Ups and downs on the path to a Nature Associateship.

by Ken Rasmussen ARPS

My Licentiateship went well. I attended an advisory workshop with a large number of natural history images, some from a recent trip to Kenya and some of UK wildlife. The comments were encouraging and, indeed, I was told my images were of Associateship standard. This was confirmed by a member of the Nature Panel who was advising on Associateships. I obtained my ‘L’ in 2008 with a panel consisting of six images from Kenya and four of UK wildlife. There were no UK birds in it, however. Perhaps this was an omen.

Buoyed my success, I wanted to take a similar approach for my ‘A’. In June 2009 I looked for a suitable workshop, but there were no nearby Natural History days. I therefore contacted Andy Moore at the RPS who suggested that I send a set of twenty images to Tony Wharton. I sent Tony images of UK birds. Tony’s response was swift but devastating. He did not think I could make a successful panel from the images. Analysing his comments, there seemed to be about ten images that were up to standard or could be with a little change. I knew I had other images of similar species which would overcome some of Tony’s criticisms but of course they may have had other faults. It was clear I had more work to do.

I had two overseas holidays planned for the next twelve months in which I hoped to get some good images of birds. One was to the Galapagos Islands to celebrate my wife’s retirement and the other was to Florida, with David Osborn, to photograph the birds there. So I considered the option of a ‘birds in action’ panel on the assumption that the holidays would produce some good images. However, a comment from Tony had struck a chord. He suggested I should not rule out doing a more varied panel - i.e. not just birds. I have always tried to photograph a range of wildlife and it would be an interesting challenge, I thought, and the ‘Birds in action’ option would still be there as a backup.

So, I decided to aim for a panel showing a variety of UK wildlife. Having seen panels with images of five birds, five insects and five wildflowers I decided to follow suit. I also decided that if my panel was to truly show variety it should contain variety within each of the groups. This meant for example, the insects should include no more than one (adult) butterfly or moth and no more than one damselfly or dragonfly; there should be at most one orchid among the wildflowers and, ideally, at least one environmental (wide angle) shot; the birds should have examples from different environments and preferably with different behaviour.

As we had recently moved house from Reading to the East Midlands, I gave myself two years to produce the images - the first year to find and check out the local reserves and hopefully get a few suitable images, and the second year to finish the image taking. The summer of 2010 saw me in local nature reserves looking for the insect and wildflower images I needed as well as looking for new bird images. I also decided to go on David Osborn’s annual fungi workshop in October 2010. Having always found fungi photography difficult, I hoped the weekend would not only be interesting and informative, but also that some of the techniques would be useful for wildflowers.

By the end of 2010, I was felt I was making progress. Then Tony Wharton struck again!

I had been reading back issues of the Iris to find advice on improving my wildflower and insect pictures when I came across Tony’s 2008 article, ‘Size does matter’. In the article Tony pointed out the benefits of using long focal length lenses for macro work: depth of field is the same as for shorter lenses but it is easier to get diffuse backgrounds. Getting good backgrounds has been the bane of my (photographic) life - it often seems easier to get a good image of the subject than to get a good background. I had been using a 60mm lens on a 1.6 crop factor camera (like a 100mm lens on a film camera) but decided to buy a longer lens (a Sigma 150mm macro).
By late summer 2011 I thought I had good selection of images and in fact, nine of the images in my final panel were taken that year. I enrolled on David's fungi weekend again and started looking for a suitable workshop. With other commitments preventing attendance at a local workshop, I was expecting I would need a long trip to Newcastle, when I noticed that the East Anglia group was holding a workshop in December. I applied and managed to get a place.

Less than a week before the workshop and after much planning of my proposed panel I had a change of heart. I decided that since it was a workshop I could afford to take a risk and if I was really going for variety in UK wildlife I should broaden the range of the panel. I decided to include fungi images as well as an image of a grass snake that had done well in club competitions. One advantage was that I had not managed to get an environmental flower shot but I did have a wide angle image of some shaggy scalycap fungi.

Richard Revels provided advice at the workshop. He seemed happy with the range of images but suggested that two of the images lacked contrast.
He also pointed out that there was movement blur on one image of the adult and pupa of a seven spot ladybird. I could not see the blurring but close examination of the digital image at 100% proved he was right. I also showed him an A4 size print of some common frogs I had wanted to include but had not had time to prepare fully (given my late change of mind about the panel). The contrast problems could be solved by better post processing and the ladybird image replaced so Richard suggested that I had a chance.

I finally submitted my panel in September 2012 and passed. None of the original twenty birds shown to Tony Wharton were in the panel and neither of the fungi photos were taken on David’s fungi workshops, though I had learned a great deal from them.

I had obtained some pleasing bird images from my Galapagos and Florida holidays and I often wonder if it would have been simpler to submit a ‘Birds in Action’ panel. However, I know that I have learned more about Natural History and Natural History photography by following the path I did.
I would like to thank both Tony and David for their influence on my panel and Richard for his advice at the workshop.

**Panel contents**

below left to right

- Water avens
- Wood pigeon
- Shaggy scalycap
- Common frogs
- Knapweed Broomrape (on Greater Knapweed)
- Common Blue butterfly
- Grass snake
- Hairy shieldbug
- Whitethroat
- Common blue damselfly
- Wild mignonette
- Fulmar
- Dryads saddle
- Mallards
- Common spotted orchid

---

**Statement of intent**

This panel shows a range of UK wildlife. It shows examples from a number of different groups of wildlife and where there is more than one image from a particular group (such as insects or wildflowers) it shows variety within that group. The panel reflects the types of UK natural history images I have taken in recent years.