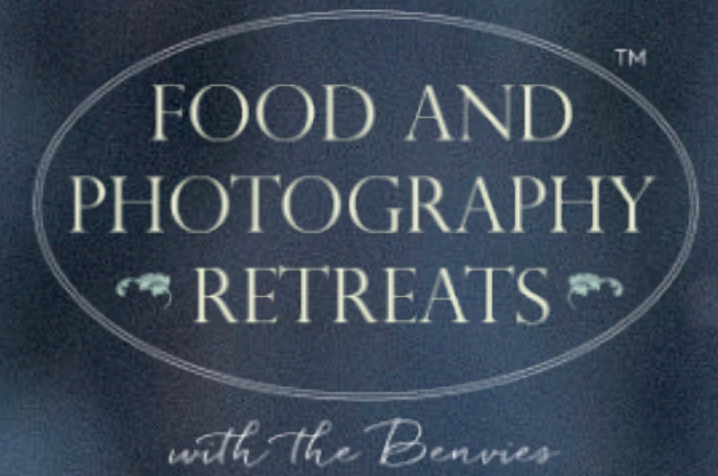


MENU

NUMBER 20 • JUNE 2023

FIFTH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

Your pictures from our Retreats



AI IMAGING AND PROMPTOGRAPHS

WHERE WE STAND

POST-PRODUCTION

iPhone DNGs in Lightroom

IRA HILGER

When student becomes master

OUR 2024
RETREATS

including

England

Norway

Scotland

Slovenia

Iceland

France



FLATANGER

SEA EAGLE
CAPITAL

Charlotte makes

Cup-a-Soup (sort of...)

also

CHEZ-NOUS CRANES • OUR STORY IN 50 OBJECTS



Common gull seeing off sea eagle



Photo by Charlotte. Yes she can shoot as well as cook!

Hello from Charlotte and Niall

IS IT REALLY FIVE YEARS since we founded our company? Sometimes we wonder where the time has gone - until we start thinking about the diverse experiences we've shared since the beginning of the adventure - and the sheer number of hours we've devoted to building and refining our offer.

In retrospect, it wasn't a great time to launch: there was no shortage of photographic holiday companies already and, unbeknownst to everyone, a pandemic was just around the corner. But like an albatross chick, we launched unsteadily into the breeze, relying on the lift of hard work and self-belief to take us into the air. At the start of 2020, the lift we had enjoyed fell away as

the world economy was becalmed by the pandemic. Like everyone else, we spent many months floating on the ocean, finding other diversions and learning new skills, but yearning to be airborne once more. And slowly, hesitantly, the breeze has returned, just enough for us to feel the wind beneath our wings again. And we think the wind will only get stronger.

Throughout, we've held to our belief that there is a demand for a high standard of care and hospitality com-

bined with great photography opportunities and informed tuition and have set about building our business around satisfying those twin demands. Judging by the responses we receive, the effort is worth it.

From its first issue in July 2018, (11 pages only!), MENU has always been more than just a sales pitch. We love sharing what we've learned, what we've made, what we've seen and what other creative people are doing, with you.

So, to mark our fifth anniversary (and 20th issue of MENU), we are pleased to present six pages of work made by some of our guests travelling on Retreat with us. We thank them for sharing these pictures with us - and you. What we aren't able to show, because of deadlines, is guests' work from our very recent Retreat in Flatanger, Norway which, by some distance, was the most photographically productive one we have ever run. We have, though, featured various pictures of our own in this issue.

Before the pandemic, we had no idea the fun we would have teaching on-line, to individuals as well as to groups. The range of topics has been diverse - from macaron-making to Colour Transects - but I've particularly enjoyed helping photographers get to grips with [Affinity Publisher](#), to add a professional polish to the presentation of their work. I'm very open with information and my ideas on the basis that every so often some smart person picks up an idea of mine and evolves it into something I hadn't considered. As you can read in the article by Austrian photographer, Ira Hilger, sometimes all it needs is a little spark to set a creative fire burning. I love the way Ira has taken the field studio back to its origins in botanical illustration

to produce beautiful, rather inspiring work. I know I've succeeded when I am envious of the work produced by a student.

It's possible, of course, with the rapid refinement of Dall-E, Midjourney, [Generative Fill in Photoshop](#) and other AI imaging applications that you are wondering what the point is in refining your photographic skills when amazing images can now be produced with a string of prompts. In a statement about our position on AI, I make the case for rejecting the reductionist "the final image is all that counts" mindset and emphasising the experiential aspect of photography. I think it's vital, too, that rather like in a library, we need to be certain that the fiction doesn't get mixed in with the non-fiction and that each is labelled properly.

We are publishing next year's programme of Retreats, including some [Chez-nous](#) specials, in this edition. While the brochures are still at the design phase, we would ask you to express interest in those Retreats you like the sound of ahead of brochure publication in mid-July. We had some quick sell-outs this year!

The iPhone, so long Charlotte's domain, is featuring

more and more in my work now as I understand its possibilities and limitations. If you don't already do so and your 'phone has the ability to capture native RAW files, try shooting some then importing them into Lightroom, Affinity Photo or Capture One. You may be pleasantly surprised at what your phone can produce. I go through some of the Lightroom basics on page 6.

Charlotte is in her element in June as the vegetable raised beds start to reward her work earlier in the year. With our [cabin](#) recently completed, we also have a space in the garden for writing, teaching and sleeping when we want to be close to the crickets, frogs, long-eared owls and nightingales that call and sing through the night. The loss of our lovely 18 m twin silver birches in a storm earlier this year is compensated for by the uninterrupted view we now have over the [bocage](#) beyond our *prairie's* southern hedge. The addition of the cabin means that we are able to offer [Chez-nous Retreats](#) for 3 friends now - but we'll take the cabin, if you don't mind!

Enjoy this extended edition of MENU and we look forward to welcoming you on Retreat. with us.

Charlotte & Niall

AI, Promptographs and where we stand

WHEN I FIRST READ ABOUT AI in Yuval Noah Harari's [21 Lessons for the 21st Century](#), I unwisely put it in the same category as social media, video games, VR headsets and other fripperies of modern life we can live well without. It would come and go and have very little impact on the real, material world. Now, with AI imaging and [General Purpose Technology](#) in the form of Chat GPT and other applications, it's clear that the implications of AI are potentially far-reaching and profound. If there is one lesson we've learned from the last 20 years it is that technology needs an elder sibling; ethics. Without its guiding influence, technology is an unruly brat, sure to fall in with bad company at the first opportunity. It is certainly not to be trusted to make your life better, however sweetly it smiles at you. But unfortunately, already, many people have allowed themselves to be beguiled by AI without much thought to the consequences.

I want to talk here about AI in the context of image creation. I should distinguish, too, between that used to accomplish technical tasks such as autofocus, noise reduction and sub-

ject selection and the AI used to make images from scratch by typing a string of prompts into a browser. Dall-E, [Midjourney](#) and others now make it possible for anyone with a computer and internet connection to make pretty much whatever image they like - without a camera. This has led to much hand-wringing in various quarters.

I remember similar reactions amongst nature photographers in the 1990's and early 2000's when photographs of predators hired from game farms were often preferred by editors over less-than-perfect images of wild individuals. And then again over the pioneering digital work of [Steve Bloom](#). At the nub of it all was the notion that the viewers were being deceived, that their hope that, with time and resources, they too could have the same experience, was a false one. Well, AI knocks these concerns into a cocked hat, that's for sure.

But for one thing.

How does the *experience* of sitting at a computer screen, perhaps even using [Chat GPT](#) to generate the prompts for

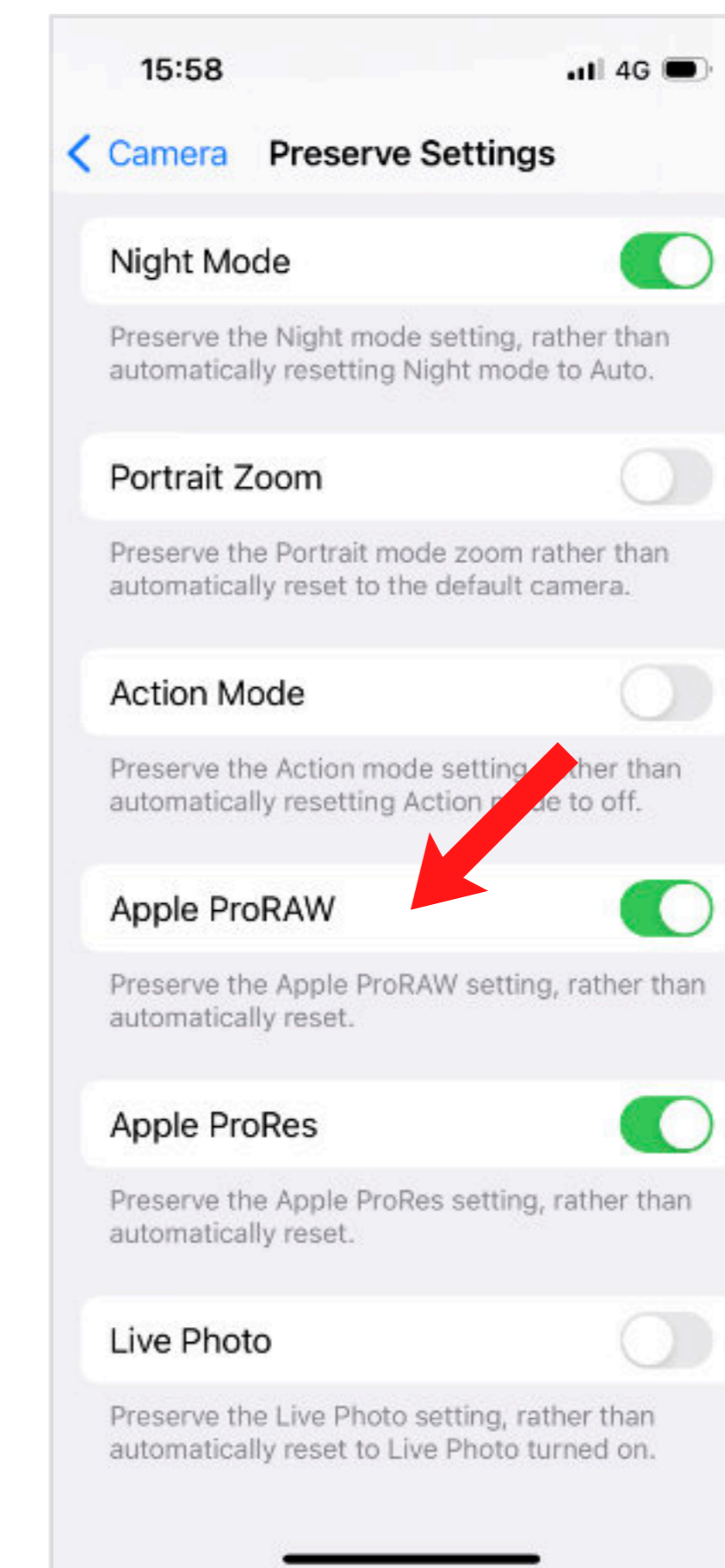
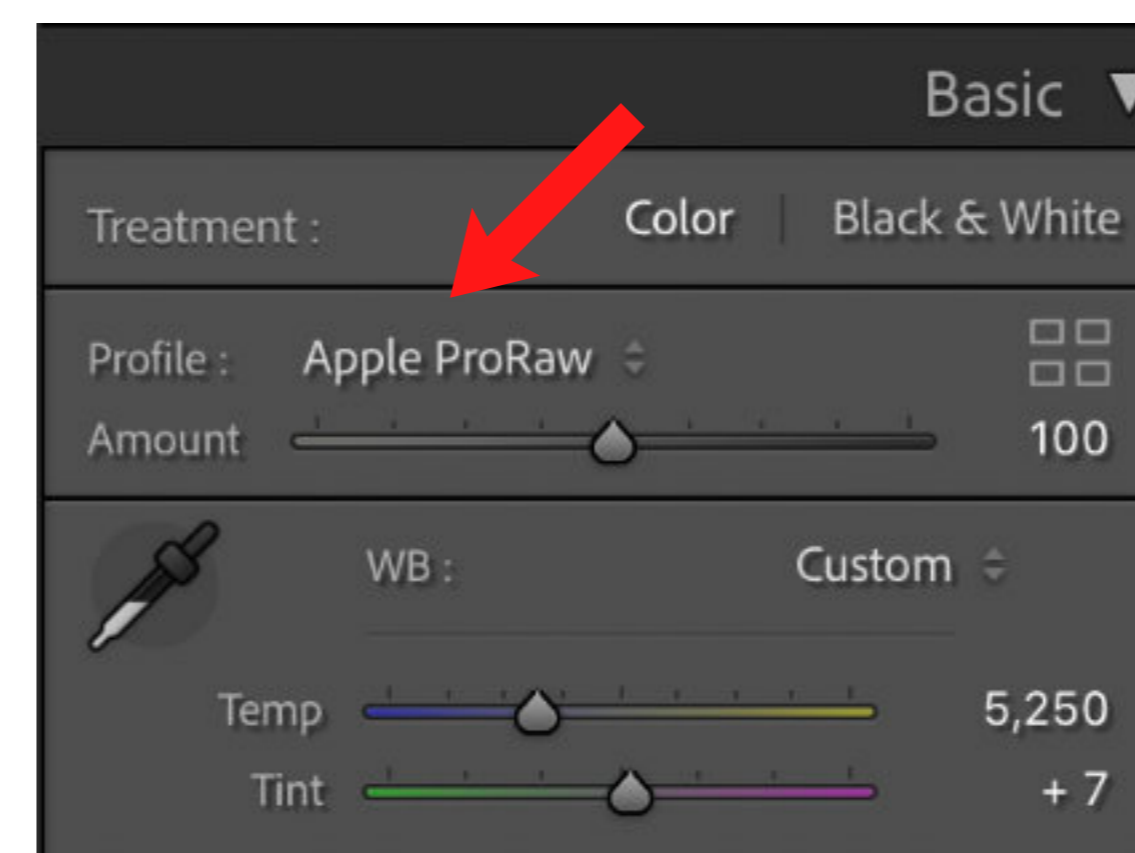
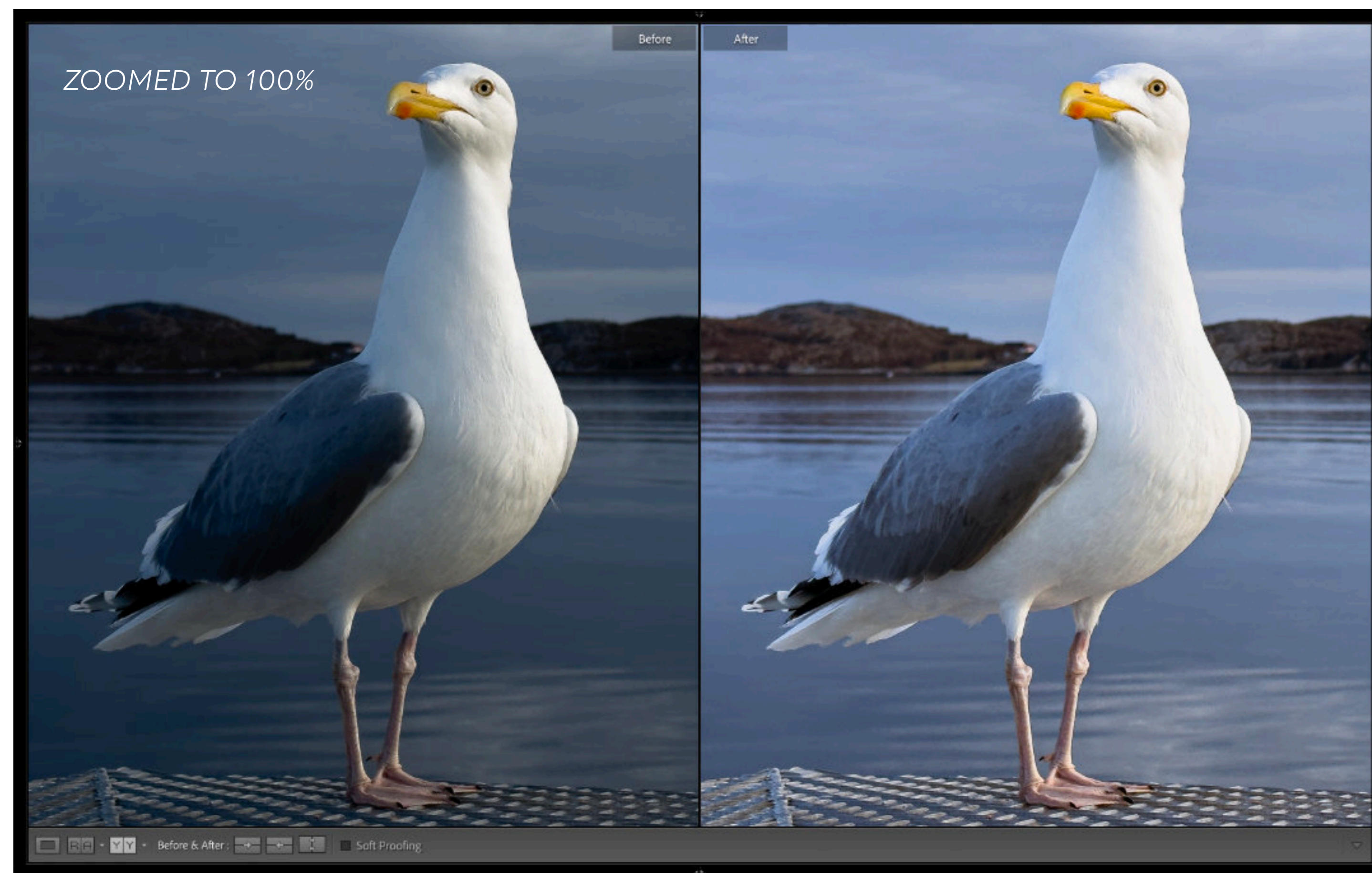
you, compare with being outside with a camera, warmed by the sun or soaked by the rain, feeling frustration or elation, having a story to tell at the end of the day? To my mind, the experiential aspect of photography, and the eternal possibility of recording something novel, makes it an incomparably richer and more fulfilling medium to work in than the recombinant technology of AI and its lack of physical demand.

You can be sure that once the current hen-house hysteria has died down, many creative people will quietly get on with adopting AI and it will become normalised - for better or worse. That's why those of us who want to continue to make our own novel work - rather than scrape and recombine in an AI app. - would be wise to signal how it was made.

In a library, there is a section for fiction and one for non-fiction. Now that we can't rely on viewers telling one from the other, I think we need to be proactive in identifying images made with Human Intelligence. This is the logo we will use in future to indicate that.



Processing iPhone RAW files



TECHNICALLY, I NEVER FOUND THE HEIC (compressed) files from the iPhone useful for anything other than posting on the web. They exhibited too much sharpening, too little dynamic range. But it's a different matter when the iPhone is set to shoot Apple ProRAW. You can do this in Settings>Cam-

era>Photo Capture. You can set this as your default format by moving the Apple ProRAW slider to green in the Preserve Settings option under Camera.

When I first export files from my 'phone (I get them on to the Mac by Airdrop then drag the files from Down-

loads over the LR icon to start the import process) they always look very dark in the Develop module. If this happens to you too, correct it by changing the Profile in the Basic panel from Apple Embedded Profile to Apple ProRAW. Instantly, the picture lightens and is much closer to what I want it to look like. While I miss the possibility to edit with a Camera Flat profile - I use it with my Nikon RAW files to provide the most neutral starting point - the Apple ProRAW format is adequate. From there, processing is just the same as with any other RAW file. RAW files can't be created with Pano or Portrait mode selected but in Photo, at 1x, you have a pretty impressive 48 Mp DNG file to work with. If you have the 14 Pro, it's a shame not to try.



The iPhone 14 Pro produces remarkably smooth files with a surprisingly wide dynamic range. Practically, it captured all the data I needed to recreate the mood of this still evening on the fjord. And it's the first camera I reach for when speed is of the essence.



Flatanger: sea eagle capital

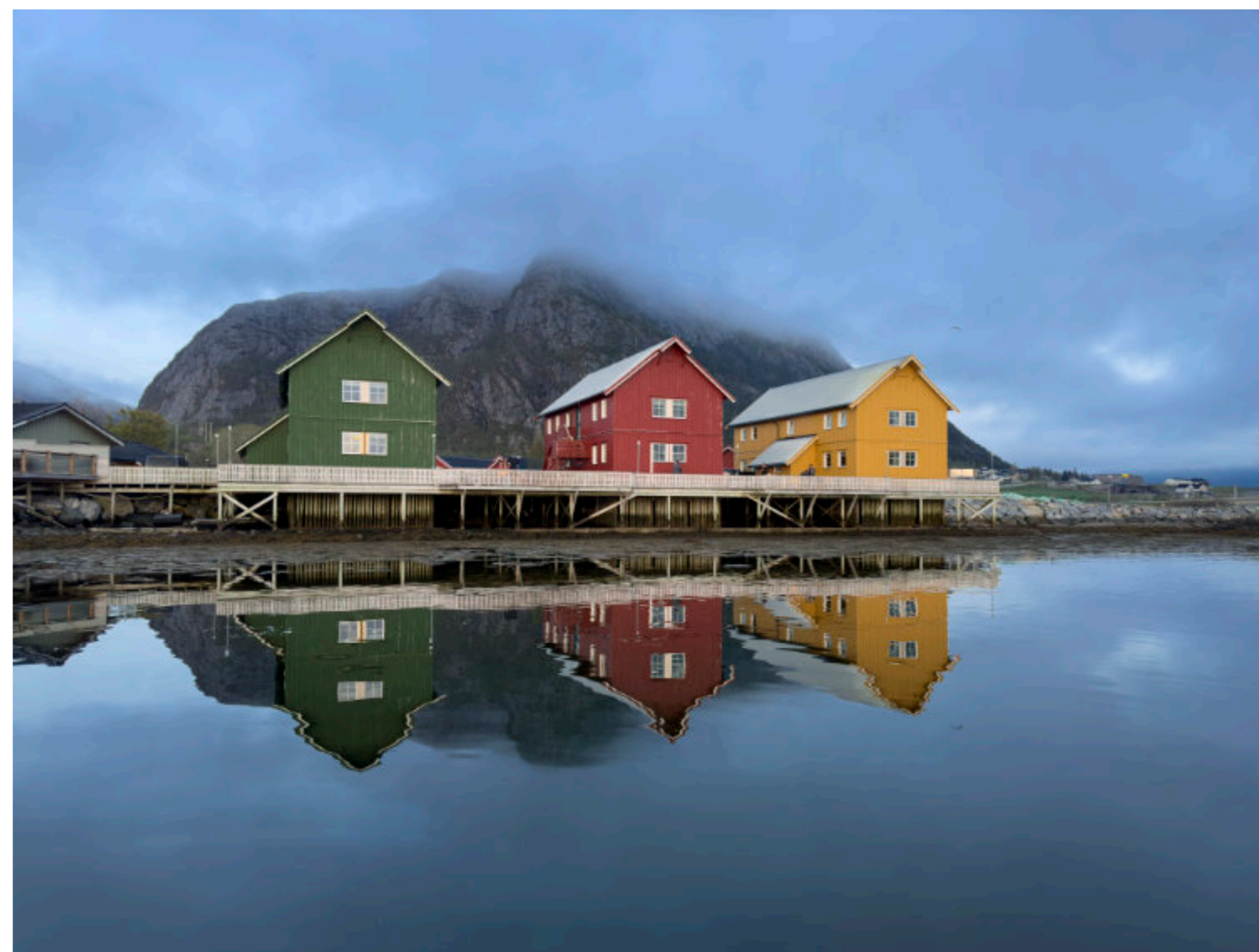


WHEN WE ARRIVED to host a Retreat in the little village of Lauvsnes, Norway, in May, it was 18 years since I had last seen Ole Martin Dahle. In the early 2000's, with guidance from British photographers Pete Cairns and Mark Hamblin, he began to develop an eco-tourism business providing photographers with the chance to photograph the wild sea eagles that he had been feeding for years from the back of his boat. It was a massive hit and over the years he and his wife, the photographer **Wenche Dahle**, have refined their **operation** to provide one of the most exciting bird photography experiences in Europe. They built a cosy guest house and hides in their forest for photographing red squirrels and a range of northern woodland birds from goshawks to crested tits. But the sea eagles remain the stars. And although a little greyer now, Ole Martin remains the same affable, professional guide who knows just what photographers are after.

Mid-Trøndelag has one of the most buoyant populations of sea eagles (synonymous with white-tailed eagle) in Europe, not least because the fjords are rich in fish, nesting sites are plentiful and persecution minimal (sheep farmers there regard the birds as big sea

gulls rather than a threat to their livestock). Young birds from the area have provided the "seed stock" for re-introduction programmes, including the **current one in Ireland**. The biggest threat to the birds comes from wind farms that have proliferated in Mid-Trøndelag, although the commune (parish) has so far been successful at blocking their construction. Given the **mortality rates** on the island of Smøla - site of Norway's biggest wind farm - to the south, the community's fears are justified.

In the meantime, the sea eagles know the routine, no doubt rolling their eyes at the antics of the common



and herring gulls that follow the boat. When they are ready, they drop from the sky to pluck the fish from the water, at an ideal distance for a 300 mm lens. Ole Martin "pans" the boat to follow their flight and before you know it, another memory card is full. A maximum of six photographers occupy the boat and a discipline is observed so that no one blocks another's view. During our Retreat, we provided each guests with two morning and two evening sessions amounting to about 12 hours on the water.

Well, that gives you a little flavour of the sea eagle experience, so now I'll pass over to Charlotte to tell you about her work on the Retreat - and some exciting news for next year. - *Niall*

I AM AT MY BEST when cooking for our family, our friends or for our guests. Recently on our Retreat in Norway the schedule was hectic, with an early start to photograph the sea eagles (and other sea birds including a bonus pair of arctic skuas!) We would return with everyone hungry from the fresh sea air and the thrill of capturing SO many images of these birds. Niall and I quickly laid out breakfast, which was devoured just as fast Then it was on with preparing

lunch and getting ahead with the evening meal so that everyone could get out again to photograph - yes, more birds. We were hooked as surely as mackerels on a hand-line and couldn't get enough of the experience. I was lucky enough to be able to get fresh ingredients



every day. On the very first morning, a fishing boat came into the harbour and we bought fresh prawns for the first evening's welcome meal. I remember thinking, as I frantically prepared them (peeling prawns is time-consuming!) that perhaps it would have been wiser to serve them for the next day's lunch with a salad. But I was finished just in time and everyone enjoyed them. I think the most remarkable thing was that when I offered some Norwegian Kroner to pay for the prawns,

the fisherman asked if I could make a card payment instead and brought out a wireless card machine. Norwegians love their tech. It was as well that Ole Martin suggested we went down at the quay early as not long after, he was sold out.

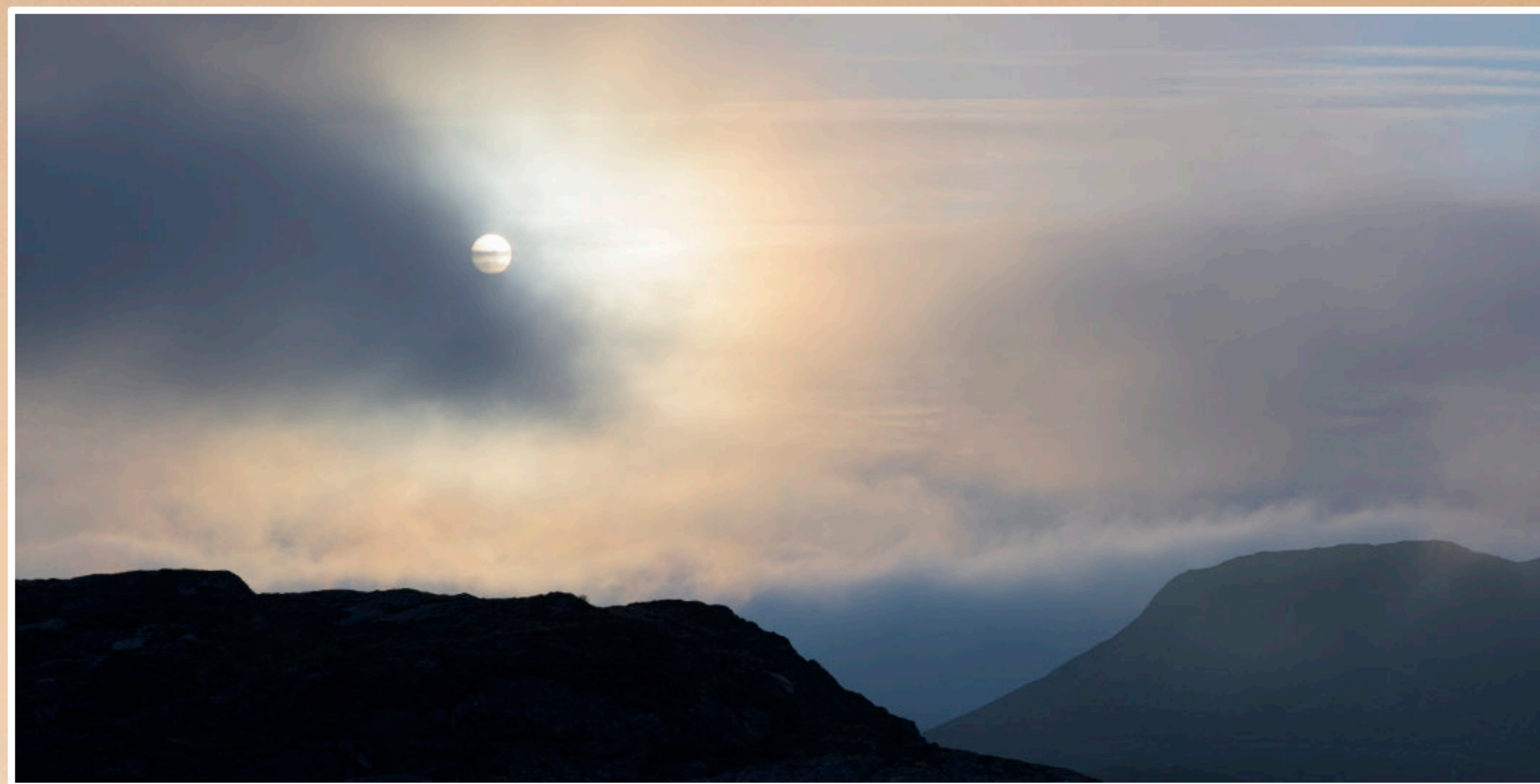


The local Spar supermarket was great and I quickly became a regular. The people working there were always so friendly and helpful, especially when I was looking for a particular item and getting confused with the Norwegian ingredients labels. We were also given the gift of a large joint of elk (moose), which I cooked in the oven slowly for about 5 hours. It was incredibly tender and not at all gamey. Thank you, Ole Martin!

I can't wait until we go back to Lauvsnes in February 2024 and again in September. The winter trip, I think will call for lots of warming soups and casseroles while in the autumn I will add chanterelles, berries and other interesting foraged ingredients to the menu, as well as



fresh crab and other sea food for guests who enjoy that. And this time, we plan to *photograph* the elk...not to mention the sea eagles, of course! - Charlotte



Our Story in 50 Objects



FOR MANY GUESTS, a fine meal is made complete when accompanied by a good wine. When we collect guests at the start of a Retreat, I always offer to stop at a supermarket or off-licence en-route to let those who wish, buy wine. On the rare occasion that no-one wants to, I know that the week *might* not be as lively as we're used to. We like our guests to enjoy themselves and in our experience everyone manages to strike the perfect balance.

Anna G and her pal, Alessandro M, are our corkscrews that have opened many an enjoyable bottle of wine at home and on Retreats. They are made by the Italian design house, [Alessi](#), and we enjoy them for their quirky design and functionality.

More seriously, their presence on our table is a small act of support for the wildlife-rich cork-oak forests of the Mediterranean region whose traditions have been threatened by the widespread adoption of screw tops. Make the meal perfect.; uncork, don't unscrew.



Chez-nous European crane special

AS YOU DRIVE DUE WEST from our house, the rolling, dense bocage landscape gradually gives way to flatter land divided into larger fields. The *prairies* grazed by white Charolais cattle are replaced by fields of maize (corn) and sunflowers, especially on the rich alluvial soils of the Loire's flood plain. And it is the residue from these crops that attracts around 1000 European cranes each autumn and winter.

The section of the Loire 20 minutes from Les Saumais is on a traditional migration corridor linking wintering grounds around the Lac du Der to the north with more southerly ones. For the last 30 years or so, though, more and more cranes have chosen to remain in this area - in no small thanks to the crop residues.

Crane photography will provide the focus for our [Chez-nous Retreats in January 2024](#). With just two (or exceptionally, three) guests, you will not only be assured all the attention you need but also a programme centred



round your particular photographic interests and abilities. As well as the cranes, you can also use our two hides for woodland bird photography, one of which has an infinity pool. And after a long day's photography, you will have a lovely dinner to look forward to with the wood burner roaring away in the background. We are running only two crane specials this winter so book early to assure you place.



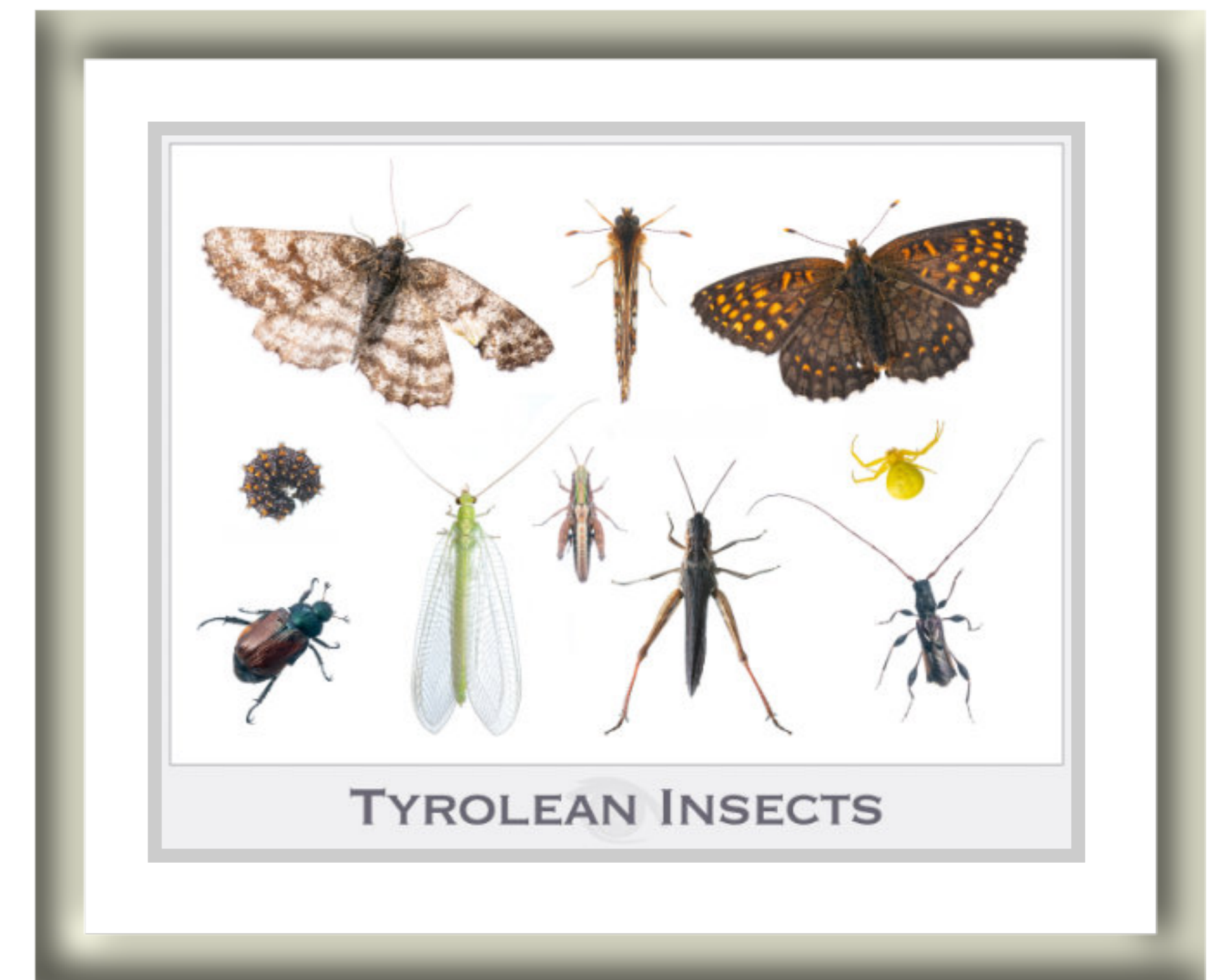
Guest photographs from our Retreats



Sessile oak, Loch Scridain, Mull. Stephen Lee



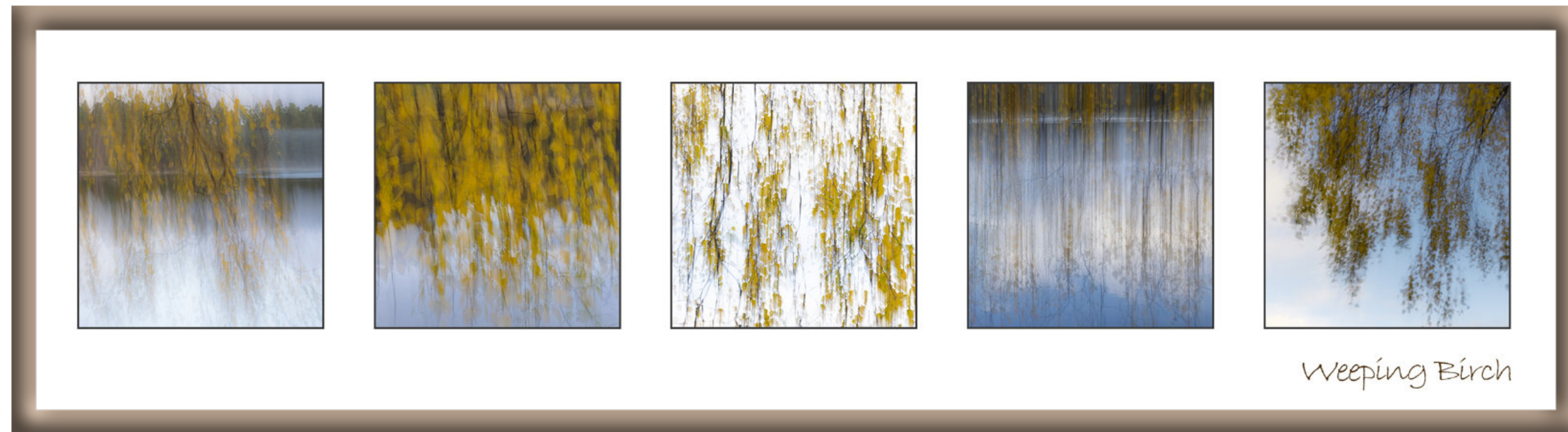
Black faced sheep tup, Mull. Phil Duddles



LT. *Tyrolean wood Chocolate Bar*. Martin Santbergen.
 LB. *Morvanelle landscape, France*. Anna-Barbara Utelli.
 Above. *"Mine, not yours, confirmed repeatedly"*, France. Anna-Barbara Utelli.
 RT. *Tyrolean insects in the field studio*. Martin Santbergen
 RB. *Horgabost beach, Harris*. Phil Duddles.



Above. *The Grumpy Chef, Inverness.* Susan J Smith.
Centre. *Pear blossom, France.* Michaela Santbergen.
Right, above. *Abandoned house, Mull.* Melvyn May.
Right, below. *Birch panel, Loch Vaa.* Jane Lee.





Feral goats, Islay. Paul Godley.



Bealach na Ba to Skye Transect. Fiona Bryden



Dawn, La Noche Maulaix, France. David Cole



European marmot, Austria. Stephen Lee.



“For you, a special price”. France. David Cole.



Saligo Bay, Islay. Melvyn May.

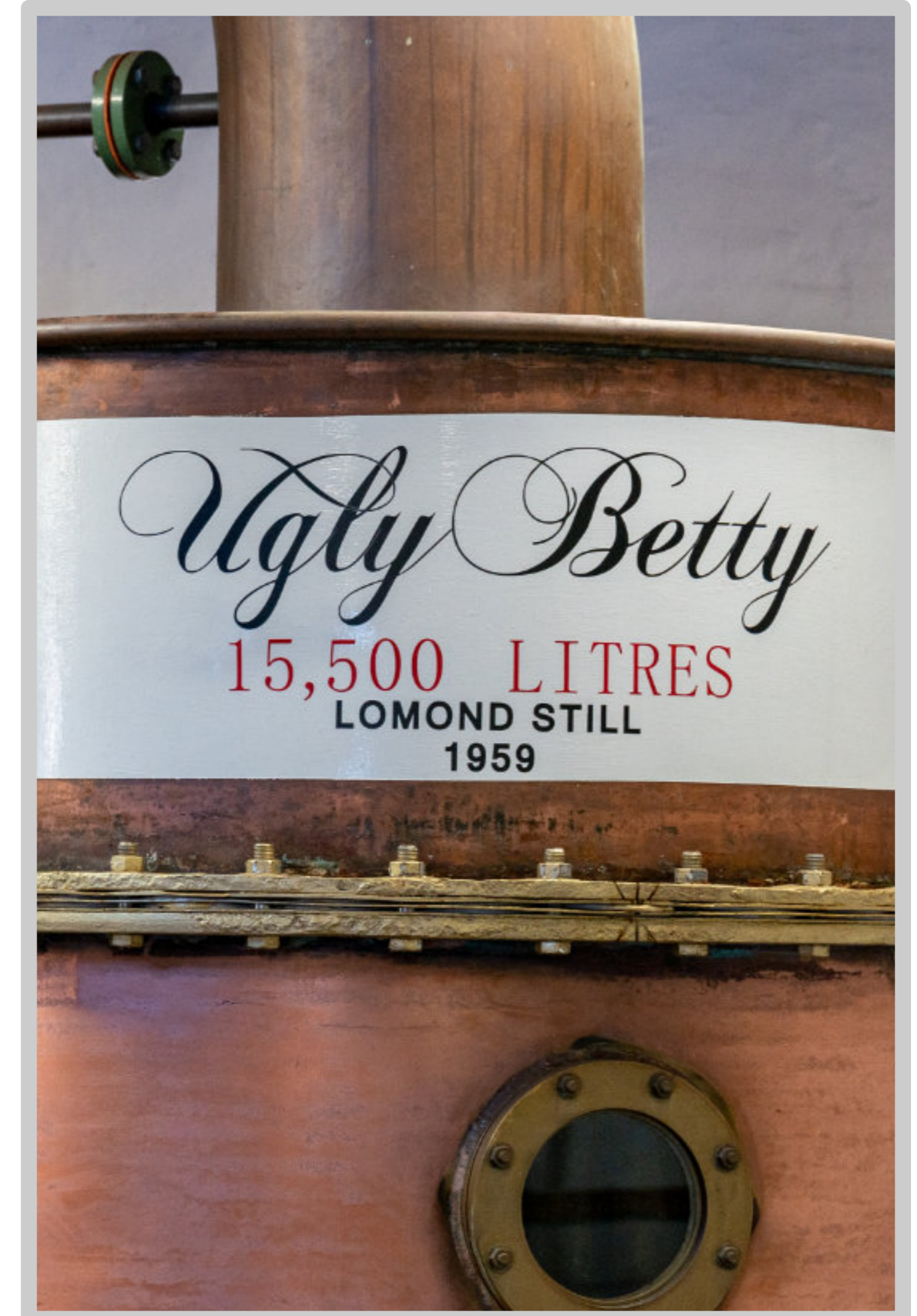
TO EVERYONE WHO SUBMITTED PICTURES for this gallery, thank you. We're sorry we couldn't include more this time but from the next issue of MENU, we will include pictures taken by guests on recent Retreats. With my designer's hat on, I must say that the benefit of cropping photographs to standard aspect ratios becomes apparent when laying out sets of pictures on a page and you'll know this already if you've ever tried to hang an exhibition where all the prints have been cropped at will, with no concession to the need to make a set of pictures work together. Even this old contrarian is consistent in his cropping these days.



Shag ascent, Mull. Melvyn May.



Classical beauties, Autun, France. Susan J Smith.



Ugly Betty still, Bruichladdich, Islay. John Barbour.

FRANCE

LOIRE- Burgundy

13 - 20, 20 - 27 January, 2024.
CHEZ-NOUS (2/3 guests)

GBP 2300, 7 nights



THIS PARTICULAR *CHEZ-NOUS RETREAT* will have a focus on photographing some of the many European cranes that winter along the river Loire, just 20 minutes from our home. The days will be divided between photographing the birds on the fields and in the air, reviewing and processing the pictures and photographing the woodland birds we attract to our garden and meadow. Have a chat with us over Zoom to tell us what you are interested in doing and we will create a programme tailored to what you want to do and what you like to eat. If your partner, friend or spouse isn't a photographer, Charlotte can create a programme centred on cooking, baking and chocolate-making for them.

NORWAY

LAUVSNES, Trøndelag

20 - 27 February, 2024

GBP 3300. 7 nights

ON THIS RETREAT at Ole Martin and Wenche's Dahle's place in Flatanger, central Norway, we will photograph not only sea eagles in the fjords but also golden eagles attracted to carcasses laid out for them in the boreal forest. They may be joined occasionally by a sea eagle. There are many other winter forest birds to photograph from the well-insulated hides with a good chance of goshawk.

When you are ready for a change, you can enjoy photographing the beautiful forests and fjords all around, in their winter mantle - and in gorgeous low-angled light.





SCOTLAND

TORRIDON - Wester Ross

15 - 22 March, 2024

GBP 2700. 7 nights

OVER A PERIOD OF 20 YEARS, we've come to know the mountainous region of Torridon in north-west Scotland inside out and can take you to the most striking spots at the best time of day. Our accommodation over-looking Upper Loch Torridon is handy for getting to several of the best locations without a long drive. The combination of imposing mountains, rugged coastline, deep, dark lochs and old boreal woodland makes Torridon an iconic region of Highland Scotland - without the crowds.



ENGLAND

HASTINGS/ DUNGENESS, Kent

13 - 16 April, 2024

GBP 1200. 3 nights

THE COAST FROM HASTINGS TO DUNGENESS in southern England is the setting for a long weekend of photographic exploration and inspiration as we visit the other-worldly shore of Dungeness and quaint old corners of old Hastings. In these places we will gather the raw material for making new pieces of work, drawing up the ideas for which [Niall is known](#), and in collaboration with him and other guests, identifying your own style. We will be based in an elegant 19th century farmhouse just outside Hastings where we can enjoy the farm's bluebell-filled woodland. This is a great opportunity to learn directly from one of the UK's most innovative outdoor photographers, without having to travel too far from London- and to enjoy Charlotte's food.



FRANCE

MORVAN- Burgundy

28 April - 5 May, 5 May -
12 May, **CHEZ-NOUS** (2/3 guests)

GBP 2300, 7 nights

THESE TWO *CHEZ-NOUS* WEEKS happen during the peak of spring when the deciduous forests of the Morvan are freshly leafed-out and newly arrived nightingales and golden orioles enliven the soundscape of the bocage. The verges are lined with flowers in an abundance rarely seen in the UK and our garden is a great setting in which to relax and work on the programme we've created with you. *Chez-nous* is without doubt the best combination of learning, relaxing and eating.

SCOTLAND

CAIRNGORMS N.P. & MULL

1 - 14 June, 2024

GBP 4200. 13 nights

RUN IN CONJUNCTION WITH German photographer, Dr Ferry Bohme, this extended Retreat is based in two locations, allowing us to experience some of the best photographic encounters Scotland has to offer at this time of year. These range from the arctic/alpine environment of the Cairngorms with its wild-living herd of reindeer to delicate birch forests festooned with lichens, from gnarled Atlantic oak woods to the Isle of Lunga with its huge population of sea birds, including puffins with little fear of people.

In the Cairngorms, we will stay in the fabulous **Ballintean Mountain Lodge**, created originally for photographers and on Mull, in the imposing **Killiechronan Lodge**.





ICELAND

MYVATN - North Iceland

28 June - 5 July, 2024

GBP 3800. 7 nights

WE ARE 25-TOUR VETERANS of Iceland and made our last visit there in 2018. We decided that if we were to return, it would be in the summer and to the north - for the birds. The range of interesting northern species - red-necked phalarope, Slavonian grebe, redwing, gyr falcon, Barrow's goldeneye and harlequin duck - makes the area irresistible, especially since several of them are relatively easy to photograph. Lake Myvatn is at the centre of this fascinating region and is where we will be based and concentrate our efforts. Expect to shoot late into the evening when the light is good but to rest during the day when it's not.

NORWAY

LAUVSNES - Trøndelag

21 - 28 September, 2024

GBP 3300. 7 nights

OUR AUTUMN RETREAT in Lauvsnes will, once again feature sea eagle photography but we will also spend time in the woodlands and meadows working on elk (moose) before the start of the hunting season. The birch forests are colourful at this time of year and there are berries and mushrooms to be foraged, not to mention the option of crab fishing for those who would like to. With Ole Martin, we have the best guide to take us to the best places at the best time. And with Charlotte in the kitchen, you can look forward to a culinary feast, too.





SLOVENIA

TRIGLAV N.P. - Bohinj

19 - 26 October, 2024

GBP 2750. 7 nights

SLOVENIA IS, WITHOUT DOUBT, one of the most picturesque countries we have run Retreats in and in 2024 we will return at arguably the most beautiful time of year: autumn. We don't need to drive far from our base in Ribčev Laz on the shores of Lake Bohinj to encounter turquoise river gorges hill-top churches and charming vernacular buildings, all with that extra twist of autumn colour. Whether your passion is landscape or macro photography, this Retreat will refresh your enthusiasm for both - and we can guarantee you'll learn some new techniques along the way.



FRANCE

MORVAN- Burgundy

7- 14 November, 2024
CHEZ-NOUS (2 - 3 guests)

GBP 2300. 7 nights

AUTUMN ARRIVES A LITTLE LATER in the Morvan than it does in Slovenia so we will be back home in time to offer a “peak-colour” Retreat based at our place in rural Burgundy. But our *Chez-nous* Retreats are about so much more than harvesting photo opportunities. They give you the time to reflect on your work, receive guidance from Niall and repeat the pictures until you have perfected them. Les Saumais is a refuge where we can sit beside the fire pit in the meadow and see so many stars in our very dark sky, or curl up with a book from our extensive library of photography and cookery titles in front of our wood burning stove Or exchange stories over dinner with our French and Dutch friends who live nearby. Whether you are interested in landscape, macro, bird photography at our infinity pool or shooting old villages, we will create a programme to suit you to a tee.

Charlotte makes...an early summer lunch

FRESH INGREDIENTS ARE APLENTY here in France. This is the season for both white and green asparagus. We love it! It is also the season when we begin to eat outside and enjoy the blossoming garden and trees as they green up. The nightingales are singing, along with the turtle doves, golden orioles, hoopoes, blackcaps, wood larks and bee eaters fly overhead. The newly emerged crickets are making themselves heard while the frogs join the night-time chorus. The hedgerows are full of red campion, cow parsley, ox-eye daises, ragged robin, early purple orchids and fields brim with buttercups. Oh - and lots of pollen which is fabulous for the pollinators but not so good for Niall. The *potager* - my vegetable and flower garden - is coming on well and soon we will be eating new potatoes along with fresh salad, many different herbs and beetroot, radish and much more. I don't have huge crops, but as with each season, I learn what works and what does not. I just love preparing a salad and adding freshly-picked herbs and borage or nasturtium flowers.



On return from our recent Retreat in Norway I started to think about an early summer lunch to share with family or friends. And I have also been lucky enough to be given some beautiful pottery from guests as a thank you. Recently I was given a set of old coloured coffee cups and saucers made of fine china by Jean and John who knew I would treasure them. It got me to thinking of what, apart from coffee, I could use them for. So I came up with “cup-a-soup”! My style, served in this elegant china.

So, here are my recipes for a light lunch for you to enjoy. The cup-a-soup is a white asparagus velouté, served with a platter of crostini with minted pea and ricotta. Try this with a glass of chilled sparkling elderflower cordial or champagne. I think it looks very appealing and the flavours are fresh and delicious. If you can't get white asparagus, green is fine and if ricotta cheese is hard to find, just substitute it with cream cheese. The ricotta gives a lovely fresh texture, though, and is my first choice.

Enjoy the warmer days (or end of autumn if you're in the southern hemisphere) and sharing lovely food with your family and friends. *Bon appétit!*

Charlotte



CROSTINI WITH MINTED PEA AND RICOTTA

(serves 4-6)

Ingredients

1 baguette (Ciabatta or French baguette, either is fine)

200g frozen peas

150g ricotta cheese

A really good handful of fresh mint-finely chopped

A teaspoon of fresh chopped thyme

1/4-1/2 lemon, zest and juice

Extra lemon zest for garnish

Olive oil for drizzling over the toasted bread and a little for the peas.

How-to

- Cut the bread into slices on the angle, toast and whilst warm, drizzle with a little olive oil and a sprinkle of fresh salt and pepper. Set aside.
- Cook the frozen peas and once drained, crush them and add a drizzle of olive oil, the juice and zest of lemon and the chopped mint. Season with salt and pepper and mix well. Taste to make sure the seasoning is good and then leave to cool.
- Measure out the ricotta into a separate bowl and season with the chopped thyme.

- Now everything is ready, compile the crostinis. Take the ricotta mix and spread a good spoonful on each slice of toasted bread. Then take the minted pea mix and pile it on top of each one. Garnish with a small pinch of lemon zest.

Serve on an attractive wooden board or large platter so that everyone can take a couple when they are passed round the table.

WHITE ASPARAGUS VELOUTÉ

(serves 4-6)

Ingredients

500g bundle of white asparagus

1 medium white or yellow onion

150 ml stock (chicken or vegetable)

150 ml double cream

Salt and pepper

2 teaspoons of chopped fresh thyme

Some small sprigs of fresh thyme

Small knob of butter and a good splash of olive oil.



How-to

- You will need a medium to large pan, chopping board knife, peeler, measuring jug and a hand soup-stick blender or food processor to blend the velouté.
- First, make the stock, measure out the cream then set both aside.
- Take the asparagus and, holding the stem at the base and half way up, snap to get rid of any woody ends (they can go in the compost) Wash the stems then peel them. This gets rid of any stringy bits.
- Chop the asparagus into 25 mm pieces and set aside, and then chop the onion fairly finely.
- Take the soup pan and, over a medium heat, melt the butter and splash of olive oil and add the onion. Sauté gently and then add the asparagus. Cook together for a few minutes and then add the stock and fresh thyme.
- Once the asparagus is cooked through, take off the heat and stir in the cream and add salt and pepper for seasoning; not too much salt at first because the stock is already seasoned.
- Blend the mixture until really smooth then return to a low heat. Taste for the level of seasoning and add more if necessary. If the asparagus has a slight bitterness to it you can add a tiny teaspoon of fine sugar or

a little drizzle of runny honey. Stir again and taste.

Serve hot, in small coffee cups or little bowls and garnish with a sprig of fresh thyme on each one.

It really is the taste of early summer.



Introducing IRA HILGER



ALREADY DURING MY BIOLOGY STUDIES, I was fascinated by the illustrations of the zoologist [Ernst Haeckel](#). I could lose myself for hours in his work, *Art Forms of Nature*. Haeckel captured the aesthetics and perfection to be discovered in nature in his charts in a scientifically detailed and yet highly artistic way. Alongside my love of nature, photography has also had a fixed place in my life for many years. However, when I met my husband, an avid photographer, it became a shared passion that takes up much of our time in a variety of ways.

Niall's seminar

It all started one evening in September 2021 when I came home from work. I can still see myself standing in the kitchen, quickly checking my emails on my mobile phone before preparing dinner. Niall's webinar, "Re-thinking nature photography" was advertised in a photographers' newsletter and was accompanied by such great pictures that I forgot about cooking for the time being and signed up for the course.

Attending the seminar was probably one of the best decisions I have made in recent years. It provided the missing piece of a puzzle, offered a new creative way of expressing myself. Niall gave me the tools that have allowed me to realise the project presented here. This project encompasses photography and biology, or more precisely botany, and also includes an artistic



Pyrus communis
(Cider pear)

aspect that is important to me.

I find it fascinating how diverse and resourceful life is and how it has adapted to its respective environment. But we don't have to go to the tropical jungle or study the works of Haeckel to realise this. These wonders are waiting for us right on our doorstep, if we open our eyes.

I had an *ah-ha* experience in connection with one of his course assignments. We were to photograph different pictures on a theme and then put them together to form a "chocolate bar", consisting of nine individual photos. For this, I chose a plant that at first glance doesn't have much to offer: maize. It is a popular crop in Austria and unfortunately dominates the landscape in many places as a monoculture. In addition to the ecological problems it can cause, maize is not, on the face of it, exactly beautiful. However...if you take the trouble to have a closer look at maize in the autumn, you will see that that is an unfair judgement.

“The seminar provided me with the missing piece of a puzzle and a new creative way to express myself.”

One of Ira's maize chocolate bars: discovering something eye-catching in the unremarkable



Lea Mays
BY IRA HILGER



The project

This realisation that even a maize plant is multifaceted surprised me and made me think. And so, after the seminar, I made the decision to take portraits of plants in our neighbourhood. In February 2022, I started this project with winter buds. I only ever collect what I need and of course, no rare species. Several thousand pictures of around 80 plants were taken in the photo studio in 2022 alone. However, I am still missing individual vegetation stages of most of them, so the project is probably becoming a lifetime's task. I'm adding new species all the time and I am curious to see where the journey will take me.

My portraits do not follow a strictly botanical approach. Some illustrate the transformation of the plant - its growth and decay over the year - others show the individual beauty of a vegetation stage or different varieties of a species. But one thing is always important to me: they should make the viewer marvel and, in the best case, inspire him or her to take a more conscious look at the flora on their next walk. The famous Austrian behavioural scientist **Konrad Lorenz** once said "Only what I know, I love, only what I love, I protect." I hope that I can contribute to this ideal with my project.

Ira

www.gartenfotografie.at. All photos © Ira Hilger, 2023

Bonus footage: dragonfly exuviae

DURING A RECENT COMMISSION for the [Moor Museum](#) in Emsland, Germany, I had an alien encounter. Or so it seemed. Biologist Johannes Weise presented me with an assortment of dragonfly exuviae to photograph in the field studio. It's clear where the inspiration for [Independence Day's](#) alien's exosuit came from. What looks from the outside like an alien, hides something more powerful (and if you are a prey item, terrifying) within.

More unnerving, still, was the way in which the inanimate exuviae - just chitin and protein chains after all - acquired a life of its own as I tried to move it on the statically-charged plastic set. Like many small subjects with exoskeletons and lots of legs, I always feel more comfortable when separated by a lens, whether or not the exoskeleton has a filling.



MENU



All content is copyright of Charlotte and Niall Benvie, 2023, unless otherwise stated. Food and Photography Retreats Ltd. Images on p12 courtesy of Alessi.

Correspondence address: Les Saumais, 193 Chemin de Sensué, 58250 SAINT-SEINE, France.
office@foodandphotographyretreats.com +33 7 52 62 06 00 | Company registered and controlled in
Scotland, SC596219. VAT: 424 9805 79