



Andy Rouse's Shots of the Month

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This month I've been working solely with one species in the UK - the Black Grouse. Now most of our friends in the states will probably be unfamiliar with this bird and therefore wondering why Jim ever allowed me to write about it here. Well this article is much more than just a few nice black grouse shots - it's a story of using field craft combined with sound exposure technique to get saleable shots of an extremely shy and elusive bird. Those of you familiar with my work will know that I am not a one shot merchant - the idea of just getting one good shot of each species and then moving onto the next seems pretty pointless to me. As a naturalist I love spending time watching and learning about any species that I am photographing, and so getting a wide behavioural coverage is something that just comes naturally. It also makes much more sound commercial sense to me, as few pictures can transcend the differing market needs of advertising, retail and editorial. So getting a variety of shots stands me in good stead for all three (hopefully!).

My experience with black grouse was minimal before I started this project six weeks ago. Fortunately I had expert help in the form of a gamekeeper with the North Pennines Black Grouse Recovery Project and an MOD Conservation Officer. To be honest once you have worked in close proximity to one shy species, it is common sense to adapt that knowledge to the next, but it never harms to have an expert on hand. I particularly wanted to base my photography on a single lek site so that I could get to know the individuals, and one was quickly found for me that was in the centre of a major bombing range! Fortunately the bombing ceased for a month during lambing time and the grouse timed their appearance perfectly to match this. So on day one of the lambing period, I arrived onsite and after a briefing about unexploded bombs, I was taken to the lek site. For those unfamiliar with the term, a lek site is a traditional gathering place for species such as grouse. Usually it is a flat patch of ground, in a very isolated area, where cock birds gather to display and win the affections of a female. The displays for black grouse are very intricate, with a variety of calls, postures and downright threats, which sometimes culminate in a full bloodied fight. The hens assess the cock birds and consider many factors before choosing their mate, as they want the best gene pool for their offspring. The lekking usually starts well before daylight and ends about an hour after sunrise when the birds depart the lek to feed and recover their energies.

As soon as we arrived at the lek site it was pretty obvious that the grouse were already in full swing. There were droppings everywhere and several areas of flattened grass; these flat areas indicate the territories of each bird. As they strut up and down displaying, they naturally stomp down the grass. Using a compass I worked out the direction of sunrise and decided where to site my hide. Since the lek was in the middle of a wide expanse of land, there was no natural cover to take advantage of so I chose to use a purpose-built sleeping hide with a RealTree camouflage exterior. The temptation when working with such an exciting species is to jump the gun and put the hide too close, too soon. I know from experience of working with foxes that this is a huge mistake, so I set the hide back around 100 meters from the lek. This would give the grouse plenty of time to get used to it for a few days before we slowly moved it forward to the prime position for photography. The final task was to close down all the viewing holes of the hide (to stop rain getting in), peg it well into the ground to stop it flying like a kite, and then get the hell out of there before any grouse saw what we were doing. I have always prided myself on ensuring that the species I am photographing is completely oblivious to my presence, sure it means some pretty cramped and unsocialable conditions but the reward is well worth it. So we set the hide up deliberately in the middle of the day, when the grouse would be feeding in the gullies and woodland and therefore unable to see us. That was that. I left the hide alone for the next few days, and then moved it slowly forward day by day until it was close enough for a 500mm telephoto. Observing the lek from a far hillside one morning, I managed to work out where the main cock territories were and so knew where to position the hide for the final time. Alarmingly the tail fin of an unexploded bomb jutted out just behind the hide, so I'd have to be careful at night.

My excitement rose as the next day's weather forecast a crisp, sunny morning. So I went through my equipment one last time - EOS 1Ds, 500mm lens with 1.4x teleconverter, several 1GB CF cards, a FlashTrax downloader, Quantum power pack, tripod with Wimberley head, angle finder and sleeping bag, all squashed into or on a Lowepro Pro Trekker. The sun had already set by the



time I arrived. As it was my first night and I had no idea what time the grouse would arrive at the lek, I'd decided to sleep in the hide all night. After a few minutes setting up the tripod and arranging the gear around the hide, I switched off the torch and at last I could hear the silence. A snipe drummed loudly over my head and I could hear the sound of a tawny owl hooting repeatedly in the distance. Half way through the night I was woken by a thud when the said Tawny decided to use the top of my hide as a perch! Around 4:30am I heard a rush of wings around the hide as if many birds had landed. I listened quietly, hardly daring to move, but could hear nothing outside. Settling back into the welcoming embrace of my sleeping bag I was just nodding off when a shrill hiss by my left ear jolted me awake. Through the gloom outside I could just make out a few dark shapes scuttling around, either the Martians were tiny or the grouse had arrived at the lek. Sure enough the rising light level triggered them into action and within 5 minutes the air was full of shrieks, hisses and cooing as the grouse began the serious business of lekking. I watched transfixed that morning as the spectacle unfolded before me with the gathering light. Right in front of my hide, several Black Grouse cocks strutted their stuff, puffing up their white tail feathers and challenging anyone who came too close. My grouse adventure had begun. Over the course of the next week I gradually began to understand their behaviour and to identify individuals - FatBoy, Mr. Angry and Spinner were three of my favourites. Fatboy, who was probably the dominant cock and thus harshly named, sat still on his mound for most of the time and rarely joined in any challenge. Mr. Angry on the other hand seemed to be right in the middle of several adjoined territories and so was constantly battling with his neighbours for vocal and positional supremacy. Spinner, my favourite of them all, was so named for his habit of spinning around on the spot when challenged by another cock.



I really hate to spoil the whole story with techno stuff but I guess for the sake of completeness I'll have to. Too much wildlife photography is broken down into technical considerations IMHO; our craft is one of an appreciation of nature first and skill with the camera a distant second. Anyway, I knew from experience that the dark feathers of the grouse would cause the DSLR light meter to greatly overexpose the image and I wasn't far wrong. Initially I tried to adjust the compensation each time but the action was so fast that most of the time I'd miss the shot. Therefore I went back to the drawing board and used a tried and tested method of metering from a medium tone subject. In this case it was the brown grass, and once I had an exposure for my chosen aperture (usually f/5.6), I dialed the value into the manual mode of my camera. This would over-ride the camera's light meter and hopefully remove my need to constantly check exposure. The light was reasonably constant for the first hour after sunrise that I could get away with shooting at the same exposure and making minute adjustments as time went on. ISO-wise I always tried to shoot at 50-100 when the sun was up, which sounds great except that most of the best fights happened whilst the hen birds were still at the lek (long before sunrise). So I used a combination of ISO 400 speed and an exposure compensation of -2 to give me enough shutter speed to have a chance of freezing some motion. The -2 compensation gave me a very dark image but I knew that CaptureOne would brighten it without much degradation. At the end of the day it's better to have a shot than no shot at all. After a few painful twinges in my back, I attached an angle finder to the camera. I am a recent convert to these and find them very useful indeed when working at a low angle. You only have one back so look after it!

And so I write this now after spending about ten days in the hide. I've had three nice sunrises (i.e. I saw the saw rise above the hill), one diffuse sunrise, three cloudy sunrises and three soaking wet sunrises. The latter three really stick in my mind as the hide is not designed to keep out the rain, therefore I got soaked. There is nothing worse than sitting in a soaking wet sleeping bag with rain dripping on your head, holding down the hide against the wind and listening to the grouse doing their stuff outside. Leaving the hide in these conditions was impossible as that would severely disturb the grouse, so I just had to grin and bear it. Admittedly it was quite a lot of fun, especially since I knew a bacon sandwich was waiting at the other end.

I've got three full days left at the lek and I'm going to concentrate on trying to get some unusual wide angle shots by using a remote camera. The weather forecast is awful but I'm going anyway as the grouse are so entertaining. In fact it's not just the black grouse, but the whole package that has made the experience so special. The air is always full of birdsong, from the plaintive call of the Curlew to the shriek of a Merlin flying overhead. I have found it so inspiring and it has really set me back on track for the kind of photography that I love doing. The pictures too have received some good comments so far and I have donated a set of them to the Game Conservancy Trust for usage in their black grouse campaign. Anyway, gotta go now as I need to pack the car and get ready for my long journey north, boy am I excited!

Editor's Note - Thumbnails are links to larger images, presented in slide show format.

Andy Rouse is a professional wildlife photographer based in the U.K. His professional credits include hosting the Discovery Channel's Wildlife Photographer TV series, and the publication of six books, including his soon-to-be-released [The DSLR Masterclass](#). Andy's images are represented by NHPA and Getty Images and are sold worldwide. To learn more about Andy, check out his [NPN bio](#). To view more of Andy's work, visit his website at www.andyrouse.co.uk.

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