



ONE-HOUR PHOTO READER CHALLENGE

Wildlife

THREE PHOTO CHALLENGES & ONE HOUR TO COMPLETE. WE SENT REGULAR READER JOHN GUBBINS AND AWARD-WINNING NATURE PHOTOGRAPHER ROSS HODDINOTT TO DEVON IN SEARCH OF SOME GREAT WILDLIFE IMAGES. FIND OUT HOW THEY DID...

WORDS: ROSS HODDINOTT / PICTURES: JOHN GUBBINS



IN ASSOCIATION WITH



The reader

Name: John Gubbins **Age:** 55
Occupation: Nursery Manager
Camera equipment: Various Nikon DSLRs and lenses including the D300, 50mm, 24-70mm and 200-400mm VR.



John says: "I have always had a passion for wildlife and outdoor photography, especially birds, but I rarely photograph mammals. I must admit I'm slightly apprehensive about the one-hour challenge. It will be a new experience that I'll need to adapt and learn quickly for. I'm looking forward to the challenge of using a different camera and the discipline of having to use just one lens, but it is also quite daunting! Although the animals are captive, it still won't be easy to get great shots."



TOP: As it was overcast, shutter speeds were slow so capturing shake-free images was a challenge without VR.

MIDDLE: With the Vibration Reduction switched on, images were much sharper and John could begin shooting handheld with confidence.

LEFT: With so much tall grass around, getting images with the animal's main features unobscured was difficult.

enclosure, where there are two resident animals. Although captive and approachable, all animals are unpredictable and in order to capture good shots, John's technique and timing would need to be excellent. Chris placed some food out to entice one of the animals into position. A few moments later, a fox posed perfectly on the top of the mound. The trees behind created an attractive backdrop. John didn't need to be prompted. The camera was already to his eye and a moment later he released the shutter. The stopwatch began...

Challenge One: Creative use of exposure

We reviewed the first few shots and unfortunately they were either a little bit soft or suffering from subject blur – the overcast light was proving a problem. John was using shutter-priority mode, but the fastest speed available to him with the lens at maximum aperture was 1/125sec. I suggested raising the ISO sensitivity to 400 and we also switched on the zoom's Vibration Reduction. We scrutinised sharpness again a few images later, and the results were pin-sharp. The foxes were proving willing models. After ten minutes, John and I had another quick look through his shots. I noticed that the tall grasses were obscuring the animal's face or eyes in a few of the shots and encouraged John to pay more attention to this – something as simple as a few stray grasses can ruin an otherwise great image.



TOP: The simplicity of John's fox silhouette makes it very striking. Challenge one complete!

ABOVE: Ross helps John get to grips with the controls on the Nikon D5000 – the camera John's using for the challenge.

RIGHT: John meters for the bright sky in order to intentionally underexpose the fox, throwing it into silhouette to finish the challenge.



The clock was ticking. Nearly 20 minutes had passed and while John has taken some nice images, nothing really fulfilled the challenge I'd set him. Then inspiration struck. One of the foxes had sat down on the top of the mound and with nothing but white cloud behind it, appeared silhouetted. Using the camera's spot meter, John metered for the cloud before composing and taking the image. As a result of exposing for the brighter sky, the fox was rendered underexposed, creating a simple, but graphic silhouette. With 'creative use of exposure' ticked off the list, it was time to move on...



Recommended kit

When photographing wildlife, versatility is key. Therefore, a zoom lens is the best choice, allowing you to quickly adapt to the subject's behaviour. At the Westcountry Wildlife Centre, you are able to photograph a wide variety of animals, ranging greatly in size. Therefore, the versatile focal range of the Nikkor 70-300mm f/4.5-5.6G AF-S VR proved ideal. Weighing just 745g, it is easy to use handheld and features Vibration Reduction (VR) technology to help minimise the risk of camera shake – something that was useful in the dull, overcast weather. A high-resolution DSLR, capable of shooting at least 3fps, is required for nature photography. Despite its entry-level tag, the Nikon D5000, which John used during the challenge, proved a capable performer. Its fast autofocus ensured results were sharp and image quality is superb thanks to its 12.3-megapixel sensor. Its innovative vari-angle LCD makes it easier and more comfortable to photograph animals from low, awkward angles. Finally, when shooting nature, the success-to-failure ratio is typically quite low so it is necessary to take lots of photographs in order to get 'the shot', so high-capacity memory cards were essential.





Challenge Two: A shot with good eye contact

Next was the hedgehog. All the animals are quite accustomed to human activity, so having been gently positioned on the ground it soon uncurled and began walking around. 'I didn't realise how quickly they moved', John commented. Hedgehogs are surprisingly fast and every time John got himself in position, the animal changed direction. I encouraged John to try to anticipate and react more quickly to its movement. I was also concerned that John's shooting angle was too high. Often, the most natural looking wildlife images are achieved from eye level. John began to lie prone, shooting through the grasses. With the hedgehog being reluctant to stay still, the camera's autofocus proved a real asset, zipping quickly and accurately into focus. Due to John's experience of photographing birds, I didn't need to remind him that if the subject's eyes aren't sharp, the image would be ruined. John was learning quickly how to adapt to his subject, but the minutes were ticking by. The hedgehog was among some attractive clover when it paused to sniff the air. For the first time, it looked straight down the lens... and John clicked away. We reviewed the shots immediately; its eyes were pin sharp and the image oozed 'ahhhhh factor' thanks to the strong eye contact. John had captured a very appealing, commercial shot – the type you might see in a wildlife calendar. With another challenge completed, time to move on.



TOP LEFT: The hedgehog was a challenging subject for John as it moves surprisingly quickly.

ABOVE RIGHT, MIDDLE & LEFT: An elevated angle looks unnatural but at ground level the grass was obscuring John's view. Eventually the hedgehog posed with its nose up for long enough for John to get a shot with good eye contact.

ABOVE: While Chris held the hedgehog, John was able to get this nice close-up.

Challenge Three: The action shot

With just 15 minutes remaining, the pressure was on. John had only photographed two species, but Chris assured John that the next animal – a water vole – would be more accommodating. With small subjects like this, the Centre often employs a white bath to contain the animal. This is a clever idea, as the sides of the bath reflect light and you can easily create a natural-looking set-up. Chris had already arranged a few mossy rocks for the water vole to poke its head through. A few centimetres of water and some pond weed ensured the set-up looked authentic. The 70-300mm was invaluable, focusing close enough to capture a frame-filling shot. A dedicated animal handler introduced the water vole to our set and he gladly posed and we were done. With under ten minutes remaining, John had taken over 200 shots. However, he had one of his challenges still to do; 'action'. John glanced anxiously at his watch as we entered the muntjac enclosure. Chris held a leafy branch to help entice the male into position. The long grasses created a colourful, natural backdrop. However, to capture 'action' would prove difficult. Even at ISO 400, shutter speeds were rarely exceeding 1/200sec – insufficient to freeze fast motion. John took a few frames of the muntjac as it ran and jumped, but the results suffered from subject blur. Knowing that Nikon sensors are renowned for their high ISO performance, we increased the sensitivity on the D5000 to ISO 800. With the camera's predictive AF activated, John kept on



LEFT: The water vole posed happily in its man-made set. John took this shot at 1/125sec at f/5.6 (ISO 400).

BELOW & FAR LEFT: The muntjac reaches up to feed from a branch that Chris is holding.

BELOW CENTRE: A beautiful, natural-looking portrait of the deer, taken at f/11 at 1/125sec (ISO 400).

LEFT: Due to the overcast conditions, it was difficult to generate a fast enough shutter speed that would freeze the deer.



shooting. However, although he came very close, that great 'action' shot remained elusive as the final seconds ticked by and the challenge came to an end. John had still taken some nice portraits of the deer, though. He had the poor light to blame, rather than himself, for not quite completing the last challenge. 'I'm exhausted', John commented as we began packing the kit away. The hour had flown by due to the intensity of the challenge. John had done fantastically well, adapting to the challenges, subjects, light and equipment superbly. On the walk back to the car, John mentioned he wanted to return to the centre again in the future... just next time he intended to spend more than just an hour taking pictures! ■ If you would like to take part in *One-Hour Photo*, email onehourphoto@digitalslrphoto.com for further details.

Digital SLR Photography thanks The Westcountry Wildlife Centre for hosting this challenge and also to Chris Robins for his help on the day. The centre is set in the beautiful River Tamar valley, near Launceston. It is a unique facility offering the opportunity to photograph or film a splendid and wide collection of captive British mammals in natural looking settings. They run a variety of photographic courses throughout the year. For more details, visit: www.wcwp.co.uk

John's challenge verdict

The hour began in the fox enclosure. The light was overcast, adding another challenge, but I was soon taking good shots after using food to entice the animals into position. Next, we photographed a hedgehog, which I found the most challenging animal. They move surprisingly quickly and it always seemed to go in the opposite direction to me. The long grass made it tricky to find a good, clear viewpoint, but I soon learnt to anticipate its movements. I had to be patient, while all the time being conscious that the minutes were ticking by! The water vole was more straightforward, pausing in position long enough to allow me to get some nice shots from an eye-level view. Photographing such a variety of subjects, of varying size, was a big challenge, but the versatility of the 70-300mm was invaluable, as was VR, as all my shots were taken handheld. Using a different DSLR proved a challenge in itself. Its smaller size is probably better for smaller hands, but it is an excellent camera. The challenge was thoroughly enjoyable. I returned with some nice shots and gained valuable knowledge. Thank you *Digital SLR Photography* and Ross.



Ross's hot shot: I love the simplicity of silhouettes. Therefore, for me, my hotshot has to be John's fox silhouette. It shows the animal's profile beautifully and is nicely composed and executed. It also fulfilled one of John's challenges for the day. Good work John.



John's hot shot: I like this shot, where the fox is looking back as though he is just passing by on his business and wants to sneak off without being seen. The shot is in focus from head to tail, which may sound simple but was challenging in overcast conditions.