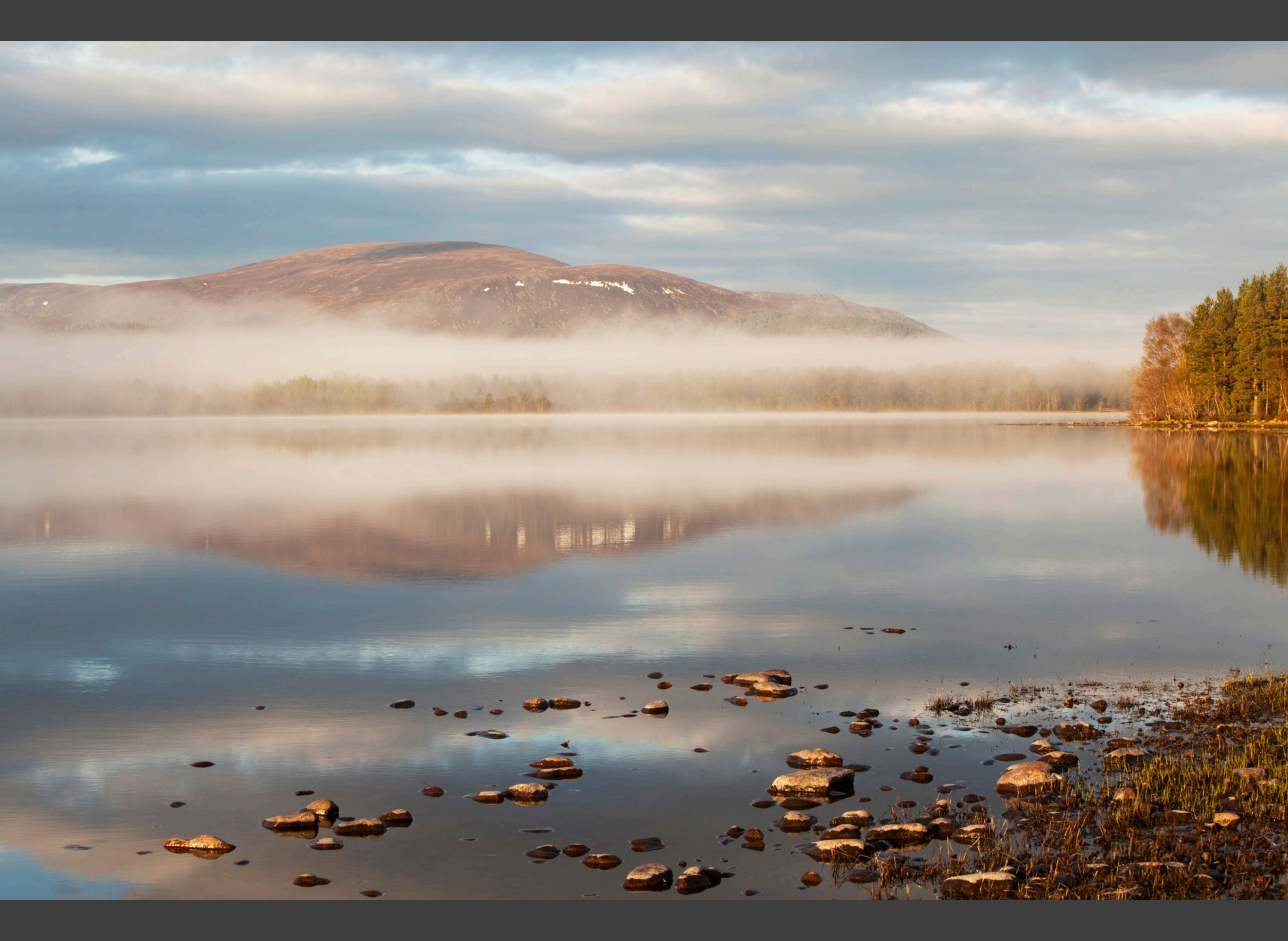
I love forests for their texture, their colour, their seemingly random growth and very often, I'm drawn to celebrating that in an image. These images are not for lovers of photographic rules but for lovers of the forest: there's a big difference.

The colour on this damp overcast day was truly breathtaking. I often go for long shutter speeds in these situations to record the blur of foliage in the wind but on this flat-calm day I opted for a multi-exposure to bring a dreamy, surreal effect to bear.

Over the years photography has taught me to see, I mean really see the detail in nature. Constantly looking through a viewfinder has educated my

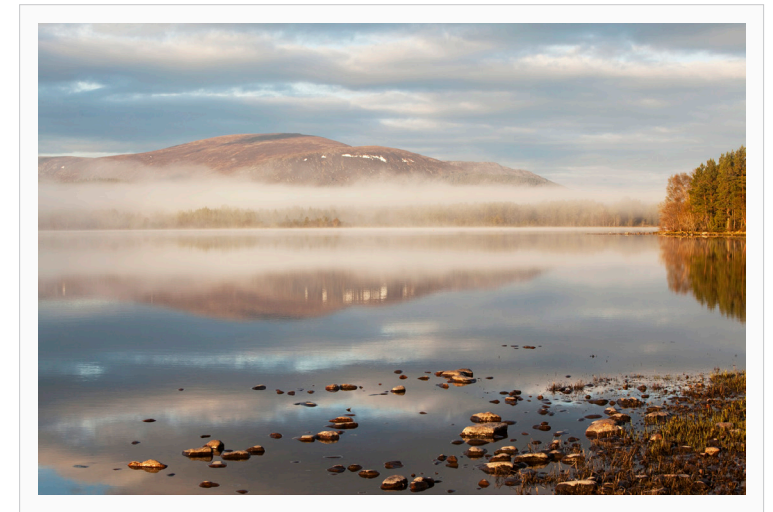
brain and has given me a deeper appreciation of natural form. In turn, this has fuelled an insatiable curiosity to learn about how the forest works, what makes it tick.

Seeing beyond the aesthetic and understanding something of the natural processes that drive a vibrant woodland has I believe, improved my photography but at the same time, has heightened my desire to see a bigger, wilder and ultimately a more rewarding forest across Scotland.



Spring dawn

Loch Morlich, Cairngorms National Park



When I first started photographing this roadside loch nearly 20 years ago, it offered opportunity at pretty much any time of year and from any angle. Now, in the face of increasing demand for adventure tourism, the wildness is often tempered by boats and the marker buoys that go with them. Photographing Loch Morlich has become more of a challenge but in the right conditions, it's still one of the most spectacular locations in the Park.

The wildness of the Cairngorms, like so many places, is constantly brought into jeopardy. On the one hand the very existence of the National Park reflects our growing appreciation for our last wild places but the flip side is increasing pressure brought about through many factors including housing development, tourism infrastructure and more latterly, the insidious spread of wind farms. Factor in contentious issues such as deer management and species reintroductions and it's easy to see why the marriage between people and wild nature is often a tempestuous one.

For me, suppressing nature and more importantly, the processes that allow nature to function, in favour of short-term economic gain, is self-destructive. There are many that agree with such a view and throughout the Park, land managers, groups and individuals are doing great work. Protecting a place like the Cairngorms however, is not a job just for landowners or conservation bodies; it's a job for everyone – residents and visitors alike. It's easy to imagine that as an individual you are powerless but that's not the case; there are lots of opportunities to do your bit. I will continue to use my camera to voice my support for the wildlife and the wild places of the Cairngorms and beyond and I hope that you will feel inspired to do the same.

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