

Interview with Wildlife Photographer Andy Rouse

If you've read any nature books or magazines over the past few years, there's a good chance you've seen some of the wildlife photos by Andy Rouse. Andy became a professional wildlife photographer in 1995, and over the years has built a reputation for taking stunning images characterised by novel viewpoints and getting close to dangerous mammals.

He has won several major awards including the prestigious Animal Behaviour section in the Wildlife Photographer of the Year awards. He's also written several books, is in constant demand as a host for courses and workshops as well as acting as tour leader and mentor for foreign photographic expeditions.

Completely self taught Andy has adopted the format of digital photography and, as ever, is at the forefront of its professional use in the natural world.

He's equally at home in front of the camera and has appeared on numerous television productions including his own "Wildlife Photographer" television series, and BBC's Countryfile earlier this year. When we caught up with him recently he kindly offered to answer a few questions for us...

What got your started in nature photography?

A boring computer job! I got to 30, realised that I was going nowhere and decided to give my talent a try out. I'd already had a lot published due to some BBC success and I'd just been offered a column in Am



ateur Photographer. So I made the decision to give it a go and the rest is history. Of course the situation is very different now.

Do you have a favourite place for nature photography in the UK?

Where I live in Wiltshire. I have two sets of Barn Owls within a mile, a fantastic sporting estate for deer, hares and songbirds, and orchids in my garden. I'm a great believer in working with local wildlife rather than just going to all the usual places. I think that's the difference between a photographer who takes pictures of wildlife and a wildlife photographer; the former just goes to the same old places where the wildlife is served up on a plate (so to speak) whereas the latter works with their own wildlife to create pictures. I'm the latter with a bit of the former mixed in!

What is your favourite British nature subject?

Hares and Roe Deer. Both are exceptionally difficult to get and require elements of fieldcraft that I am fortunate enough to have. I never get tired of photographing them either, and would do so every day of my life if it weren't for the commercial pressures to do otherwise. I also loved working with Black Grouse this year for the first time, they are truly special birds and I have donated pictures already to the Game Conservancy projects that work to conserve them. Sometimes money doesn't matter.

What's is the most difficult subject you've photographed in the UK?

Black Grouse. Difficult mainly because I wanted to get a hide right in the middle of their lek

site at their prime lekking time. The responsibility for this is enormous as the last thing that you want to do is to disturb them at such an important time. So I had to be extremely patient when placing the hide, taking several visits to move it closer and closer. The photography side was difficult too; I had to spend most nights in the hide (a tiny camouflaged tent), rain or shine, then had only 1 hour or so of light to work with before the Grouse left. But I have to say that they were truly awesome birds.

Every assignment is different, but what equipment would you take with you on a typical days shoot in the UK?

I simply pack my Lowepro Pro Trekker to the brim! Usually I just take one camera body, the 1Ds or 1D MK2, a 500mm and 70-200 f2.8L lenses with a 1.4x teleconverter, a FlashTrax 40GB downloader, pack of 4 x 2GB Integral PRO CF cards and some corned beef and piccalilli sandwiches. On the outside of the pack I strap my Gitzo 1548 carbon fibre tripod, either with the Wimberley head or the Wimberley Sidekick and Kirk Ball Head. Then of course I select my camouflage depending on what I am doing.

Apart from being able to take great photos, what practical steps should a person take if they want to turn professional?

You have to be able to take saleable photos virtually every time you leave the office, which means

you must be really able to work in any situation. The number one requirement is to decide which area of photography you want to be in and specialise, don't be a jack of all trades as it rarely works. You need money behind you, and an expectation that you will not make any money for at least 2 years or perhaps never. The market these days is flooded with images, the top agencies have closed their doors and so the only option is a smaller new agency (which is small for a reason). Remember selling an image for 40 quid to a big magazine may seem like a major success, but it won't pay the bills and allow you a life.

Is it possible to earn money from photography part-time and still keep a full-time job?

If you are a good enough photographer yes, in fact this is how I started. I just tagged on a lot of trips to my foreign travelling, concentrated on some difficult UK species such as badgers & foxes (wild ones I hasten to add) and just kept ploughing on.

If you were starting out today, how would you go about promoting yourself as a photographer?

To answer the question directly, I wouldn't want to be starting off today as the market is saturated and it is very very difficult for anyone to break in. The one thing to remember here is that you are competing against people like me, Art Wolfe, Heather Angel et al. from day one. No client

makes any exceptions because you are new. Therefore the trick is to find those clients that will take this into account and there is no better vehicle than the camera magazines. They pay real money, publish large and are in the business of promoting reader pictures. I publish a reader picture every month in my Practical Photography column.

Would you consider using a picture agency / photo library, and if so which one?

Yes of course, anyone that sells for you is a good thing, especially if you travel a lot like I do. Unfortunately I cannot recommend an agency since mine are both closed to new photographers (due to creaking stock files) and I am unsure of others. The one thing to bear in mind is that an agency works for you; too many think that we work for them and try to push the boundaries of what is good and what is bad in business. But in general an agency is a good thing.

What's been your most profitable British wildlife photo?

Hmm, very difficult question as I rarely keep count. My badger photographs have certainly proved popular over the years, as have my Barn Owl images taken under a schedule 1 license for the past 3 years. But I can't really say for a specific image; it also depends on what is "in vogue" at the time!

More of Andy's work at:
www.uksafari.co.uk/rouse