

Expressions

Conversations in landscape photography



JOURNAL 5

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Conversations in landscape photography



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© Cover Image: by Paul Gallagher

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It is incredible that this fifth issue of Expressions marks our second year of publication. From the initial notes on paper to outline design, to tentatively hitting the release button, it has been an adventure and a pleasure working with the photographers we have so far. There are so many photographers that we want to work with in the coming months and to speak with them about their craft, their inspirations and where they are looking to explore next. Thank you to all of who have agreed to become involved to date.

When digital cameras were first introduced there was a slow acceptance fuelled by a suspicion that these devices could never match that which was delivered by film. Although film is still loved to this day by many practitioners, there is no denying that modern digital sensors and images created by them are incredible.

The same can be said for smart phone cameras. When first released they merely enabled you to harness a keepsake snap that would seldom be regarded as a good quality image. As with digital cameras, this has all changed and in this issue Michael Pilkington shares his experience of iPhone photography and a new found freedom.

Also, Paul Gallagher shares his thoughts and opinions about simplicity in landscape photography and why neutral density filters, as ubiquitous as they are, are not the only tool to creating expressive images. As a means of maintaining enthusiasm in our work, we often try out new techniques and directions.

Finally, in this issue, we speak to Andy Phillips who seems to have diversified in so many ways whilst achieving a quality and success in his work many would envy.

As always, Expressions is free to everyone, so if you know a budding photographer or a visual artist you may think would enjoy what we are offering here, then please share this link with them aspect2i.co.uk/journal.



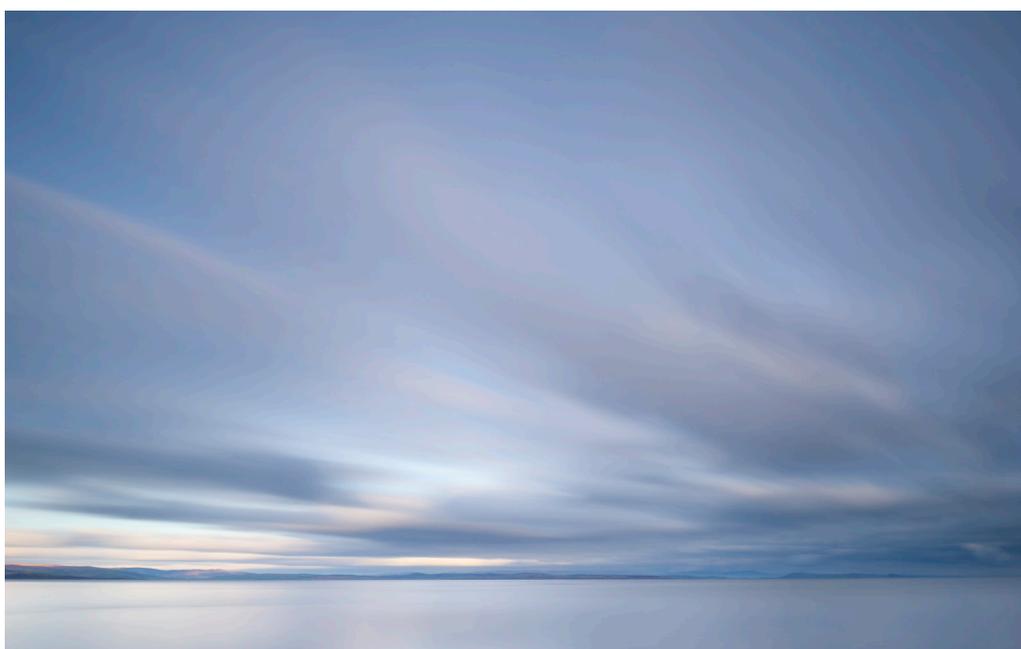
Considering simplicity - more of less

by Paul Gallagher

Considering simplicity - more of less

by Paul Gallagher

Often, one of the first challenges in the pursuit of landscape photography is making order from chaos. All too often we are faced with an awe-inspiring view and the first thing that occurs to us is how can we make it look like this in a photograph. The first mistake to be made is to deploy a wide-angle lens and capture every element of the scene that our wide-angle vision sees, but this often results in disappointment. The reason is that cramming all that is in front of us into a frame often overwhelms the viewer and all of the individual elements of the composition become tiny and somewhat lost in the photograph.



© Paul Gallagher

We then need to consider what to leave out of the composition, which, more often than not, is as important as what we include in the composition. Try to consider what the scene is made up of, and by that, I don't just mean the physical elements of the scene, but the open space, light, shadows and colours. Ask yourself, how and why do all these components sit together, what is their relationship, and what aspects most ably sum up the essence of the place..

Other bearings on the composition are height of the camera and the proximity of where you are standing in relation to the chosen subjects. We can all be contented by setting our camera at eye level, looking through the viewfinder or at the camera screen, and believing that whatever you see is somehow the principal position from which to represent the landscape.

It's advisable to compare the zoom functionality of a lens with walking closer or further away from the subject matter. The outcome is fundamentally not the same. A zoom lens will successfully magnify the view, but moving in closer alters both the perspective and geometric size of the elements within the composition.

Putting this into practice means you begin to distil the elements in your photographs by removing what is superfluous, and by the same token, drawing attention to the elements that you conceive as meaningful. This distillation process, if refined, is what makes minimalism and simplicity a success. Condensing your compositional elements will improve the narrative in your landscape images without even attempting to accomplish minimalism, so it is a good place to start.

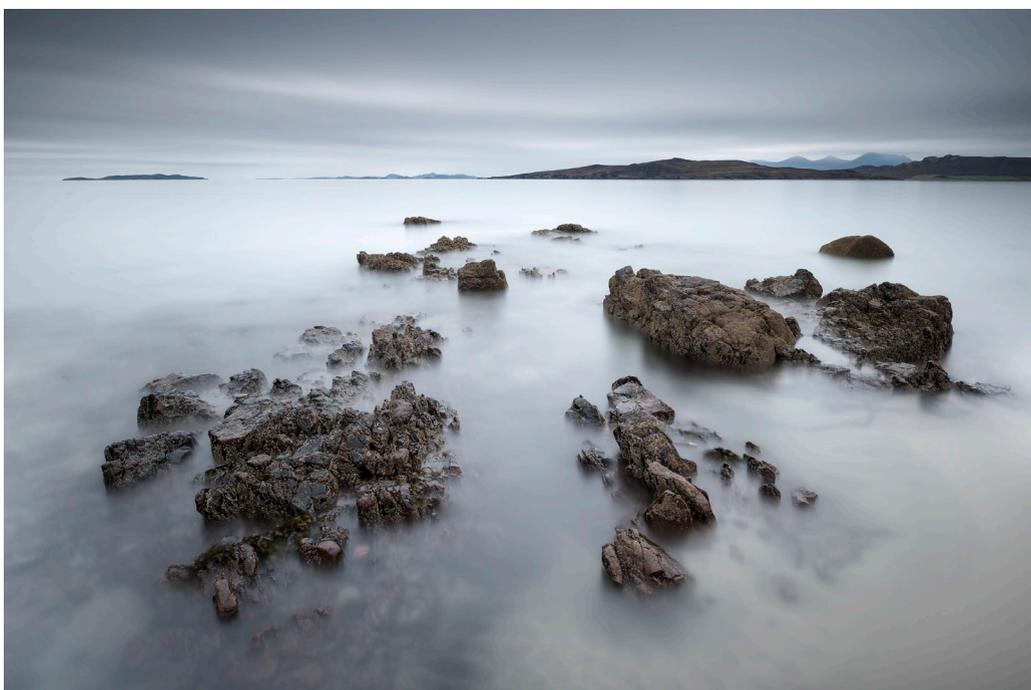


© Paul Gallagher

The label 'minimalism' is a rather vague one because there are no golden rules as to what a minimalist photograph should be like, but the overall approach culminates in the finished photographs containing less complexity and, more often than not, open, or often referred to as negative space. Negative space is represented in images as areas of the composition that contain little or no prominent subject matter, or subject matter that is uniformly simple in comparison with the other elements of the image. The term 'negative' space sounds rather negative in its use, but is something that can be very potent indeed. It is easy to think you need to occupy all areas of a composition with something with discernible detail that will 'support' the photograph, but the opposite is often the case. Having next to nothing occupying portions of a photograph can actually add a certain gravitas.

The world of digital landscape photography experienced a swift change in direction several years ago

purely because of the introduction of strong neutral density filters enabling landscape photographers to achieve very long exposure times that can easily run into several minutes. The popularity of this type of filter use created a wave of landscape photographs instantly exhibiting simplicity and having a 'minimalist' feel about them. The photographer that pioneered most of this taste in photography was Michael Kenna, but in the main, he used low light conditions and low sensitivity film to create the prolonged exposures.



© Paul Gallagher

The most common, and quick way, to achieve this type of photograph is at the coast. In environments like this you are faced with a mass of water that, if subjected to a long exposure, will become very smooth and 'milky' and if there are any structures such as rocks or coastal structures, they will be pin-sharp. It is this contrast of textures and tones that are considered the key to success.

Long exposures, as popular as they are, are certainly not the only way to approach simplicity and minimalism in landscape photography. Don't forget that minimalism is a direct result of reducing the quantity of elements in your composition, so photographs with a leaner quota of these can be just as effective. Take for example working in misty or foggy conditions. The veil of mist hides the surrounding landscape and as you move towards or away from your subject, the effect of the mist reveals it to a lesser or greater degree. Along with mist and fog, ask yourself why many landscape photographers closely study the winter weather forecast in the hope that snow will be imminent and then head out as soon as it arrives. Yes, the elation to get out in these conditions is because they are now seemingly rare, (certainly in the UK), but also the transformation of the landscape is nothing less than stunning. The underlying reason why snow is appealing is because it masks many of the complexities of the landscape along with its colours, and in doing so, creates a simplistic canvas from which to work.

Even if mist, snow and your filters cannot help, there are still approaches that can create beautiful minimalist photographs.



© Paul Gallagher

The use of a shallow depth of field is one that has been with us always. Often in landscape photography the norm is to seek to achieve a tremendous depth of field whereby every detail from the grasses at your feet to the distant mountains are all perfectly sharp leading the viewer right into, and through the frame. The rising use of focus stacking further evidences this. Similar to the effects of mist and snow, the use of a wide aperture will throw parts of the composition out of focus and softens them making them less prominent. It is commonly used in macro photography but can be just as effective in the landscape. The extent of the blurred area of your image can determine how much scrutiny you want placed on the main subject matter that is sharp. This is a good approach in woodland photography where making order from chaos is often the ultimate challenge.

The final approach to simplicity in your photographs is composition itself. We have all the power and control at our fingertips to choose what we want and what we elect to discard from our image.

Don't be afraid to point the camera at the sky when standing at a beach making this occupy a large portion of the frame. Also consider tones and brightness. Your subject might be the only bright aspect of your image leaving the rest to fade into the background darkness.



© Paul Gallagher

There will always be a trial and error aspect to learning these skills and don't be too apprehensive about encountering mistakes. It is all too common to be of the opinion that the photograph is overly simple to the point of being uninspiring, but perseverance will deliver dividends. Also, try to ignore many of the 'rules' that are frequently regurgitated about composition. The 'Rule of Thirds' and the '80-20 Rule' may be considered helpful when we are starting out, but in my opinion, if we all adhered to these, compositions would begin to look formulaic with exploration and experiment becoming forfeited.

We must all remember that a camera cannot make a photograph: it is the photographer themselves and what they 'see' that is all important. With time and practice, we begin to see the simplicity that is all around us.

Exploring the wilderness of Inverpolly

by Chris Cullen

Travelogue - A truthful account of an individual's experiences to or within a particular place

It is to be expected that occasionally photographers form an affinity with a particular place or landscape. It is sometimes difficult to pinpoint why this is, but there is a certain comfort in visiting the place, walking through the landscape, and of course the rewards it gives when making images. Since the inception of Expressions, we have been approached by photographers who have harnessed a deep communion with varying environments from beaches to woodlands and glens to deserts.

In this first contribution to Travelogue, we have the words and experiences of Chris Cullen who has a love for the north-western Highlands of Scotland, and specifically, Inverpolly.

Last October I took myself back to one of my absolute favourite parts of Scotland. I have been going there for over 30 years, with friends, girlfriends and more recently photographers. This was a solo trip as I was dying to really explore and get into a few specific parts that had intrigued me for years.

Inverpolly is the name given to the large area of land in Assynt, bounded to the North by Loch Assynt, the South by Loch Lurgainn, the East by the A835 and A837 and to the West mainly by the coast. It covers a huge area of over 20,000 hectares (50,000 acres).

This area used to be known as the Inverpolly Nature Reserve. Its official title is now 'Wild Land Area No.32'. Inverpolly (from its Gaelic origin) strictly speaking refers to the mouth of the little River Polly that flows down from Loch Ùidh Tarraigean to the sea at Polly Bay - but the whole area has taken the name. It is now publicly-owned and is managed by NatureScot, who aim to strike a balance between preserving the natural habitat and allowing responsible access for visitors.



Inverpolly is overlooked from the south by the mountains of Ben Mór Coigach, Sgùrr an Fhìdhleir and Beinn an Eòin. Just to the north lies the Quinag and to the east Ben More Assynt. Inverpolly has its own share of dramatic mountains (Stac Pollaidh, Sulven, Cul Mor, Cul Beag, Canisp). These mountains (referred to as 'Inselbergs' or 'Monadnocks') are all the more spectacular for the dramatic way they rise upwards punctuating the relatively level ground around them.

The crinkly type of landscape around these majestic mountains is called 'cnocan' or my preferred term - Cnoc 'n' Loch, which sounds more fun. One look at the snippet of OS map shown here illustrates this. Cnoc mean hillock in Gaelic and I'm sure everyone knows that Loch means Lake. This mainly treeless landscape of scattered undulating low hillocks and irregular shaped lochs is made from a rocky platform of hard Lewisian Gneiss. The mountains that stick up so dramatically from this terrain are made of Torridonian sandstone.

There are no roads penetrating this wilderness. There are only a handful of properly recognised footpaths and most of them are short. This makes Inverpolly very unspoilt and feel like a true wilderness and the often boggy ground and the frequent little lochs and lochans make access tricky.

For many years I've had a borderline obsession with Suilven. It gets its name from old Norse for Sail Mountain (or Pillar Mountain - depending on who you ask!). Suilven is surely one of the most iconic mountains in the world. It's even starred in a film (Edie, 2017) and features extensively in a recent Star Wars spinoff series. It is quite unlike anything else the way it rises up almost vertically from the surrounding terrain. It's a terrifying looking mountain from some angles and looks utterly impregnable.



© Chris Cullen

I had spent many hours online, poring over maps, reading walking guides, studying other people's photographs, trying to find the best ways to approach the area and get good views of Suilven. Despite all this research the greatest revelations were in the end obtained by getting out of the car and exploring. I had worked out some promising starting points - places where I knew old footpaths, no longer marked on OS maps, should hopefully be. I also worked out possible parking spots. Parking in passing places in the highlands is a real no-no. The contour lines of OS maps gave me a hint as to just how hard or tricky possible routes might be. I wasn't just going to photograph Suilven but I was aware that it, as well as Cul Mor and Stac Pollaidh was likely to be the backdrop to many potential views.

I set off from home in Suffolk full of great hopes and expectations. All trains were cancelled! Great start! I eventually reached Edinburgh, my first stop, many hours late. The following day I travelled on to Inverness. I picked up my hire car and set off West. Within 100 yards the rear view mirror fell off. The only way of fixing this and not waiting a couple of hours for an alternative car was to reattach the mirror with doubled-sided tape. This worked well enough but blocked the car's light and rain sensors. For the rest of the trip the car was convinced it was night-time and never raining. At least I was on the road!

Rabbie Burns wrote: The best-laid schemes of mice an' men gang aft agley (The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry). I had studied the weather forecast closely in the days before arriving. What I had not considered was the cloud height!

One of the peaks I planned to climb, Sgùrr an Fhìdhleir (The Fiddler), was entirely hidden in heavy cloud all week. That, and the sudden 1500 feet vertical drop from the summit, put me off that plan. The very low cloud based dogged me most of the week and forced me to adjust my plans.

Luckily Suilven itself is not a munro. At 731 metres it is a mere 'Fiona'. Its relatively low summit meant that after the second day it was visible at times. The high winds meant that the light on its steep flanks was constantly changing.



© Chris Cullen

Stac Pollaidh (612m) looked cloud free, so I headed up. It's a great peak to climb. It's pretty steep in places but the lower eastern summit offers simply amazing views for relatively little effort. The western, higher summit is a different matter - being one of the toughest in mainland UK.

I reached the easier summit to be greeted by a stunning but fleeting view of the surrounding mountains and lochans.

A few seconds later, with the strong breeze, cold wet cloud poured off the top of Cul Beag to my east and rapidly swept up the side of Stac Pollaidh and enshrouded me and the summit. I sat there in the exceedingly damp air and wondered when, or even if, the view would return. Successive waves of heavy cloud rolled over, sometimes partly clearing, giving brief but tantalising views over Loch Sionasgaig and Cul Mor to the north. I was transfixed. Though most of the time was spent with my coat zipped up and my camera hidden away underneath, the intervals of clearing gave spellbinding views that evolved by the second, before disappearing again.



© Chris Cullen



© Chris Cullen

A brilliant fog-bow appeared on the slopes below me, with my shadow at its centre. I stayed up there for almost 2 hours before reluctantly heading down and west, hoping for views towards the Summer Isles etc. Thirty minutes later the summit was hidden completely and stayed that way for most of the next two days.

I met two people on my climb up Stac Pollaidh. This was the only point in the whole week when I encountered other people when exploring. I had had Inverpolly all to myself!

In view of the winds and low cloud forecast, I had to adapt my plans. I had the option to explore the dramatically beautiful beaches of the area. The wind meant that intermittent rain and spray would make coastal work tricky but not impossible. Though I've explored the area many times I really hadn't spent quality time investigating the lower level, inland details. All my research into the tracks in the area paid off. I was able to concentrate on a section of the tiny road between Lochinver and Badnagyle. This incredibly twisty-turny road winds its way up and down and around the little river valleys, hills, lochs and the coast. It passes little patches of mainly birch woodland in more sheltered spots. These copses were at their peak of autumn colour.

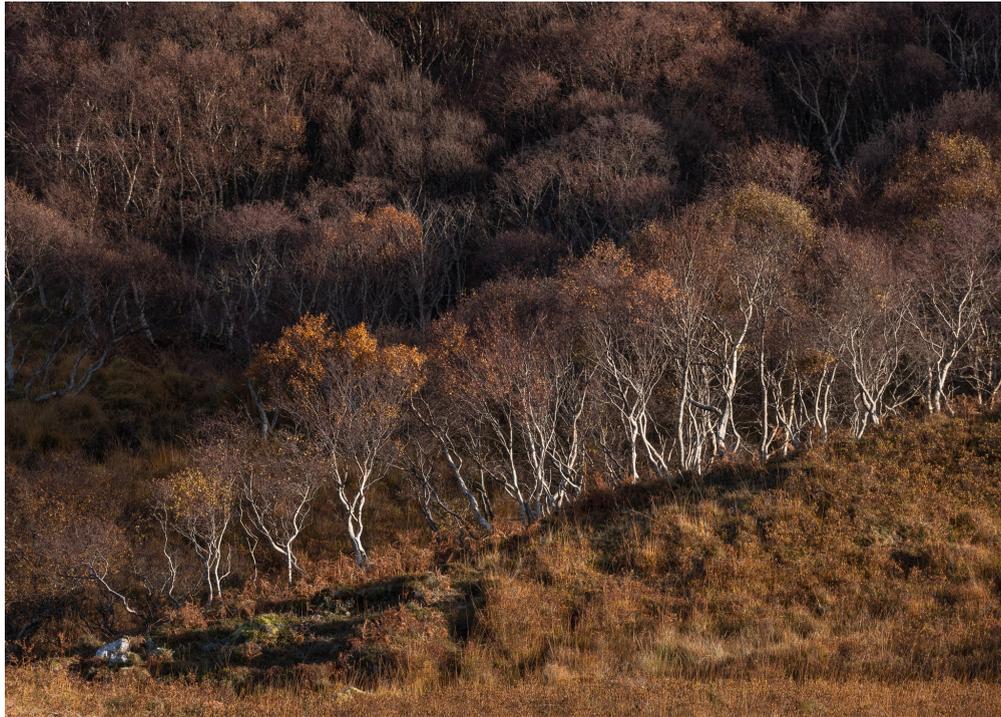


© Chris Cullen

The pure, unpolluted ocean air allows wonderful lichens to grow on the trees. I loved the contrast of the copper and gold foliage of the birches and the pale bluey-green of the lichen.

In places the birch trees were very scrubby in nature. It proved tricky to find a clean composition that really worked. There always seemed to be another branch, trunk or exposed rock breaking the harmony. Even when embracing the chaos of woodland, my typical practice is to try to find a composition that feels even. Different elements of the image need to be in a visually balanced state with others. Distracting elements such as erratic boulders, almost white with lichens, or objects puncturing the edges of the scene draw the eye too much. I have always been very attracted to the pale silver and white of birch trees. Set against the rich autumn colours of the bracken and grasses, they are particularly beautiful. Despite this I really struggled to find and refine images that would make the grade in many areas.

However, I found that nearer larger outcrops of rock, the trees were limited as to where they could take root and grow. This constraint created in some spots very photogenic clusters or even lines of trees. I tried to use these lines in concert with the backdrop of lochs and mountains.



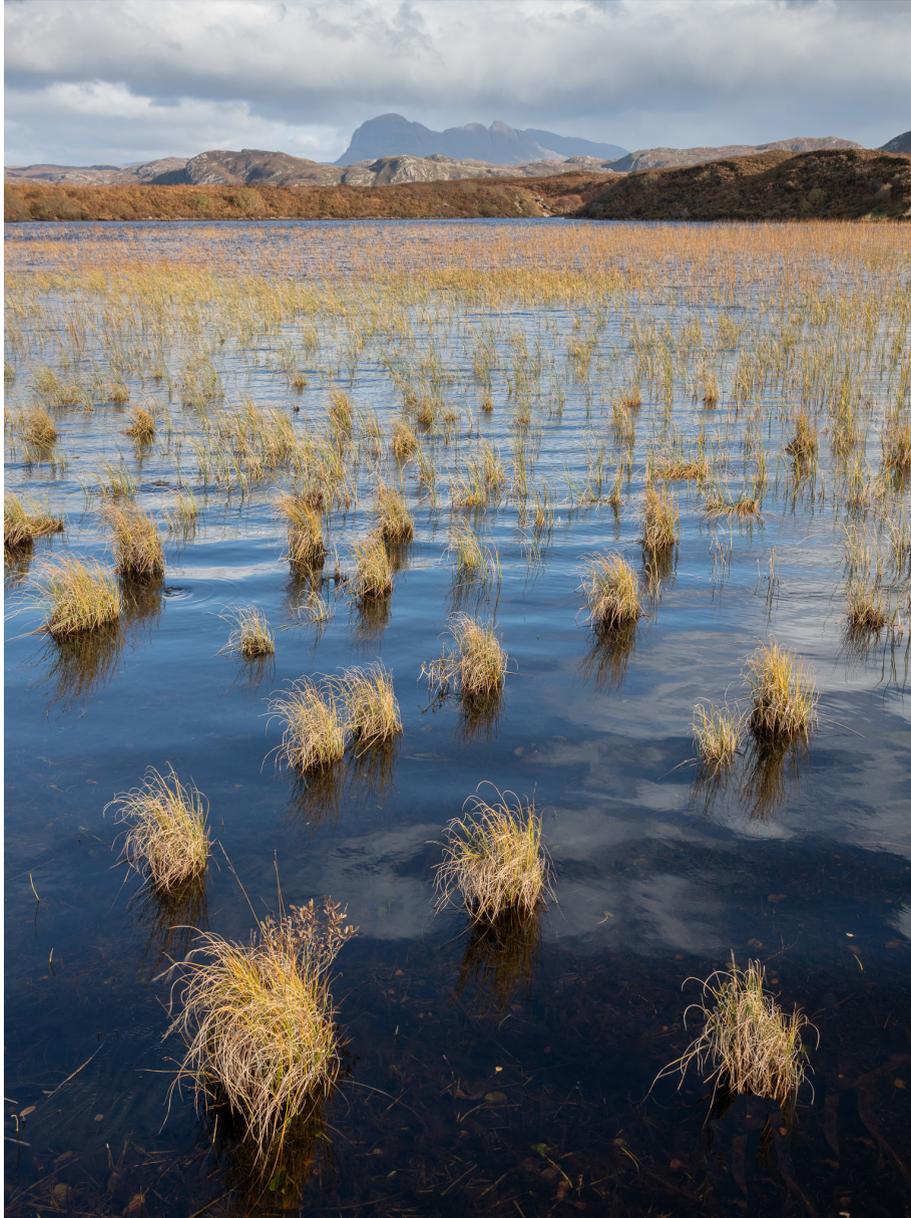
© Chris Cullen

The winds were not severe enough to make subject movement an issue but were strong enough to keep the lowish clouds shifting. It was a matter of squinting up at the sky and guessing how soon the lighting might change, then waiting for that moment to come. The varying lighting on the more distant mountains only added to the experience.

Over five days I kept returning to this same 5 mile stretch of road between Loch An Èisg Brachaidh and Druim Bad a' Ghail. I set off across the boggy ground in promising directions. I speculatively climbed up various cnochs. I loved the view from them - the patchwork of lochans, the heather and bracken clad undulating terrain between them, the scattered little birch copses all with the mighty Suilven, Cul Mor etc making an appearance as breaks in the cloud permitted. Assynt and Coigach offer an abundance of arrestingly beautiful locations but this little stretch of road kept calling me back.



© Chris Cullen



© Chris Cullen

Have I 'done' this location? Not at all! After getting home I was already plotting my next visit. There's talk of staying up there for a whole month sometime this year. That I have so much more to explore and investigate in a tiny part of such an amazing area tells you all you need to know about my emotional tie to this small corner of northwest Scotland. Oh, and did I mention otters, sea eagles, red deer and others?



© Chris Cullen



© Chris Cullen



© Chris Cullen



Featured photographer: Andy Phillips

Andy Phillips

Everyone has a story to share about how they discovered photography and where it led them. Some photographers apply themselves to one specific genre, whilst others have the confidence to explore different directions, even if it involves limited success sprinkled with some disappointment

There are not many of us that walk this path that can say that they have found success in much of what they have experimented in. Andy Phillips however is one of those photographers. From using photography as an escape from the stresses of being a paramedic, to becoming a consummate landscape photographer, lecturer and even mastering the art of desktop studies. We wanted to know more, and Andy was happy to share his experiences.



© Andy Phillips

When did your journey in photography begin and how did you discover it?

Back in the day, I was a very enthusiastic amateur Bluegrass banjo player, and I would spend ridiculous amounts of time jamming in pubs and clubs. I loved the whole 'Live Music' thing, and I did this for years. Eventually my enthusiasm began to fade, and it was time to explore something else.

I moved to the north in Lancashire in 2002, having worked as a paramedic in a few counties. I was soon to be travelling to New Zealand for an extended holiday and I thought I needed to record the event, and get a camera!

I hadn't a clue what I was doing, I shopped in Argos and bought a Fujifilm bridge camera for £400! I was told by my colleagues there was a casualty porter at my local hospital who was knowledgeable in photography called Ian. I button-holed Ian and asked if he would teach me. He asked, "How long before you go away?" I told him - 3 weeks!!

He agreed and showed me how to shoot in automatic and also taught me a few focusing techniques. He also introduced me to his camera club in nearby Blackburn. Ian became my 'go to' font of knowledge and he knew not just about photography, but post-processing and computers too. I was lucky: everyone in photography should have an Ian! He was a serious wildlife photographer, but that general knowledge still helped me in other chosen genres.

I became absolutely enthralled with it all; I was a sponge in my quest for knowledge in this amazing hobby. In every free moment of my time, I would immerse myself by studying, practising and reflecting on the outcomes. Even at work as a paramedic, when I got a rare break between 999 calls, I would read another few lines on photography! I bought every magazine, every month, and pored over them, often making scrapbooks out of interesting articles and images.



© Andy Phillips

The New Zealand trip didn't give me any particularly amazing images as you would expect, but I shot videos too and I achieved my objective of recording an expensive holiday and the good times travelling around both Islands. I wish I could return now with the knowledge I have but I would need to stop a year or so!!

We all have a first photograph that we consider a milestone/breakthrough. Can you tell us about yours?

Having joined Blackburn camera club, I got into the club competition circuit. I made a lot of camera friends and I would glean from them as much as I could. I was new to the north-west of the UK and I travelled around it constantly discovering amazing places to photograph. I experimented with a few genre's including portraiture and portraiture lighting, but I always spent more time in the landscape.

One of my favourite areas to visit was Sunderland Point near Heysham not far from Lancaster. It's an old slaving port and is tidal. You get about four hours of photography time to work after the tide turns the area, but if you ever visit, ensure you keep an eye on the time or you will lose your car to the rising tide that engulfs the small car park.



© Andy Phillips

It's a wellies only location as the mud is everywhere, and you have to pick your footsteps carefully. There is a professional fishing community here and the boats are moored up on the mudflats. You could easily spend a day achieving many compositions from the village through to detail shots, boats and reflections in the mud, but only in four hour windows!

Because I was working shifts in the ambulance service and I got one day off to myself per week, I couldn't pick and choose the weather. So, when that day off came around, I just had to run with it come what may. On one such occasion I planned to get to Sunderland Point for an early morning shoot when the tide was out. That day presented a blanket thick fog and I drove on the M6 at 30mph most of the way.

When I arrived, you couldn't see your nose on your face with the thick fog, but because I had been here countless times, I could feel my way to the boats which were sitting on the mudflats. It amazed me that I didn't require the tripod I had lugged with me. I learned that fog, although dense, enables you to achieve fast shutter speeds as everything is very bright. I composed my image to have 3 boats resting on the mudflats. I entered it into local competitions, and it did really well.

So, why is that image my milestone image? I chose it for three reasons. Ansel Adams, one of the masters of landscape photography once stated that successful photographs were constructed from infinite perception, interpretation and execution! For the first time, I thought I had achieved this in this image.

What do you consider the most important part of landscape photography?

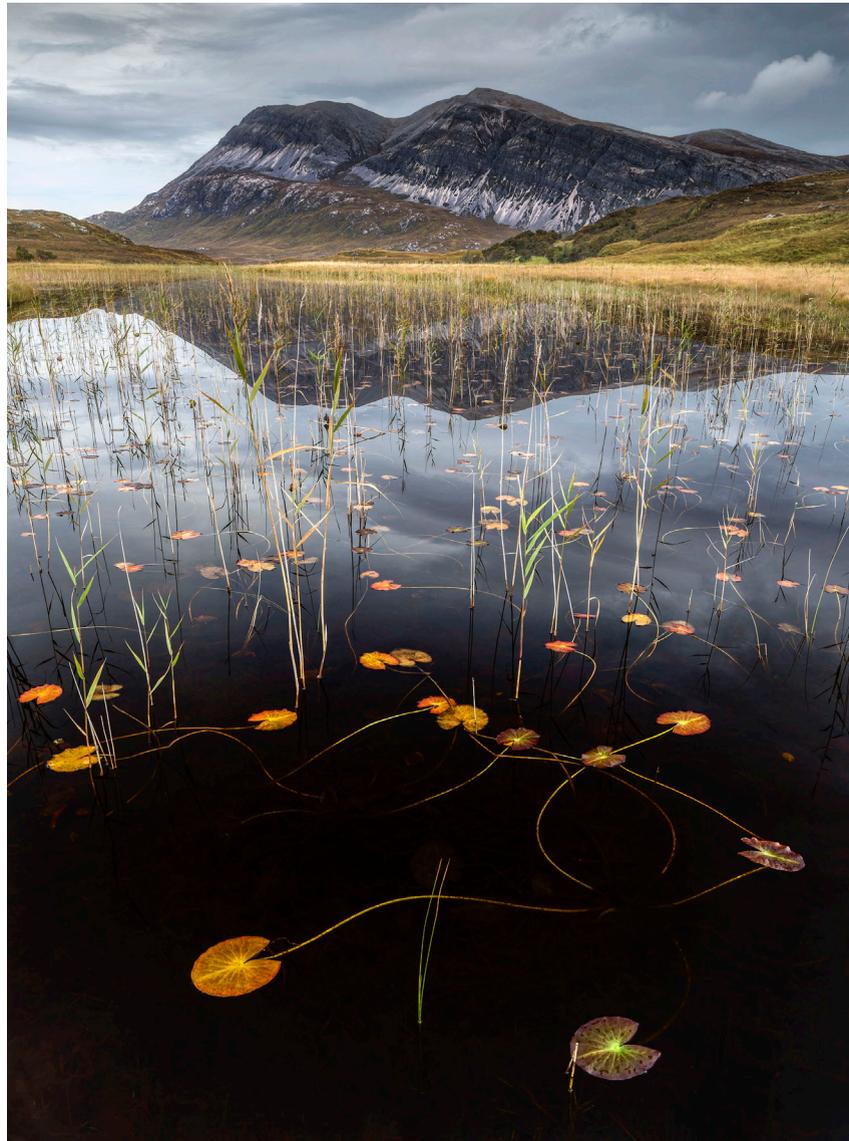
I think of the old adage 'If you want to understand a subject properly, then teach it!'. Some years ago, I was invited to go on a field workshop in Glencoe which was the first I had ever attended.



© Andy Phillips

At first, I was simply looking forward to being up in Scotland and being in the incredible surroundings with my camera. What soon became apparent was it was a workshop where I could learn new skills and feel confident working with the workshop leader: Paul Gallagher FRPS.

This was a turning point for me as I was having years of experience shared directly with me from a photographer that had a deep passion for and huge knowledge of landscape photography. Everything from mastering exposure to lens choice were covered followed by continuing the image journey through the editing stage from raw camera file to finished print. After this I dedicated time to honing these skills and now I can pass on the same experience by teaching others. This for me, is a real pleasure. Seeing photographers making the same transition is as rewarding as shooting my own images



© Andy Phillips

It is clear from your past portfolio that you have dipped your toe into several different genres in landscape photography. What would consider your most loved and most challenging?

Infrared landscape work without a doubt. I have a dedicated Olympus camera which is converted with a 720nm filter. I am primarily a Nikon enthusiast and use the Nikon Z system of cameras and lenses. But I discovered, in an expensive learning curve, that Z mirrorless cameras are not currently ideal for infrared because if you perform extensive tonal manipulation during image editing, dark bands appear across the image due to the redesigned autofocus system.

My wife and I have a wedding photography company. For that we prefer to use Olympus cameras and lenses. These are ideally suited to this type of work because of their low-light capability. So, when choosing another camera to dedicate to infrared I chose an Olympus because I already had all the lenses.

I spend a lot of my spare time shooting with my infrared converted camera and a lot of that time is dedicated to woodland photography. Infrared gives me a fresh challenge, both in shooting and post-processing. They are so completely different.



© Andy Phillips

The first thing I had to understand was what would look good in infrared light, and what would not. In the simplest of terms, wherever green plants and trees are present, they contain varying amounts of chlorophyll which reflects infrared light very effectively making the subject bright. It was the process of understanding light that is not visible to the naked eye which was fascinating, and remains so.



© Andy Phillips



© Andy Phillips

I see from your website that you have a section on ‘Smallscapes’ and the images are exquisite. Can you tell us about how this started and the process that creates the images?

Yes. I have always liked ‘tabletop’ work and still-life to a degree and I promised myself one day to spend more time exploring the genre. This was accelerated in December 2020 when the Covid pandemic hit the UK.



© Andy Phillips

As with everyone else, workshops and our wedding & commercial business ground to a halt very quickly, but I still had a passion to carry on with my photography and also earn.

My plan was to teach online by Zoom, so I needed to explore something that would attract the program secretaries of camera clubs and photographic societies. The answer lay in what I now call my ‘smallscapes’, ie little landscapes. The first one I created was of a garlic bulb shot using focus stacking with a colour-engineered background. This image was the first I had featured in a magazine and things just accelerated from there and I embarked on compiling my first presentation.

As things evolved I experimented with texture photographs I had collected, together with blending modes to completely change the appearance of the subject. I only utilise natural light and I demonstrate how to control it with homemade reflectors and light modifiers. It has proved very successful and is in constant demand by the clubs in the UK.



© Andy Phillips



Exploring woodlands

by Paul Gallagher and Michael Pilkington

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by Paul Gallagher and Michael Pilkington

One of the most natural visual barometers to the changing seasons is woodlands. As the cold of winter passes, the skeletal trees reaching to the sky gradually produce buds on the finest of branches that look almost dry and dead. Soon, the fresh lime-greens of spring appear, and along with this, a carpet of woodland plants slowly emerge from the ground with the promise of summer.

Eventually, the light of the day is gently swallowed up by the vast canopy of leaves above that sound like the sea as a breeze blows and the ferns become waist high along with brambles and blackberries stretching out. As the hours of sunlight lessen and the sunlight becomes more golden, so do the leaves, changing with the cooler air and bitten by the first frosts of winter.

Soon to follow is a carpet of yellow and brown that lies on the ground and daylight is invited back in, often with morning mists and occasionally a powdering of snow. A year has passed and each and every transition has presented us with boundless possibilities to photograph one of nature's most exquisite spectacles.

Exploring woodlands with a camera is seen as a rather daunting proposition, but it is one that should be embraced. Take time to do nothing when you arrive. Sit, look and listen and become part of your surroundings, as only then will its complexity be softened by its shapes, rhythms and abject beauty. Try not to make the trees fit your frame but allow their limbs to pass through it and resist grappling with the chaos. Woodlands cannot be tamed or made orderly, so it is for us, the photographers, to honour its natural state.

For thousands of years woodlands have been a source of shelter, food and protection supporting millions of creatures, and remain examples of some of the most richly diverse environments on our planet. It is for this reason so many are protected and cherished the world over. When visiting a woodland with your camera try not to see it as a place of stressful complexity, but one of solace and calm.



© Paul Gallagher



© Paul Gallagher



© Michael Pilkington



© Paul Gallagher



© Michael Pilkington



© Paul Gallagher



© Michael Pilkington



© Paul Gallagher



© Michael Pilkington



© Michael Pilkington



© Paul Gallagher



Using a smart phone

by Michael Pilkington

Using a smart phone

by Michael Pilkington

I have just returned from a workshop retreat on the west coast of Scotland; Wester Ross to be precise. The objective of this workshop was to explore some chosen locations and create a portfolio of printed work that defined the visual interpretation of the photographer whilst at these places.



© Michael Pilkington

One of our clients was mainly using an iPhone 15 Max for this her time here and I was quite intrigued by what would be achieved. My interest has been piqued on several occasions in the past and now I use my own iPhone extensively, mainly as a teaching aid. iPhone images are an invaluable aid in demonstrating different compositional approaches and even some image editing interpretations. I also recommend it to use as an aide-memoire for the colours and light as a comparison to the raw file that will be produced by on your main camera. When capturing an image, we are sometimes forced to over or under expose because of the prevailing light conditions to ensure we capture all of the dynamic range of the scene and prevent shadow or highlight clipping, and it can be difficult to visualise these aspects when editing your images some weeks or months later, because as we all know, the raw file image can look very different from the scene that we were faced with. Referencing the phone image is very helpful as it can remind you of the intensity of the light, the depth of the shadows and the colours as it is designed to emulate reality.

Photographers often say smart phones are generally not regarded as 'proper' cameras. How can they be? You basically need to do nothing except point and shoot. Furthermore, the quality of the images, whilst acceptable on a small screen, are not of sufficient quality to edit or even print. I will say here; this has not been true the case for some time now. The iPhone 15, the latest incarnation of that particular brand, uses a colour space of P3, that is roughly equivalent to ProPhoto RGB which is the colour space we use whilst post-processing in Lightroom and Photoshop. The iPhone 15 is also available with an impressive 48 mega-pixel sensor, which is around the same as my Nikon D850 and 2x close up capability, 3x and 7x zoom optical range. Throw in Night Mode, the capability to shoot in RAW as well as image stabilisation, and this adds up to quite a cocktail.



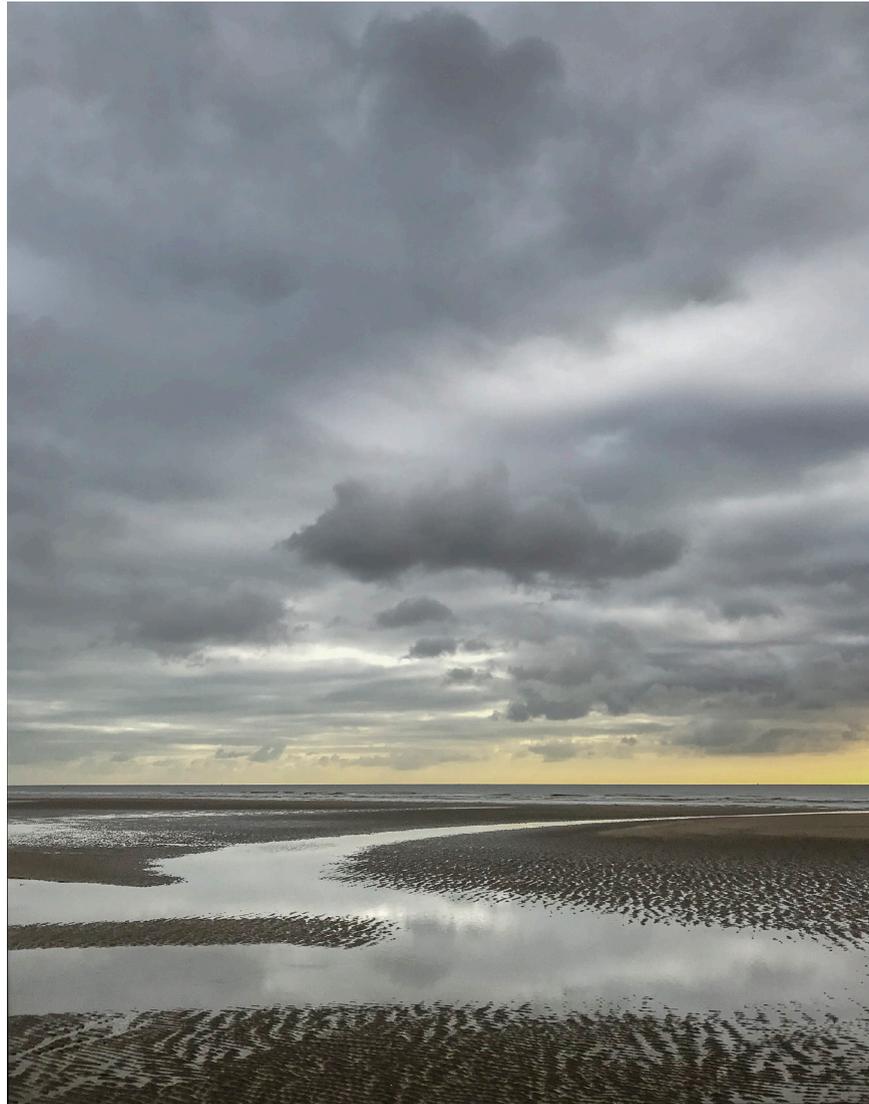
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On paper, these specifications are impressive. Nonetheless, looking at the files in great detail, they do not compare at all with modern DSLRs or mirrorless cameras. But is this a problem?

You always have your phone on you. There's that old saying; 'what is the best camera?' Answer – 'the camera with you'. Whatever you see, wherever you are, you have your camera phone to hand. You can experiment freely, be creative, be curious as to whether a scene or composition might work. When traveling with my DSLR, and before I commit to getting it out of the bag, I will wander around, looking, trying to see suitable candidates to capture and start to assess potential compositions. Often, I will pull out my phone and try the shot and evaluate whether it is worth setting up the 'big' camera.

You will see in this article examples of what I consider to be reasonably successful images taken on my iPhone. What I have discovered is that it is indeed not as capable as the DSLR.

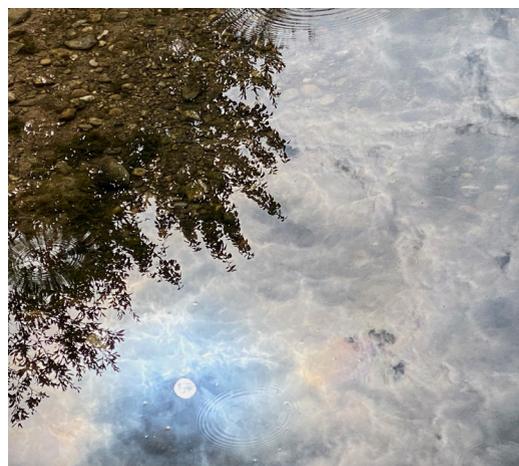
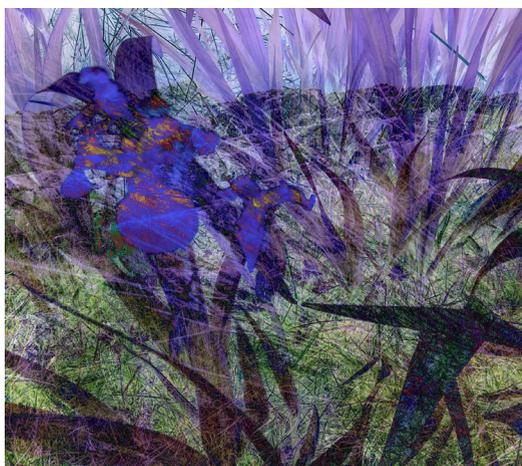
Great dynamic range is not handled well. High contrast scenes do not translate well and some colours, especially blues and greens are more vibrant than I would prefer. What we have to consider though, is that the phone is giving you a processed file in the form of a JPEG or equivalent.



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The algorithm or processing software is making decisions as to how to edit the file and present it at its 'best'. This is the same as using the auto button in Lightroom. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. However, in more modern phones you can now shoot in raw and this does make a difference. You can take control and edit your files in Lightroom or Adobe Camera Raw. The files still don't compare to a DSLR or equivalent, but you have a lot more scope for post-processing. Lastly, the files seem over sharp or even 'crunchy' and this also needs to be addressed in editing.

Perhaps one of the best features in using a phone are the different apps that you can explore. I have been inspired by many multiple exposure images that I have seen in the past few years and have taken it upon myself to learn the techniques and experiment. On my DSLR, I have some capabilities to do this, but on the phone I have far more sophisticated options available to me. I can use many more blending modes, enlarge, reduce or rotate images, and use any photo ever taken on my phone and incorporate it into the final composite. There are apps that allow you to take long exposures and shoot in Raw if your smart phone does not offer this capability.



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The versatility of the iPhone as a tool of photographic expression was further galvanised when I saw the resulting iPhone work from our client in Wester Ross. The iPhone files used were multiple exposures and the final exquisite 12 inch square prints were spellbinding. The iPhone image files have a native resolution of 72 dpi and when changed to 180dpi for my Epson P900 printer, this would allow me to print up to a generous maximum size of 16.5 by 21 inches which is just about right for A2. The conclusion of any photographer's pursuit is the final image, and you would be hard pressed to tell what sort of camera they were taken on.

So, in conclusion, I will be upgrading my phone sometime soon, which will furnish me with a better sensor and camera, and I will be using my iPhone more and more for photography. That doesn't mean I am giving up the DSLR anytime soon, but having another tool available to me to pursue my more creative endeavours will be more than welcome.



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Write-off

by Mark Lawrence

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Life is full of twists and turns and, I guess, that's one of the things that generally make it fun and interesting. Of course, not all of life's events are happy ones and sometimes they change us in a way that we hadn't expected. Last year I was in Scotland and had spent time photographing my favourite landscapes, lochs, mountains, seascapes – the weather had been kind to me.



© Mark Lawrence

As I headed away from Ullapool towards Inverness, I was looking forward to a few days in the Yorkshire Dales with my wife who was heading up from London. Then, from nowhere, two deer leapt out of the darkness and, despite braking hard, I knew I couldn't avoid hitting at least one of them. The result was my car was a write-off. Fortunately, the deer escaped, hopefully no worse than bruised.

As photographers we rely on transport of one sort or another to explore and visit locations that capture our imagination. The car is perhaps the most used mode as many of the locations we love have limited or no public transport. Of course, I needed to get another car.....or did I? My wife had a car so I started to wonder if another car was essential. In addition to the environmental impact, I reckoned that I could afford to hire a car for 7 weeks of the year and be a little better off than if I bought a car. So here we are 15 months later, and I no longer own a car, for the first time in nearly 40 years.

Since the write-off I have been to Scotland a couple of times; a mix of public transport and a hire car worked fine. More significantly, I have been exploring places closer to home using public transport. Looking back, I wonder if I was ready for this change. We visit places like Scotland because they offer us beautiful landscapes in which we can explore nature and make wonderful images. It takes us away from the day-to-day routine which, for most of us, is in an urban area. In my free time I decided to explore some landscapes that are urban and industrial, walking along the banks of the Thames. I decided not to take in London's bridges and architecture, or through Oxfordshire's meandering meadows, but towards the estuary, starting at the Thames Barrier.

On one of my first walks at low tide, I was struck by the rubbish that has been thrown by local residents into this great river. As I explored further, I discovered how much industry is still using the river, as a vital transport link, in some cases only a few miles from Tower Bridge. I found it a rather depressing but nonetheless fascinating landscape with a mixture of new industrial development alongside relics of the past, all mixed amongst marshland that is home to a multitude of wildlife. Then there are the residential developments, old and new, rubbing shoulders with industry. It is mostly a harsh, gritty environment with graffiti, rubbish, high concrete flood walls, razor wire fences, tank farms and factories. It is a challenging environment in which natural beauty is hard to find; it is an environment that shows clearly the impact we have on the planet we live on. As I walked the paths alongside the river, I wondered if the industry that is seemingly always within my line of sight, with its blatant disregard for the natural environment, in meeting consumer demand, somehow makes some people think that throwing rubbish into the river is OK. I come across three metal benches positioned below the towering chimneys of a soap factory – I wonder who comes and sits here, perhaps their only place of escape from the four walls of home.

As I pass an old World War 2 structure I see a container port in the distance, whilst in the river in front of me, the receding tide begins to reveal more discarded shopping trolleys emerging from the muddy riverbank. It is a strange juxtaposition that I decide to record, using a long exposure to give greater prominence to the trolley: written off like my car. There can be no doubt in my mind that this is not an image I would have made without the write-off, the idea of finding a fascinating beauty in this industrial wasteland alongside the Thames would not have occurred to me. But forced to take a different approach, using public transport that allows me to hop off a train in one place and walk down the river to another, I feel both sad and entranced by what I am seeing and recording.



I am planning to continue these walks as and when time permits. I am fascinated by the scenes I am finding, and I am becoming acutely aware of why we need to take action both collectively and individually to help our beautiful planet. I am certainly not an eco-warrior but the write-off has challenged me both as an individual and as a photographer in a way that has been both surprising and rewarding.

End note

“A creative man is motivated by the desire to achieve, not by the desire to beat others.”

Ayn Rand

It may seem odd that I have shared a quote from a Russian-American philosopher penned many decades ago, and not a photographer. Furthermore, please forgive the reference to ‘creative man’, when of course a woman can be equally creative. But if we turn our attention to the narrative of the quote, it compares the desire of personal achievement with the desire to achieve over others.

A creative desire should be concerned with how you as a visual artist want to communicate without the urge to compare what others are creating, and even worse, using their perceived success as a benchmark. It must be said that this practice is often commonplace in photographic societies and camera clubs. When it comes to competitions it is clear that entrants will want to experience the sweet taste of success, and this of course is fine, but when the resulting work morphs into something less personalised purely to influence the outcome of a competition, then surely this is dubious at best.

It takes courage to throw off the shackles of conformity and engage the imaginative mind because as we all know there will be pitfalls and maybe even raised eyebrows. Any creative person whose work is replete with integrity and originality will have experienced this, but they will now be seen for the artist they are and will be the person whose benchmark is above the rest.

If you would like to comment on what you have read, you have something to add, or you have any questions that may help you on your way in your photography, then please get in touch. You may have had an experience you would like to share that you know others would be fascinated to hear, or you may want to contribute as a featured photographer or submit an article. Just follow the email link below and feel free to drop us a line with your thoughts or equally leave a comment on our [Facebook](#) or [Instagram](#) pages.

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We hope to hear from you soon and what you have to say!

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