

MENU

NUMBER 13 • MARCH 2020

At home

Photo therapy to get you through the weeks ahead.

Reflection pools

Making and using.

Charlotte makes

The best Florentines you've ever tasted.

Introducing

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Our story in 50 Objects.

FOOD AND
PHOTOGRAPHY
RETREATS

with the Benries

new series

BOOKS FOR INSPIRATION

White wagtail, Alicante, Spain.



Hello from Charlotte and Niall

How are you? As COVID-19 does its work around the globe, we earnestly hope that you are able to keep your distance from it - and keep safe. In recognition that our Retreats are probably far from your mind right now, we have a different emphasis in this edition of MENU, looking at how you can keep creative much closer to home, perhaps polishing skills that you can use once you start to travel again later in the year.

There are few parts of the economy that haven't been hit hard by the pandemic and we've not been immune. Nevertheless, we have honoured our obligations to clients on Retreats that had to be cancelled and are all set to resume business once travel restrictions are lifted. No-one quite knows when that will be but as soon as we do, we will let you know our plans for later in the year and the start of next.

We work away from home for a fair part of the year so confinement is an agreeable novelty - for now. It's a chance to catch up on things we never quite get round to, to distribute work that has been languishing on drives for years and to make new things. Niall has produced an all-new edition of his 2013 eBook on field studio photography and is putting together book proposals, a couple of short AV's as well as shooting new food and field studio pictures. Charlotte, between all the office administration, has been working her way through recipe books; trying, changing, tasting and perfecting.

We are currently surrounded by packing boxes for our move to France on 22nd May. Whether it happens then or not remains to be seen but either way it will have no effect on the company as it will remain a UK registered one. We hope to see you again before long. 



Our story in 50 objects

THE MOBILE LIBRARY

Ever since, as a teenager, I became enchanted by nature photography, I have collected books on the subject. Over the years many colleagues have generously gifted copies of their new books to the collection and, now and again, I have been able to reciprocate. What I now have is not just a collection of beautiful, inspiring books but a record of how outdoor and nature photography has evolved over the last forty years - long enough to identify key figures in the creation and

development of particular styles and approaches. They provide evidence of a continuum - acknowledgement of which is vital if we aren't to be condemned endlessly to re-invent the wheel.

I confess that I was always a bit precious about my books in the past and still can't bear it when people turn pages with an index finger and cause "v" shaped

creases. If you're nodding vigorously in agreement you'll know just how I feel! But now, on our Retreats, I get a great deal of pleasure by introducing guests to artists whose photographs have stirred something in me, not on a screen, but as real, printed images.

The books are a wonderful teaching resource too (so long as I have marked the page with the picture I want to discuss, beforehand), allowing me to reference work beyond my own when we are talking about ideas and precedents. Charlotte brings her own stack of beautiful cookery and lifestyle books on Retreats too which are put to altogether more practical use by her and, if she has any, her cooking guests.

■ ■



Our story in 50 objects

ARTISAN KITCHEN AID

You've heard of Farm Aid? Well, this is Kitchen Aid," quipped our American guest as he quietly pressed the envelope into my hand at the end of the Retreat. Protesting that there really was no need was pointless nor was it especially gracious so I thanked him ...and began wondering *what colour?*

I always take a Kitchen Aid food processor on our Retreats. I use it every day and to me, it's what a tripod is to a photographer. I'm just not comfortable without it. It speeds up so many of the things I need to do in the kitchen. Some places we rent have one but I can never bank on it so, along with the red ice machine and the red Magimix, my red Kitchen Aid travels with us.

Well it did, until this particular French Retreat, when it drove me up the wall. I had owned it for many years but after a recent service, it seemed to have lost first and second gear. Unless

I was very careful, as soon as I turned it on, flour would be broadcast to the furthest corners of the kitchen and cream beaten to butter in a matter of seconds. Enough was enough. However red and cute it was, it had to go into retirement. And so the offer to help a cook in distress couldn't have come at a better time.

Kitchen Aid pricing is predictable insofar as it is high 95% of the time but every so often there are inexplicable reductions. If you're alert to these and prepared to strike like a cobra then you can land yourself quite a bargain. And so it was with my new, sparkly off-white Artisan, freed from a dingy warehouse outlet in Dundee and now travelling with us around Europe. And let me tell you; it won't be going for a service any time soon. **MC**



Books for inspiration

SHAPED BY THE SEA THEO BOSBOOM

For *Shaped by the Sea* I have explored the Atlantic coast of Europe. I wanted the book to be fresh and personal - not just a collection of seascapes. So, I chose for my theme the sea's shaping of the landscape, both on a small scale (patterns in the sand, pebbles moved by the waves) and a large scale (cliffs that have been worked by the sea over many centuries).

As a photographer, I find the beach a source of constant inspiration, a fascinating place that is different every day, even every hour. The dynamics and variety, the power of the sea, the ever-changing weather and lighting conditions and the wide range of shapes, colours and moods ensure that I am never short of subjects to work. When I am on a beach, I feel close to nature. Moreover, the sea has a mysterious ability to calm you down

and positively influence your mood. The German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke,

has expressed this beautifully, "When anxious, uneasy and bad thoughts

come, I go to the sea, and the sea drowns them out with its great wide sounds, cleanses me with its noise, and imposes a rhythm upon everything in me that is bewildered and confused."

So it was a real treat to work on this project! In total, I photographed more than fifty beaches in: Norway, Iceland, the Faeroe Islands, Scotland, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Portugal, Spain and France. This book not only showcases the diversity of landscapes and geographical features that make up the Atlantic coast, it also pays tribute to the dynamism and creative capacity of the sea. I have tried, in my pictures, to convey again and again the amazement that always captures me. *Shaped by the Sea* is my most personal book and the one I am most proud of. I'm delighted, too, with Sandra Bartocha's great design work. - *Theo Bosboom*.



Books for inspiration

SHAPED BY THE SEA
THEO BOSBOOM



Signed copies of Theo's books, including *Shaped by the Sea*, can be bought from his website, www.theobosboom.nl. It's one of our "tutorial books" now.

Our Retreats programme

2020 - 2021

2020

Like everyone else in the travel industry, we have been forced to change our published programme of Retreats owing to COVID-19. As soon as we know when international travel can resume, we will update you but in the meantime, these arrangements stand.

June

12 - 19th

[Austrian Tirol](#). 5 places.

August

dates to be fixed

[Cairngorms](#), Scotland
to replace cancelled
April 2020 Retreat.

September

27 - 4th October

[Burgundy, France](#). 4+ spaces.

October

10 - 17th

[Slovenia](#). 2 places.

November

4 - 11th

[Torridon, Scotland](#). 4 places.

14 - 21st

[Islay, Scotland](#). 1 space.

2021

February

3rd week*

[Islay](#) - Coastlines and creativity.

March

1st week*

[Harris](#) - White sand, turquoise sea.

April

3rd week*

[Extremadura](#), Spain. Birds and macro.

May

3rd week*

[Queyras](#), France. Orchids & marmots.

June

3rd week*

[Austria](#). Magical alpine meadows.

July

3rd and 4th week*

[Burgundy](#) - open for bespoke Retreats with us. Tell us what you'd like to do.

September

4th week*

[Burgundy](#) - Rural life in old France.

October

3rd week*

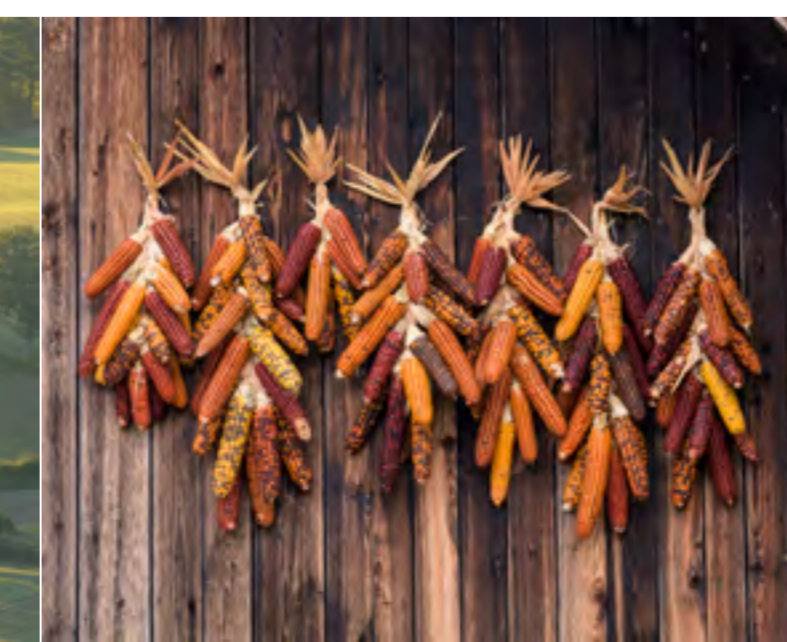
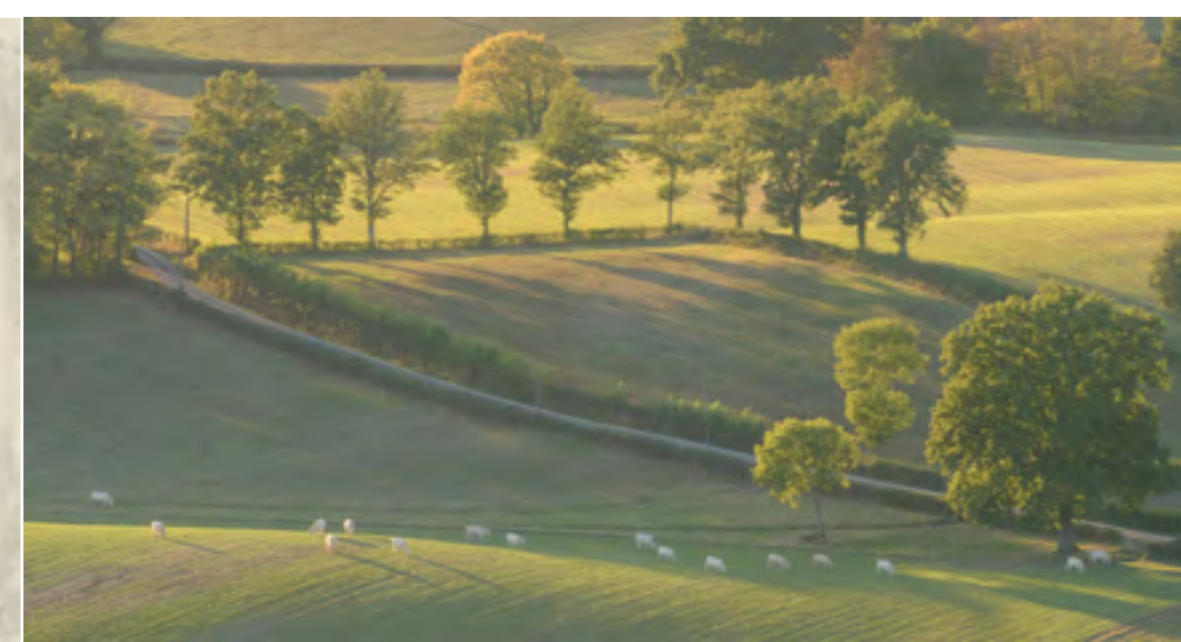
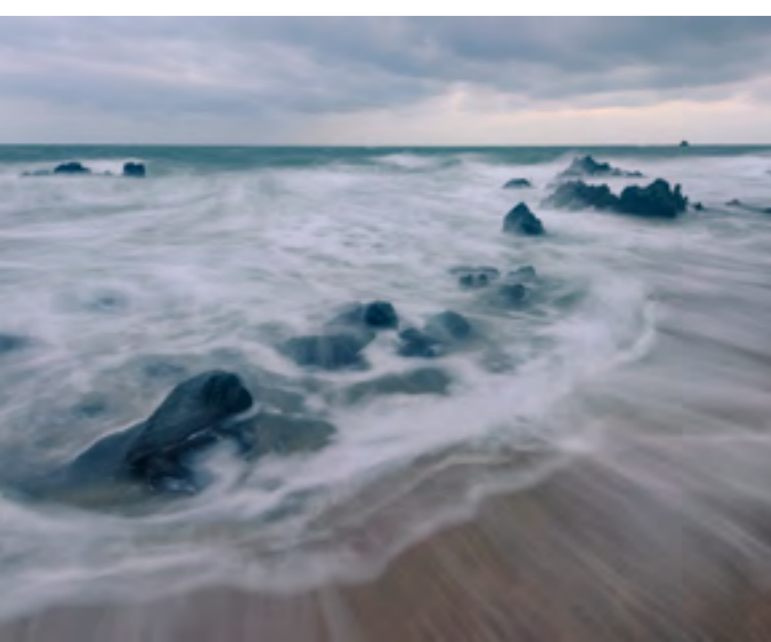
[Slovenia](#) - Old churches, misty lakes.

November

2nd week*

[Cairngorms](#) - Forest and loch, mountain and glen.

**Final dates to be published once accommodation is confirmed.*



REFLECTION POOLS

I grant you this: creating your own reflection pool for bird photography is quite a big undertaking. But then again, we don't know how many weeks we are going to be in lock down. And since we're being chivvied by the authorities to remain physically active, it may as well be in the prosecution of something useful to both you and the wildlife in your garden.

I fully appreciate that not everyone has a garden and even if you do that it may not be big enough to accommodate a 5 metre long pool. In fact, the bigger issue in many suburban settings is shade and whether the pool gets light early in the morning when there is likely to be most activity. But if you have the space, energy and some delivery drivers willing to bring you the materials you need, you have the prospect of some pretty exciting photography ahead, especially if we experience another hot dry summer like last year's.

The example shown here was made by my Spanish colleague, [José Benito Ruiz](#) and some friends on José's property near Alicante. It's a serious undertaking. At the planning stage you have a big decision to make: would you rather build up the pool so that you don't need to sink the hide for a water-level perspective; or would you prefer to reduce the work you need to do with the pool and sink the hide to meet it? José went for the raised pool approach.

Ideally, position the pool so that it is backlit but failing that try to ensure that the vegetation behind catches early-morning light; that will introduce some attractive colour into the water.

While some pools I've seen are lined with a waterproof material such as butyl rubber, this one is concrete skimmed. The advantage of this is that the pool can be filled right to the top of the rear edge, without any unsightly



REFLECTION POOLS

liner appearing, producing an infinity-pool look. You will notice, too, how the rear edge of the pool falls way away from it so that even if the camera is raised above water level, the concrete edge remains hidden from view.

While some photographers, understandably, prefer an uninterrupted view from the hide, others, including José, have had great success by shooting through reflective glass. I was initially very sceptical about this until I reviewed my first batch of images and found issue only with those where I had shot a subject at the side of the pool obliquely through the glass. Otherwise, I couldn't tell whether or not the window was open. The great advantage of the window, of course, is that it's much harder for the birds to see your lens moving about and to hear sounds from within the hide, such as the steady drip of perspiration from forehead of a photographer. Believe

me, you don't want to sit in this hide in high summer.

I'm not a fan of pool shots where the back edge is clearly defined; it's not like anything you can normally see in nature. I prefer to introduce low-level perches that not only make it easier for the birds to reach the water to drink but also block the view of the rear edge of the pool. If you don't do this, you'll have to rely on a wide aperture to blur it out.

How do you even get the birds to come down to the pool in the first place? Well, these pools can double as feeding stations and carefully secreted sunflower seeds or mealworms will lead the bird to perch just where you need it to. Just don't overfeed or else you'll have to contend with kernels floating around the pool.

Once we're installed in France, guess what I'll be doing first in the garden? **MN**



Charlotte makes

FLORENTINES

But first, some musings from Charlotte's kitchen.

Since it was going to be a very busy spring, with our weeks filled with tours and Retreats, we started in February to pack up our house in Scotland ahead of our long-planned move to our home in France in May. But then, with the spread of COVID-19, everything changed. No travel. No guests to cook for. And no move, at least not when we planned. While our fate is shared by hundreds of millions of others, not all of them live somewhere now resembling a Fed-Ex depot.

All this time I've suddenly acquired is taking some adjustment but we still seem to be as busy as ever: Niall is on his Mac making an eBook or a PDF or just writing endless emails; me with my cook books out, looking and planning and longing to be isolated in our little corner of Nièvre rather than here.

I had some wedding chocolate orders to fulfil this spring but even those have been cancelled. Nevertheless, with the ingredients already purchased I've got stuck in to making truffles, bonbons, lollipops and Easter chocolates some of which we're selling through our local farm produce vending machine. You can buy your free-range eggs and dark chocolate bonbons on the one visit. I think both count as essential foods.

As well as the chocolate, I've found myself wanting to make comfort food and special treats. Florentines are amongst my favourites and they also use up those random, half-finished packets of ingredients in the store cupboard. And did you know that Florentines, contrary to what their name suggests, are not Italian but are in fact a French invention?

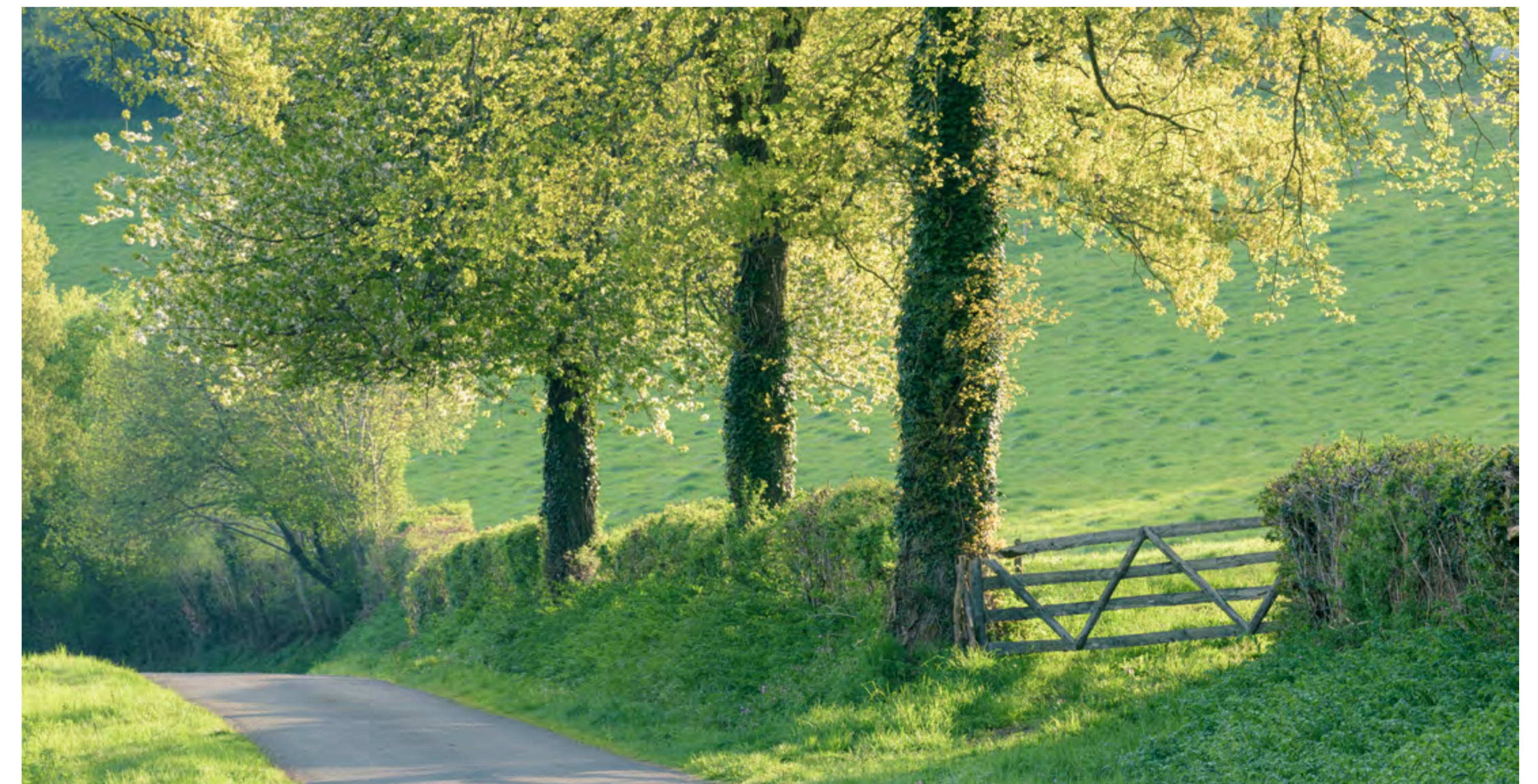
Creating things in the kitchen is very therapeutic for me and it's very

satisfying to know that you and your loved ones have something delicious to look forward to, whatever is happening out there. I miss not having guests to cook for each day at the moment so I'll need to be satisfied with describing something I would have been making for you were we on Retreat.

Niall's repertoire in the kitchen is smaller than that on his computer but he makes some pretty tasty things so I've let him

onto my pages here to share his recipe for Armagnac chicken liver pâté. It's good, really; I've tasted it.

Enjoy these recipes and remember that in this time of food scarcity (but clearly not Armagnac) it's fun to experiment with substitutions if an ingredient is missing from your store cupboard. Be adventurous and creative, and stay well. We'll see you again soon, we hope, and look forward to it very much. **MC**



Charlotte makes

FLORENTINES

To make about 24, you will need:

- 50 g of unsalted butter
- 20 g of plain flour
- 150 g of caster sugar
- 130 ml of double cream
- 50g of whole almonds, roughly chopped
- 150 g of flaked almonds
- 100 g of candied mixed peel, chopped
- 75 g of glace cherries, chopped
- 300 g of fine dark chocolate, broken into small pieces, for melting.

Actually, any combination of nuts is fine - just make sure you tell your guests what you've used.

How to:

- Pre-heat the oven to 180°C (160°C fan)/ Gas 4. Line a baking tray with baking parchment.
- Put the butter, flour and sugar in a pan and gently melt them together, combining the ingredients until they are smoothly blended, just like a roux.
- Add the cream and mix it in well. Next, throw in all the chopped fruit and nuts



and stir until everything is thoroughly mixed. You can now remove the pan from the heat and allow the mix to cool down a little.

- Scoop small spoonfuls onto the baking sheet leaving about 3 cm between neighbours and flatten them slightly.
- Put in the oven, now at temperature,

and bake for 15 - 20 minutes - or until they are flat and pale, golden brown. Remove from the oven and leave them to set on the tray. If they have sprawled, re-shape them into circles by pushing them in with a blunt knife. After 5 minutes or so, you will be able to transfer them to a cooling rack.

- Meanwhile, slowly melt the chocolate. You can do this in a *bain marie* or give it 5 - 10 second bursts in a microwave, stirring between each. Once melted, spread it on the underside of the Florentine and, just before the chocolate hardens, create wavy lines with a fork, for decoration.
- The vital finishing touch: a sprinkle of edible glitter just sets off the appearance of these delicious treats.

MC



Niall makes

ARMAGNAC CHICKEN LIVER PÂTÉ

Substituting Cognac with more mellow Armagnac adds a subtle twist to this classic French entrée.

As a starter for 8 guests:

- 500 g of trimmed chicken livers
- 220 g of unsalted butter
- 1 tbsp of olive oil
- 2 finely chopped shallots
- 1 crushed garlic clove
- 1/2 tsp of allspice
- The zest of one orange
- 50 ml of Armagnac
- 100 ml of double cream
- Sea salt and ground black pepper
- Bay leaves for garnish.

How to:

- Add about 20 g of butter to the oil and fry the shallots at a medium heat.
- After about 5 minutes, add the garlic, zest, seasoning and allspice and cook for another two minutes.
- Now you can fry the livers, in the same pan. Keep turning these so they cook evenly. You will need to do this for up

to 10 minutes. While you don't want to see blood, it's fine if they are still pink when you cut one open. If you cook until it's brown all the way through, you will dry them out too much.

- You can put these ingredients into a food blender now.
- Pour the Armagnac into the same frying pan, heat for a couple of minutes to evaporate the alcohol then add the cream. Heat for two more minutes.
- Add this to the contents in the food blender and set it going.
- Drop 120 g of butter a piece at a time into the blender. I like my pâté completely smooth so let the blender run for up to 10 minutes. That's plenty.
- When you take it out, the pâté may seem a bit sloppy. Don't worry; it will set to a better consistency once it has been in the fridge for 30 minutes.
- While it is chilling, clarify the remaining butter on a low heat and skim off the white fat. Use the rest to seal the pâté, once cooled, and garnish with bay. **MN**



At home

ART IN THE BACK GARDEN

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PANDEMIC

At home

ART IN THE BACK GARDEN

It's easy to convince yourself that everything of real photographic interest lies beyond your front gate. No doubt for some folks that's the case. But as David Liittschwager famously demonstrated in his book, *One Cubic Foot*, even somewhere like Central Park, New York City, hosts a surprising amount of biodiversity. The challenge is how to photograph your subjects in a way that engages and holds the interest of the viewer.

If you've travelled with us, you'll know that I'm quite a fan of the "field studio" image. My 2013 eBook on the subject introduced this specialised field to a wider audience and prompted some really interesting exploration of the possibilities of shooting on pure white. But a lot has changed in the intervening seven years in terms of my understanding of the process and what we can do with it. I've also come to know the work of very imaginative practitioners whose photos have greatly influenced my own.

The plan to produce an updated edition of that original eBook has been on the back-burner for ages but the current lock down has provided the time window



to do this and, I hope, to introduce another generation of photographers to the discipline. Even for those with only a passing interest in the natural

world, some of the lighting techniques and Photoshop skills I describe have application well beyond the field of natural history photography.

so it feels like we've come full circle, only without the element of choice this time. You can order the eBook book from our [website](#), if you haven't done so already. If you have, thank you for your support.

MN

I started making field studio photos 13 years ago because I wanted to work closer to home without repeating all the things I had done previously. And



ART IN THE BACK GARDEN

As an overview to the process and to help you imagine your way into making these pictures, I'll describe how I created this particular one, last week.

Movement restrictions meant that I could shoot only what I could find on a short walk down the lane from our house. I headed into the beech

wood and photographed several vines of honeysuckle whose purple-hued leaves caught my eye. A closer look revealed dog's mercury, fresh greater

woodrush and some lesser celandines on a stream bank. I shot a variety of examples of each species to give me choice when I assembled the composite.

Processing these elements was straightforward but putting together an agreeable composition was altogether more time-consuming. I spent about three hours trying different arrangements and examples. When I make one of these pieces I try to present the plants as characters

interacting with one another - or ignoring their neighbour. The three celandines are in their own little world, the two "affectionate" ones causing out-rage in the one on the left. The two pieces of honeysuckle on the right look like they are up to some mischief with the dog's mercury plant between them. The woodrush stands tall and aloof from its neighbours. Once I concluded the final composition and brushed away a few overlaps, I selected the background (Select>Colour Range: Fuzziness 0), grew that selection by one pixel (Select>Modify>Expand Selection) then filled it with my favourite cream for a less stark look to the final piece.

These are art works, not scientific references. They are made to beguile, not provide objective testament. While the subjects are natural and wild this isn't "nature photography". But then again, not much nature photography is art. So we're quits. **MN**



Introducing

STAFFAN WIDSTRAND

Years ago, during the initial phases of Europe's biggest nature photography project, [Wild Wonders of Europe](#), I sat in on a meeting in Brussels Staffan had arranged with the executives of one of the big European magazine publishers. He gave a pitch for a package of images and articles that we were planning to commission from 69 nature photographers from across the continent. At the end of it I was left with one thought: these fellows are going to feel they've *really* missed out if they don't take this deal. It was a key lesson for me in the power of positivity - and having a great product.

Over the years, this Swedish outdoor photographer has channelled this huge energy into a number of major projects which have sought to bring people into a more harmonious relationship with wild nature. From the [Big Five](#) initiative, which set out to overthrow negative attitudes towards predators in Europe



Male king eider, Norway. One of the best places to photograph arctic sea ducks is in the Båtsfjord harbour in Varanger, Norway. And arguable the “best” duck is the king eider.

Pallas's cat, Qinghai, China. On the Tibetan High Plateau, Staffan spent hours with a family of Pallas's cats. The highlight came when one of the youngsters started to stalk him.



Introducing

STAFFAN WIDSTRAND

and beyond, to his central role in the establishment of [Nature's Best Sweden](#), the quality standard for eco-tourism businesses in the country, Staffan's dramatic, yet honest, photography has been the central tool of communication. He has received recognition of the power of his photography in the shape of five WWF Panda Book of the Year awards, accolades that acknowledge the contribution a book makes to our appreciation of the natural world.

Wild Wonders of Europe, unfortunately, launched in 2008 and initial promises from sponsors soon turned to dust as the banking crisis unfolded. Through this time, though, Staffan and the rest of the team saw the project through. The result: WWE reached 800 million people, through: news and social media, web sites; indoor and outdoor exhibitions; and a flagship book with a run of 100 000 copies. The message viewers received was all positive: we

still have these amazing animals and plants living amongst us. And when we give them a little space and respect, they can thrive and enrich our lives. It's a message that may resonate even louder in the post-COVID-19 world.

Not deterred by the difficulties that beset the early stages of Wild Wonders of Europe, Staffan and business partner Magnus Lundgren have since immersed themselves in an even more ambitious undertaking - the [Wild Wonders of China](#). This has involved a lot of relationship and trust building with Chinese agencies, authorities and individuals - essential ground work that has to be done before any photographs are taken. But with that process well underway now, the images that are beginning to emerge are breathtaking. Species most of us have never seen before, or unfamiliar cousins of those we have, appear almost daily on the WWC [Instagram feed](#). It feels like



Iberian lynx. For a long time, the Iberian lynx teetered on the brink of extinction, with fewer than 100 animals at one time. A successful captive breeding programme and habitat protection has seen number rise to about 830 individuals. This wild individual was photographed during a tour Staffan was leading for his company, [Wild Nature Fotoressor](#), Sweden's leading wildlife photography tour operator. We are collaborating on the development of Retreats to complement their offer.



Golden pheasant, Yangxian Biosphere Reserve, China. This Chinese endemic is just one of 77 bird species found no-where else in the world, 20 of which are pheasants or their allies.

another lesson in the power of positivity
- and how that can open eyes to the
wealth of a natural heritage, at home
and abroad. MN

Bonus footage

HOME FIRES

I write this mindful of the national calamity suffered by our Australian readers in recent months and in no way intend to trivialise conflagration by writing about it as mere “subject matter”. There is just a deep, primitive fascination with fire that makes me surprised that we don’t see more photographs of it than we do.

I’m not talking about the terrifying, life-threatening walls of flame we saw in Australia but rather: the close-up; brief gusts of copper sulphate-inspired green flames that put you in mind of bad dragon’s breath; the details of glowing embers. There is intrigue here, heightened by a little danger.

A 150 mm lens (while I shot in DX format) let me keep my distance from this fire in our garden and I worked quickly from a tripod to avoid damage to the lens. The scene reminded me of an aerial shot of active volcanic fissures. **MN**



MENU

FOOD AND
PHOTOGRAPHY
RETREATS

with the Benvies

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