THE IRIS

MAGAZINE OF THE NATURE GROUP OF THE RPS
Issue No. 142 / Spring 2022
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THE RPS ROYAL PHOTOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

Masai Mara Photographic Safaris 2022 & 2023

The Masai Mara is regarded as one of the best wildlife destinations in Africa and a photographer's dream. Renowned for the Big Cats: lion, leopard and cheetah, but not forgetting elephant, giraffe, hippo, hyena, zebra, antelopes and the huge variety of birdlife.

Join me on this exclusive small group safari to the Masai Mara. I have personally spent years working and living in the Mara Conservancies.

Experience one of the world's last true wildernesses and bring back your own photographs of its iconic wildlife and landscape. Photographers of all levels welcome, if you are a non-photographer and have a great love of wildlife you are very welcome on the safari.

Contact me by email at:
alisonmeesphotography@gmail.com or
www.alisonmeesphotography.com

Contact me soon as spaces are limited for June & November 2022.

Dates now available for January & February 2023

Covid safety measure and protocols are implemented across all camps.

Image by Alison Mees ARPS

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Images by
Richard Revels FRPS.
See his article
"Wildlife Visits to the Gower"
on page 16

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THE RPS
ROYAL PHOTOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

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All contributions should be submitted to the Editor. Items covering any aspect of nature photography and/or natural history are welcomed, including reviews on equipment and relevant books. The Editor can be contacted at: natureeditor@rps.org

- Copy should be sent as txt, rtf or docx files by email. Please do not send hard copy.
- Digitally captured photographic images to support your article (whether vertical or horizontal) should be supplied as 8bit jpg files, 216mm (2555 pixels) on the longest edge, at 300 pixels per inch, quality 12, file size approx 5 MB. Please send images via WeTransfer.
- If your image is selected for use on the cover of The Iris you will be asked to supply a larger file.
- No payment will be made for material used.

The views expressed within The Iris are solely those of the contributor and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Nature Group Committee or the Editor.

Distribution:
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Cover Image: Burnt Tip Orchid by Keith Polwin ARPS

Inside front: Images by Richard Revels FRPS

Inside Back and Back Cover:
Images by Nature Group Members attending the Foxlease Residential Weekend.

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Nature Group Exhibitions

CDs/DVDs of Nature Group Exhibitions are available for purchase by camera clubs/photographic societies for use in their programme. Please contact the Exhibition Secretary, details above.

Editorial

Welcome to the latest issue of The Iris. Another bumper issue and a big 'Thank You' to all who contributed articles and images. I cannot promise that all future issues will contain as many pages - without the support of Nature Group members sending in their stories and images there would be very little for me to work with.

This issue contains some interesting reading and equally interesting images. Grahame Soden ARPS, a member living in Finland, writes about the Aurora Borealis while John Nathan ARPS gives us an account of a trip he made to the Antarctic a few years ago.

From the far north of the British Isles, Brian Boyes, a resident of the Isle of Mull, shares his passion for photographing Otters and Robert Galloway has provided a short insight into a Badger that visits his Scottish garden regularly. The Gower in South Wales is the topic of past Chairman Richard Revels FRPS who reminisces on his visits there and shares images of the wildlife he photographed along its coast.

Trevor Davenport ARPS gives us an insight into the life cycle of the Vapourer Moth and John Bulpitt FRPS shares his experiences and images from his local Nature Reserve in Norfolk and if you've ever fancied a photographic set-up of your own, Roger Hance offers some tips on how to go about setting one up.

Ann Miles FRPS has provided a review of the Field Meetings held in 2021 together with a selection of the images taken by the members who attended them and Booker Skelding ARPS shares her experiences with the Nature Group at the Foxlease Residential Weekend held in October 2021.

Finally, two announcements. The Nature Group is holding its combined Spring Meeting, AGM and Annual Exhibition Opening on Saturday 9th April at The Old Schoolhouse, home of Smethwick P.S., located near exit 2 of the M5 in the West Midlands. An excellent day out. The second is for the Kingcombe Residential Weekend.

The next issue will be our Summer issue in July and should contain some successful Associate and Fellowship panels as well as the award winning images from our Annual Exhibition plus a list of the accepted images.

If you have something you would like to share with your fellow members, please contact me.

Dawn Osborn FRPS Email: natureeditor@rps.org

From the Chair

The Iris

Welcome to the second edition of our new look Iris. I would like to start by congratulating Dawn Osborn for her excellent work which has received a lot of very positive feedback from members, regarding both the printed and electronic versions. The following examples are short extracts from the comments received.

- The Iris has just arrived and my goodness - what a difference! Well done everyone and including the contributors.
- I really love the new format, which allows images to be fully enjoyed at a much more suitable size to give justice to the photographers. A significant improvement that is to be applauded.
- I realise how much time and effort Dawn would have put into preparing the copy ready for publication and she is to be applauded for producing such a fine product.
- Thank you to the committee and, particularly, to Dawn Osborn, for the new look – excellent.
- It's very much 10/10 from me. I'll be curious to see how the take-up of an electronic version goes, since this is the way a lot of the wider newspaper and magazine market is going.
- In response to your request for feedback on the new format, I found it excellent and a real inspiration.
- The change of size to A4 is a positive move and makes it easier to read. I would also be happy to receive it in an electronic format.
- I welcome the change to the format of the Iris. The A4 format is much better all round - it really does justice to the high quality of images and articles presented and is much easier to read.
- The new Iris format is great and really does justice to some fantastic images. Really interesting articles too. Even the electronic version is super. Well done to everyone involved and especially for Dawn taking it under her wing again.

To summarise, the larger size makes it more flexible for organising the content and layout of articles. It also allows more space for members images to be shown at a more suitable size to showcase the photographers work. The feedback also suggests a need to support both printed and electronic versions and we already have a system in place for anyone who prefers to receive their copy as a PDF instead of a printed magazine. We will monitor and report on the take-up of an electronic version. Feedback from members is always welcome and we also hope that you will be inspired to submit articles to Dawn for future editions.

Nature Group Advisory Days

The RPS is encouraging the Nature Group to run more Advisory Days thus allowing us to build on the success of our last one in 2020. All the places for advice on the next of these, held via Zoom on 26th March, were fully booked. We will be arranging another Advisory Day for later this year, when we hope to be able to include prints.

Events – Field Trips and Zoom.

Ann Miles continues to organise an impressive number of field trips with new events planned in several parts of the country.

She would like to extend this to as many counties as possible and in order to achieve this, we are hoping to encourage many more members to offer to host events in their local areas. All suggestions and support will be welcome.

We are also looking for Zoom speakers so that we can continue to offer a variety of talks that are available to all members regardless of geographical location. All suggestions will be welcome.

Environmental and Social Responsibility

We have been approached by the chair of the Environmental and Social Responsibility Committee, Martin Hancock ARPS, and have agreed to work with him to devise a policy for the Nature Group.

The Landscape and Travel Groups have draft policies documented, but there appears to be no commonly agreed standard for this at the moment, although it is a relatively new initiative that will undoubtedly change over the coming months.

Our current approach is to be mindful of the environment and make common sense decisions to reduce our impact, such as encouraging more local events to reduce travel and increased use of zoom for both committee meetings and online talks for members.

The Northern Lights (Aurora borealis)

by Grahame Soden ARPS, ABIPP

Hi – I'm Grahame Soden and I've been making photographs for around 50 years. I'm English, but live now in Swedish Lapland and am an Associate of both the RPS and The British Institute of Professional Photography. When I lived in Berlin I had press-passes for many pro-sports events such as boxing, speed skating, ISTAF Indoor Athletics, Berlin ePrix, Paralympic Swimming, etc. I love sports photography and have found it to be the most exacting of genres which tests your reflexes, photographic skills and workflow to the maximum.

BUT... in 2013 I relocated to Sweden and ended up in the most beautiful location of Vormsele, in Swedish Lapland. Lapland has a population density of around 2 people per square kilometre and in the winter months there can be more reindeer and elk than people. I can see the Vindelälven River from my house and, while it is still frozen over, the Sami (our indigenous people) reindeer herders drive their animals along it in spring, back to the summer pastures. Elk & deer tracks criss-cross the frozen river, and every year (except in the pandemic ones!) there is a 400 km over 4 days dog & ski relay race along its length (reduced last year to 300 km over 3 days due to poor ice).

The winters are long, but beautiful. It can start snowing in November and then the ground will stay white until April or even early May. Temperatures of -20°c are common and it can go down to -35°c, but with global warming who knows what the future holds. It's a bone-dry cold though, and much easier to endure than the grey, damp 0°c common in London or Berlin. As an added bonus, we get a minimum of 4 hours of daylight per day in the winter.

Before 2013 I was vaguely aware of the Northern Lights as a concept, but had never seen them. Then, one night during my first months here, they appeared and I was blown away – captivated forever. That first display was one of the best I've ever seen with the sky directly overhead dancing with green and purple. I decided then to learn how to photograph them and was even more surprised by how easy it is, assuming you are far enough north. I'm about 300 km south of the Arctic Circle, so far enough north – 64.9033 degrees north to be exact.

The Lights are, of course, caused by our Sun's activity and (so I'm told) this rises & falls in an 11 year cycle. Winter 2021/22 is the start of a new cycle which should peak in 2025, so start planning!

I'm sure there is some solar activity most weeks, but this far North the sky is only dark enough to see the Lights (or the stars) from September until April. The early and late part of each season is kinder to the photographer.

Every Lights display is different, varying in duration, intensity and colour. Green is the predominant colour but purple pillars and dancing magenta curtains are common. However, in April 2021 I was fortunate enough to see & photograph a display with vivid cobalt blue, which is quite rare and is caused by the very last rays from the sun, well below the horizon, just being able to strike the Lights. This display not only had the unique colour but was also very fast, racing across the sky like waves breaking on the shore. If I am never able to photograph the Lights again, then April 2021 was truly a grande finalé ...

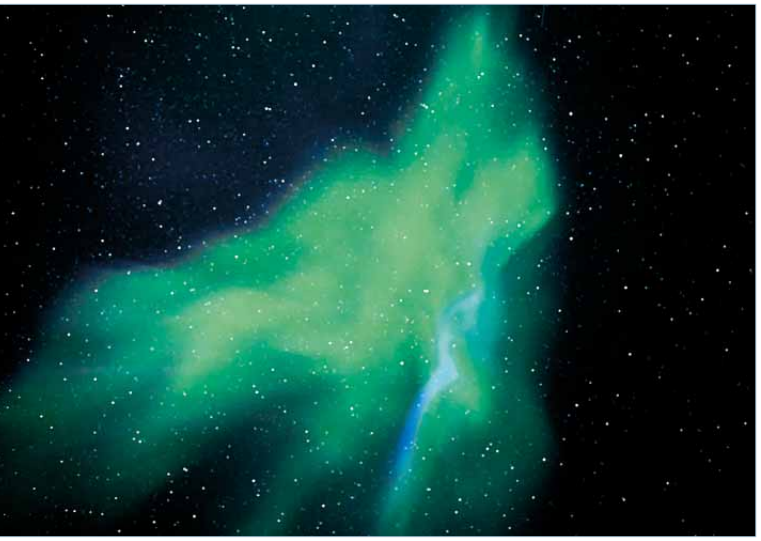
I honestly don't know what our ancestors thought of their night sky suddenly turning green. It must have been terrifying, and even now a major display can be terrifyingly beautiful - almost beyond comprehension. The Sami folk-lore attributes the Lights to the dancing souls of women who have died childless. Aurora hunters travel miles to see "The Green Lady Dancing" and I am convinced that I can see a dancing, long-haired woman, in one of the images that accompany this article.

There are many internet sites, and mobile phone apps, which will provide you with an aurora forecast. They are all full of numbers but the important one is the "KP Index". This is a scale from 0-9 of the possible geomagnetic activity. The higher the number, the more likely you are to see the aurora. At my location, I have

photographed the aurora with a KP of 3, but if you are further south then you might need KP4, 5 or 6. You also need a clear sky, low light pollution, no wind and infinite patience. When all the conditions align perfectly then your patience is well rewarded.

My "go to" forecast site is: www.gi.alaska.edu/monitors/aurora-forecast which is the Geophysical Institute, Fairbanks, Alaska, but I also use another more local forecast service on Facebook, plus an app on my phone.

I have found the online Aurora hunting communities to be very helpful and generous with their advice. If you



have an online group near you then it's a good idea to join it as they usually post a "heads up" if there is a possibility of incoming activity.

For photography, the basic minimum requirements are a camera with a wide-angle lens, a decent tripod and a remote release (or a self-timer) although people do get results with just a mobile phone, I don't know how. The deluxe set-up is a DSLR with good high ISO capabilities, a rock-steady heavy duty tripod, and camera RAW. I always assume that everyone shoots in RAW. For me, it has been the easiest way to improve my digital photography and correct my mistakes. I shoot with Canon gear and post-process in Capture 1 now, but I used the free Canon RAW processor, DPP, for many years and it's very good too.

The tripod head is quite important as, if you are well north, the Lights may be directly overhead and you need to be able to tilt your camera almost vertical. The tripod head is not as important further south, as the Lights will be low in the sky towards the northern horizon.

My camera settings are usually iso of 1600, with an f2.8 28 mm lens one or two stops down from wide open, and an exposure of anything from 8 to 15 seconds depending on how bright the display is. Sometimes you can scarcely see the Lights with the naked eye, but the camera image will surprise you! It sees a lot more.

For focussing, set your lens to manual focus. If the foreground is interesting then focus on that. I usually focus manually to infinity then back it off a little. The Lights move a lot so will never be wholly in focus. I don't bother too much about the white balance as RAW lets me adjust it, but Daylight WB gives an OK result too.

Check and adjust your camera settings as much as possible and mount it on the tripod, before you leave the house. It's a good idea to turn your lcd brightness down too.You will be working in the near-dark and possibly extreme cold so get as much of the fiddly stuff as possible done first. I've done a Lights session in -34°C and you really don't want to be working without gloves in temperatures like that, your fingers will freeze to anything metal. Do not breathe over your camera, its screen or the lens. Your breath will freeze on them. If you have to pop back indoors, leave your camera outside – otherwise condensation will render your gear unusable for at least half an hour. After your session, let all your gear warm up gently indoors, leaving the lens cap off.

Some people pre-cool their gear outside before shooting. I've never had a problem in taking my gear from the warmth into the cold – but that might just be that the cold air here is very, very dry. In more moist air then you might need to pre-cool.

I have never had a camera or battery fail in the cold (although one lens didn't like it too much and started 'grating' if I tried to refocus). I usually give up well before the equipment does. I can wear 3 pairs of gloves (thin cotton, chamois-leather flying gloves, topped with fur lined mittens) and a mat or thick plywood panel to stand on can help; it's your hands & feet that die first.

Digital noise can be an issue, as can hot or dead pixels, so images do need some in-camera help such as long exposure noise reduction (which will slow your shooting rate down a lot) and post-processing work. You need a clear dark sky as you can't see the Lights through cloud, and wind is a killer, too, both for the wind-chill and camera shake.

To summarise, you need:

- A good location. Swedish Lapland, North Norway, Iceland, and North Finland each have their own merits and drawbacks but all are far enough north;
- Confidence that you and your gear can work in the cold and the dark;
- Suitable clothing;
- Patience;
- Clear Skies!
- Luck.

So that's it – that's what works for me and I did get my Associate qualification with BIPP (The British Institute of Professional Photography) for a panel of 40 Northern Lights images.

If you're keen on trying your hand at the Northern Lights photography and are planning a trip then I'm happy to help – just get in touch.

Remember, if you are fortunate enough to see the Lights then take some time away from the viewfinder to just enjoy the spectacle - you will always remember your first time.

Cheers - Grahame

www.odensdawn.zenfolio.com
photograhame@gmail.com

RPS Nature Group Spring Meeting
46th Annual General Meeting
Opening of the Annual Exhibition

Saturday 9th April 2022

Smethwick Photographic Society

The Old Schoolhouse, Churchbridge, Oldbury,

West Midlands, B69 2AS

Programme:

10:00hrs	**Doors open, tea and coffee available**
10:30hrs	**Welcome and Introduction by RPS Nature Group Chair, David O'Neill LRPS**
10:40hrs	**Presentation by Wildlife Photographer and NG Member Mike Lane FRPS**
12:15hrs	**Break for Lunch and to look at the Exhibition**
13:15hrs	**46th Annual General Meeting of the RPS Nature Group**

Agenda:

1. **Apologies for Absence**
2. **Minutes of the 45th AGM 2021 (printed in Issue 140 of 'The Iris')**
3. **Matters arising**
4. **Chair's Report**
5. **Treasurer's Report**
6. **Secretary's Report**
7. **Programme Coordinator's Report**
8. **Any Other Business**
9. **Date and Venue of the 47th AGM 2023**

14:00hrs	**Opening of the 2022 Exhibition**
	Presentation of the Awards
	Projection of the accepted images
16:15hrs	**Close**

Throughout the day the prints accepted for the 2022 Exhibition will be on display
Please bring your own packed lunch as lunch will not be available.
There is a dining area. Tea, coffee and drinks will be available at the bar.

Watch the RPS Nature Group website for further information and how to book or contact:
Duncan Locke ARPS, Honorary Secretary
E-mail: duncan.locke@btinternet.com

Nature Group Summer Residential Weekend 2022

The Kingcombe Centre Dorset

Friday 10th to Monday 13th June 2022

For the 2022 Summer Residential Weekend, the Nature Group is returning to The Kingcombe Centre in West Dorset. Not only does Kingcombe provide a central point to visit Dorset's many Nature Reserves, but the Centre is situated in Kingcombe Meadows, one of southern England's best Nature Reserves. A full programme of visits to Dorset's Nature Reserves will be planned.

For further information on the venue visit:
https://www.dorsetwildlifetrust.org.uk/nature-reserves/kingcombe-centre

Up to sixteen places are available dependant on the mix of single and shared twin bed occupancy.

All rooms have en-suite facilities. One bedroom with disabled access is available.

The final cost for three nights full board accommodation is £290 for shared twin bed occupancy and £350 for single occupancy.

A deposit of £150 for single occupancy or £125 for shared occupancy will secure a place.
Final payments will be required by: Friday 8th April 2022.

For further details on the Weekend and to book your place, go to the RPS Nature Group website:
https://rps.org/events/groups/nature/2022/june/summer-residential-weekend-at-the-kingcombe-centre
or contact: Duncan Locke ARPS. E-mail: duncan.locke@btinternet.com Tel: 07989 494232