

Andy Rouse's Shots of the Month

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Wimberley

Kingfishers

This travelling lark isn't all it's cracked up to be. I seem to spend my life on airplanes, an international vagrant of the grumpiest kind. Of course it is all my personal choice, and at the time it seemed like a good idea, but half way through the busiest travel year of my life I am officially knackered. It's having an effect on my photography too, I'm missing shots that I would normally get and have little interest in picking up the camera when at home. Of course the other cost of all this travelling is that I miss the best periods for my local wildlife, something which has caused me more than a little consternation this year. A couple of months ago I decided that this had to change so I started work on updating my ancient coverage of the European Kingfisher, a stunning bird that inhabits our waterways and lights up our world with its brilliant colours. Most people only see the Kingfisher as a flash of blue disappearing into the distance; it is a shy, reclusive bird that can be a real pain in the butt to track down. Luckily a local farmer had previously told me of a kingfisher that nested on his farm so, after applying for and getting my Schedule 1 license, I went to take a look.

The nest site was a small pond, and I watched carefully from a distance as the Kingfishers came back and forth from the nest. Over the period of a few days I began to recognise individuals and realised that both parents were coming and going from the nest. This meant that they had chicks inside and therefore it was the best time to erect a hide as the chance of disturbance would be minimal. I always hate erecting hides when a bird is sitting on eggs; I feel that there is too much chance of abandonment. It only takes the female to be away from the nest for a few minutes before predators will appear and steal eggs, no photograph can ever be worth that. I always feel that we have a relationship of trust with our subjects and if there is any chance of disturbance then we should always shy away from it. Of course not everyone has the same opinion but that is the way that I have, and always will, conduct my photography.

I set up the hide in the pouring rain, when hunting would be impossible and the parents would be sheltering away from the nest. Quickly I set up my little dome, and then placed a perch in the water across from then nest. I always provide my Kingfishers with a perch as they like to sit and look around before flying into the nest; of course it helps my photography a lot too. Finally I moved any vegetation that is on my shot, and then retire quickly to the shelter of the trees to nervously watch for the parents return. I say nervously as no matter how many times you do it there is always a part of you that constantly worries that the parents will never come back. Five minutes and my worries are over, with a shrill peep one of the parents sits on my perch, beak stuffed full of fish for its hungry youngsters.

Two days later I return to the hide well before sunrise and am set up long before the birds start their daily search for food. I'm in my own little dark world, my views to the outside limited to a tiny window and the view through my camera. When the kingfisher arrives my viewfinder lights up with stunning colour, looking through the lens takes my breath away. Kingfishers have just the most amazing colour and I miss the first few opportunities because I'm so transfixed by them. Eventually I wake up and my photography begins. It's not the kind of site where I can take my wide angle wilderness shots, so it's just a case of formatting the image correctly for clients and getting the image razor sharp. To be honest I could photograph it upside down and it would still work as a picture such is the stunning colour. I spend three happy days in the hide before my travelling beckons again; I only hope that in two weeks time they are still feeding their young.



Two eventful weeks pass, which you'll read about in a later NPN article, and on getting back to the UK I am itching to get to the nest again. The weather is awful for the first few days then the forecast gives good news so I'm in the hide before sunrise again. For the first hour everything is suspiciously quiet, there is no sign of any Kingfishers and I start to think that they young have fledged and moved elsewhere. Then I hear a peeping in the distance, which gets louder like an approaching train, until finally one of the parents lands on the perch complete with fish. It continues calling, which is unusual, then another answers from behind my hide and I realise that the young are just out of the nest. As if to prove my logic a youngster appears on the branch and shuffles along to take the fish from the adult; I stay perfectly still and resist any temptation to take the shot. It's the first feed of the day and I don't want to risk disturbing the highly suspicious parent and causing her to take the youngster elsewhere. Feeding over, the parent disappears leaving the youngster on the perch, I frame up for the next feeding opportunity which I know won't be far away. Sure enough, ten minutes later I get the chance to record it, albeit carefully and with the motor drive switched to single frame advance. Over the next day or so the feeding on the perch gets less and less and the parents encourage the youngsters to move farther and farther from the nest.

I really like the Kingfisher images that I've taken, with a mixture of styles and different lighting conditions. Perhaps more important however is that I watched the birth of new life, and didn't affect or disturb it in any way. Too much photography these days is based on technical issues – I see reviewers slating good, wild photographs because they are taken with the wrong lens or wrong white balance. What matters is that we get out there and take these wild images and enjoy what we are seeing, not what equipment or what exposure settings we use (notice the absence of them within this article). It is the wildlife experience that counts, nothing else matters. As I write this I've just returned from my latest trip and my first call was to the farm, it looks as though the kingfishers are raising a second brood! This time I'm home for a month, so let's see what I can do.

Next month I'll take you on some close encounters with bears and capercaillie in the thick forests of northern Europe - I hope that you enjoy *your* photography in the coming month!

Comments on NPN wildlife photography articles? Send them to the [editor](#).

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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.

