



PHOTO MASTERCLASS PART 15

URBAN AND GARDEN WILDLIFE



Many photographers assume that you have to travel into the 'wilds' to take great pictures of wildlife. Not true! There are lots of beautiful, unusual and often poignant opportunities on your doorstep – you just need to know how to make the most of them.

WITH WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER MARK CARWARDINE

COMMON AND FAMILIAR species that you find close to home tend to be ignored by many wildlife photographers. They are considered too obvious or insufficiently exotic to make good subjects. But the fact that these animals are so often taken for granted means there are more opportunities to take inspirational pictures of them. Just think about it – there are fewer memorable images of house sparrows or grey squirrels, for example, than of snowy owls or elephants.

With such a wealth of potential subjects nearby, you don't need to fly to far-flung corners of the world. But when you do travel, remember to keep your eyes peeled in suburbia as well as out in the wilderness. As any great wildlife photographer will testify, it's not what you photograph, it's the way you photograph it.

There are two ways of tackling urban and garden wildlife photography. The first is to make the most of all the animals that are accustomed to people and therefore more approachable than their wilder counterparts. The second is to place them firmly in their urban environment to add a unique dimension to your pictures.

But it's not quite as easy as walking out of your back door and hoping for the best. You do need to plan ahead and use your imagination as much as with any other form of wildlife photography. So this month we'll be getting down low, climbing up high, moving backwards, forwards and from side to side, thinking laterally, getting up early and staying out late to take uncommonly good images of some common subjects.

▲ An intriguing photograph of a bemused urban fox with a flock of feral pigeons. Photographer Laurent Geslin takes great delight in making the most of London's rich wildlife to capture such striking images. He proves that you should never overlook common species.

MEET THE EXPERT...

Every issue, our world famous photographers share their knowledge and skills.

LAURENT GESLIN

UK

Originally from Brittany, Laurent is a professional wildlife photographer. Now based in London, he is best known for his images of urban wildlife.



Laurent Geslin travels the world in search of suitable subjects, but still makes time for photography closer to home. He has a small urban garden that is completely wild and home to hedgehogs, squirrels, brown rats, foxes and all manner of garden birds. It's even occasionally visited by a peregrine.

Currently working on a book about photographing wildlife in towns, Laurent finds as much inspiration just outside his back door as he does on safari in Africa. Instead of leopard, lion, elephant, buffalo and rhino, his 'Big Five' are badger, fox, heron, hedgehog and grey squirrel. "My great passion is urban foxes and I never tire of photographing them," he says. "They are a dream because they are so much easier to photograph than their country cousins."

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The biggest challenge for Laurent is including a sense of the urban environment.

"Backgrounds are as important in urban and garden wildlife photography as in any other form of wildlife photography," he says. "In fact, they can be even more important, because they can't be too distracting yet need to tell a story." He smiles as he describes moments when all the elements of a picture have come together. "A real coup was photographing Canada geese flying over Canary Wharf, here in London – you don't get much more iconic than that."

One challenge he has to face is people. "I do get passers-by crowding round me to find out what I'm doing," he laughs. "I don't mind, but I sometimes have to tell them that I'm working and need to be quiet."

Laurent's top urban and garden wildlife photography tips

A hedgehog clammers over one of Laurent's old walking boots.



1 Make your garden wildlife-friendly

There are many excellent books on wildlife gardening that provide plenty of good advice, but there are four golden rules – grow endemic plants, put out feeders, don't be too tidy and never use pesticides. If you have the space, it's also worth building a simple pond – it will pay dividends in photo opportunities.

Three herons squabble in a park while an innocent bystander looks on.



2 Learn to see potential pictures

There is never a shortage of wildlife subjects in urban and garden environments. Don't just shoot the obvious robins, blue tits, hedgehogs and grey squirrels – look for some of the less obvious species, such as spiders and herons. Remember that everything can be photographed in many different ways and in various weather conditions.



YOUR STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE...

Mark Carwardine shows you how to apply the theory to get the perfect picture.

1 WORK WITH A SINGLE SPECIES



- » **Pick a common species**, such as a mallard, and take as many different pictures as possible. It's a great way to train your eye.
- » **Research your subject** to identify a range of potential shots. These might include different plumages, interesting behaviour such as courtship, feeding or flying, large gatherings, intimate close-ups and so on.
- » **Identify locations** where it should be possible to photograph the animal in an iconic urban environment, such as a town lake with people strolling in the background or in front of a distinctive building.

2 LOOK FOR ICONIC IMAGES



- » **Look for evidence of suburbia** – the more iconic the better – to include in your pictures. Planes, trains, cars, houses, shops and signs, for example, all make good secondary subjects.
- » **Shoot urban wildlife with national flags**, famous landmarks or anything else that represents a particular country or city.
- » **Try to include people** in some of your pictures – children feeding ducks, a heron beside a fisherman, a robin on a spade or a fox peering into a dustbin. These examples may be clichéd, but with a little effort and imagination they can make super pictures.

3 MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR TIME



- » **Use holiday time** productively. While everyone else joins a city tour, take a walk and look for urban wildlife instead.
- » **Look for potential pictures** around harbours and quaysides, in town parks and hotel gardens, or near rubbish dumps and landfill sites – there are so many likely places.
- » **Ask the locals** about wildlife in their neighbourhood. Fishermen are often a font of knowledge in coastal towns, for example, but it's surprising how many people will be able to point you in the right direction for some interesting pictures.

4 REMEMBER THE BASICS



- » **Take note of the 'quality'** of the animals you are photographing – not all individuals of a species are equally photogenic.
- » **Work with the light** – get up early, stay out late and look for atmospheric weather conditions. Try manoeuvring into the best position for some picturesque side- or rim-lighting.
- » **Keep it simple** – avoid clutter and move into a better position (or use a wider aperture) if the background is likely to be too distracting. Keep recomposing until you have removed any elements that do not add to the overall picture.



ESSENTIAL KIT... CAMOUFLAGED HIDE

A hide is simply a hiding place for you and your camera. Basically a glorified tent with big windows for lenses, it's a great way to shoot wildlife from just a few metres away.

It's often risky using a hide in public areas, where it may be stolen or vandalised, so your garden is the perfect place. The trick is to site the hide close to where your subject is likely to be – beside a bird table or a pond, for example. Move it into position slowly (perhaps over a period of several days) and then fool the local wildlife by using a decoy (someone who goes to the hide with you and leaves once you've entered, then comes to collect you at the end of the session).

WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

- » Light weight and portability so that the entire hide can be moved quickly and easily.
- » Shock-corded poles to hold the fabric taut so that it doesn't flap in the wind.
- » Sufficient space inside for you, a small stool, your camera equipment and a tripod.

CHEAPER ALTERNATIVES:

- » Kitchen window – simply put food and water nearer the house and shoot through the kitchen window.

DOS & DON'TS

- » DO consider the position of the sun when deciding where to put your hide.
- » DO remember to take a stool with you. If you stay in your hide for several hours, you'll soon be uncomfortable and start fidgeting.
- » DON'T place your hide near a bird's nest in case you cause disturbance (it's illegal to photograph some protected species at the nest without a licence).
- » DON'T be lazy – even urban and garden wildlife photography demands good light (which often means getting up early and staying up late).

MASTERCLASS CHALLENGE UK...



The urban environment is one of the richest for photographing wildlife, but it's often neglected. Expert **Andy Rouse** helps you take super shots in the city.

Deer

Deer are abundant and easy to photograph in deer parks across the UK, and an urban scene can make an interesting backdrop. Keep a low depth of field to avoid the background being distracting (you just want an impression of it) and keep major elements in the background (apart from the deer). Look through the camera and move around to get the right composition.



Robin

Natural behaviour is the key to getting good urban shots. All gardeners know that robins perch on anything and photographers can take advantage of this. Use garden props such as plant pots, spades and gnomes and a little food (mealworms work best) as an incentive. Keep the background diffused by using a low aperture to make the robin the main focus.



Barn owl

To get great urban wildlife pictures, you need to know your local patch. In winter, our local church was used by roosting barn owls, so I simply set up my camera in someone's bedroom and waited for one to appear. I deliberately shot the owl small in the frame to show the beautiful church around it, since the habitat was as important as the subject.



Fox

Feeding urban wildlife allows you to control the location of your shot and therefore all the features within it. The light is the most important element in any picture and can truly make or break a shot. For this photo, I placed the fox's food in the last rays of sunlight against a very dark background, giving the picture a moody, evocative atmosphere.



MASTERCLASS READER PHOTO OF THE MONTH

Now it's your turn. Use all our experts' hints and tips to take great photos of urban wildlife. Use Andy's ideas for inspiration, though you don't have to photograph the same subjects. Upload up to eight images on our website and the winning shot will be published in *BBC Wildlife*.

HOW TO ENTER

Log on to www.bbcwildlifemagazine.com and click on Photo Masterclass, then follow the instructions to upload your images. Closing date: Wed 11 April.

RULES 1) The contest is open to amateurs only. 2) Up to 8 entries per person. 3) Entry of a picture constitutes a grant to BBC Worldwide to publish it in all media. 4) Entries will be judged by *BBC Wildlife*. 5) The winning image will be published in the June issue. 6) No correspondence will be entered into and winners will not be notified. 7) Entries will not be accepted by post or email. 8) Image file names must include your full name.

'COLD WEATHER WILDLIFE' WINNER: Michal Bulak

We loved this quirky portrait of a red squirrel digging in snow for food. Michal has managed to capture the quick action of the squirrel's paws while keeping its face in focus, creating a comical image with bags of character.

