



## PHOTO MASTERCLASS

### PART 11: WORK ON A PROJECT



If you want to develop your creativity, try focusing on a single theme or subject. Commitment should reward you with the unusual, the abstract and the extraordinary, says **Mark Carwardine**.

**Mark Carwardine** regularly presents BBC natural-history programmes, and is a photographer, writer and conservationist.

One of the best ways to improve your photography is to take on a project.

Shooting the same subject over and over again forces you to experiment, to think outside the box and to push your personal boundaries of creativity.

The more time you spend on a project, the more likely you are to produce truly original, imaginative, eye-catching photographs. The trick is to keep shooting until you completely run out of ideas, and then produce a coherent selection of varied pictures. Far from feeling restrictive, it is truly liberating.

Your project could focus on a single species (such as the grey squirrel or starling – the more familiar, the better, because it

is more challenging to produce something fresh); a specific location (a local park or nature reserve, or even a village pond, would be perfect); a simple theme (green, winter, raindrops, etc); or just an idea (shooting the same place at different times of day and year, for example, or taking a single photograph every day on your commute to work). Once you start to experiment with new positions, compositions, lighting and times of day, you'll soon discover more abstract approaches.

So this month we'll be learning why top wildlife photographers tend to resist the temptation to flit around shooting a bit of everything, and focus on specific projects instead.

▲ **DWARF STAR**  
Perseverance is key to a successful project. After weeks of bad weather, in a boat far off the northern Great Barrier Reef in Australia, I had one outstanding day with dwarf minke whales – and got the shots I was after.

How long did it take for you to spot the Ural owl? Spend lots of time with your subject and you'll start to identify more unconventional portrait styles.

## 1 USE YOUR EYES – AND IMAGINATION

SVEN ZAČEK ESTONIA



Sven Začek has a particular passion for the boreal forests of his native Estonia,

where he has spent months photographing Ural owls.

"I've probably spent more time with these beautiful birds than with any other species," he says. "Over the past four years, one particular individual has come to accept me as its second shadow. This level of familiarity has enabled me to take a wide range of images that would otherwise have been impossible."

But just because Sven has gained the owl's trust, and has therefore

been able to get incredibly close, doesn't mean to say that all of his pictures are full-frame close-ups, as this example ably demonstrates. The whole point of a project like this is to create variety. It makes you think laterally, to take many different photos of the same subject.

"The best tip I can give to beginners," says Sven, "is to learn to 'see'. Spending a lot of time with the same species, or even the same individual, enables you to hone your observational skills and pick out potential images that perhaps you wouldn't have noticed before."

► [www.zacekfoto.ee](http://www.zacekfoto.ee)

### TECHNICAL SPECS

Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III + 300mm lens + 2x converter; 1/60 sec at f4; ISO 1000



Conservation issues – here the many threats faced by olive ridley turtles – lend themselves well to photographic projects. A picture really is worth a thousand words.

### TECHNICAL SPECS

Nikon D2X + 80–200mm lens; 1/125 sec at f2.8; ISO 100

## 2 FIND A STORY TO SHARE

SOLVIN ZANKL GERMANY



Another reason for taking on a photographic project is to learn how to tell a strong, lucid story with a series of images or, better still, a single image. This is what Solvin has done with this powerful and evocative picture, taken at Playa Ostional, Costa Rica.

"I wanted to illustrate some of the threats that olive ridley turtle hatchlings face before they even reach the sea," he explains. "This image shows a dog digging up a nest buried in the sand, taking a hatchling and ultimately leaving the rest of the brood exposed to loitering black vultures."

Conservation issues make great photographic projects. Try working with a local group – in return for advice, access and assistance, let them use your images free of charge.

► [www.solvinzankl.com](http://www.solvinzankl.com)

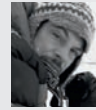




Winning the fox's trust enabled Stefano to get close enough to use a wide-angle lens.

## 3 GET OUT AND MAKE FRIENDS

STEFANO UNTERTHINER ITALY



Stefano was exploring Gran Paradiso National Park, in the Italian Alps, when he found a fox den containing five cubs. One of them showed absolutely no fear of humans, and Stefano spent two years photographing the youngster. "I called him Fred," says Stefano, "and we became great friends. I followed him day after day as he patrolled his territory, hunted mice and chased groundhogs, and I waited patiently while he slept in the shade of rocks. Photographing truly wild foxes is anything but easy – they tend to be very shy and distrustful – so I made the most of our beautiful friendship."

Stefano took no fewer than 15,000 pictures of this fox, but had to edit those down to a mere 100 for his book of the project.

► [www.stefanunterthiner.com](http://www.stefanunterthiner.com)

### TECHNICAL SPECS

Nikon F5; Fuji Provia film; ISO 100

## 4 DABBLE WITH DRAGONFLIES

ROSS HODDINOTT UK



Ross is best known for his close-up photography, and specialises in insects and wild plants.

"I've been shooting dragonflies since I was 12," he comments. "They are incredibly challenging. First, you have to find them, then you have a lot of fiddly macro work, then you have to contort yourself into awkward positions to get exactly the right angle. But it's enormous fun."

Dragonflies make excellent subjects for a long-term project. Try photographing them with different backgrounds, at water level and in flight; shoot extreme close-ups and wides of them in their watery environment; experiment with lighting to show off their wings; and get to know them well enough to capture different types of behaviour.

► [www.rosshoddinott.co.uk](http://www.rosshoddinott.co.uk)



### TECHNICAL SPECS

Nikon D300 + 150mm macro lens; 1/8 sec at f16; ISO 200

Dragonflies, such as this four-spotted chaser, offer great potential for variety.

You could photograph them for a lifetime and still not run out of ideas.

# BREAKING THE RULES

Once you know the rules, bending them can result in a better picture.

## 5 KEEP AN OPEN MIND

ALEX MUSTARD UK



Alex took his first picture beneath the waves at the age of nine and has specialised in marine wildlife ever since.

While he does undertake projects focusing on specific subjects – from West Indian manatees in Florida to basking sharks in Cornwall – he also takes advantage of opportunities as they arise.

“You have to keep an open mind,” he says. “It’s great to have objectives for particular projects, but you don’t want to be so focused on one shot that you miss other opportunities.”

Photographing coral reefs is a good example. You can’t change lenses underwater, so you have to make basic decisions about the animals you are likely to see. If you’re concentrating on small fish and invertebrates, for instance, you’ll need a macro lens, but if

Sometimes, not having a specific goal allows you to uncover new opportunities – such as this clownfish captured against the gaudy red skirt of a magnificent sea anemone.



you’re after sharks and turtles, a wide-angle one is more suitable.

Beyond that, you have to be ready for any encounters. Alex captured this Red Sea clownfish during a trip to Egypt, while

shooting everything from oceanic whitetip sharks to seaslugs.

► [www.amustard.com](http://www.amustard.com)

### TECHNICAL SPECS

Nikon D700 + 16mm fisheye lens + 1.5x converter; 1/125 sec at f10; ISO 200

## TRICKS OF THE TRADE

### ► MULTITASK

Have a few projects on the go at once, to keep you inspired in case you find one of them particularly challenging.

### ► FREE YOUR MIND

Be as ingenious and outlandish as possible to push your creative boundaries.



### ► LOOK AND LEARN

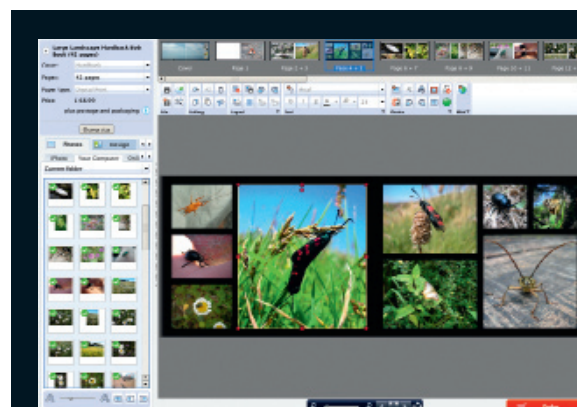
Seek inspiration in other people’s photographs – look for styles you might be able to adapt to suit your own work.

### ► USE ALL THE BUTTONS

Experiment with all of the camera and flash settings, all of your lenses and as many different techniques as you can dream up.

### ► ENJOY YOURSELF

You are allowed to quit a project if you’re not enjoying it – they are, after all, supposed to be fun.



Easy-to-use online or downloadable editing software makes compiling a professional-looking book of your photographic project a straightforward task.

## SET A GOAL: CREATE A BOOK



Making a photo book is a great way to pull your project together. There are several online services that enable you to create and print books – Bob Books is particularly good ([www.bobbooks.co.uk](http://www.bobbooks.co.uk)), or try Blurb ([www.blurb.com](http://www.blurb.com)). Choose a template, then upload your pictures (size-12 jpegs at 300dpi RGB or sRGB) and text using the inbuilt design software (Bob Books’ is compatible with Mac OS X 10.5 and 10.6, Windows 2000 and later, and Linux). The finished book arrives in the post within a few weeks.

## ON OUR WEBSITE



Read previous Masterclasses, admire our experts’ picture galleries (above) and enter our online photo contests at

► [DiscoverWildlife.com](http://DiscoverWildlife.com)

**NEXT MONTH BREAK ALL THE RULES** Take experimentation to the extreme for unique results