

## Andy Rouse's Shots of the Month

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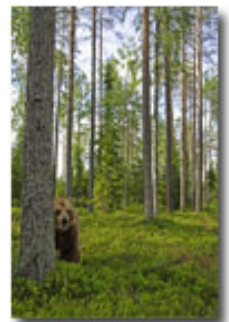
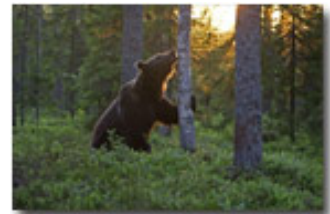
*Editor's Note* - Thumbnails are links to larger images, presented in slide show format.

First of all I'd like to say thanks for all the really nice comments about my Grizzly pictures from last month, it is much appreciated. The bear theme continues for the first part of this month's article, as I was only at home for a day after the Grizzly trip before leaving to photograph their European cousins...

Yes that's right, we have bears in Europe, and in fact we have a lot! Spread from Scandinavia, across to Eastern Europe it's fair to say that the UK is perhaps the only European country not to have any bears. They're about the same size as Grizzlies, kind of the same shade of brown but with a markedly different facial shape. My task was to spend a few days deep in a Scandinavian forest trying to get some definitive shots of these bears in their natural habitat. The location that I chose is a well known feeding site, but rather than use the large hides I opted for a small one person hide situated by itself in the middle of the forest. European brown bears are much shyer than their US counterparts so a hide was the only option, and I had to get in it by 4pm before the bears were active. I spent 4 days in the hide, but have condensed the text into a single evening so avoid the risk of boring you to tears.

The shot of me is taken inside the hide, as you can see there is barely room to swing a cat (or even a chipmunk). In fact there is just enough room for my sleeping bag, water and all my gear. Sleeping bag? Yep - it's an overnight stay job as the light is good until midnight, and I'm locked in until 7am in the morning. The first job when I get into the hide is get my lenses set up and ready, as I will not be able to make any movements when the bears are around the hide. Luckily the hide is constructed with tripod screws so all I have to do is get the tripod heads set up; I choose one with a 70-100 f2.8L lens and one with a 300mm F4L IS lens with a 1.4x teleconverter. These give me multiple options for shots, as the bears have a habit of turning up where you least expect them.

At around 5 PM the first bears turn up and eyes the hide suspiciously. During the course of the evening they get bolder and one even approaches one of the open hatches and looks in at me, which gives me a sense of humour failure as I'm locked in. But these bears are renowned for being tolerant, and its inquisitive nature satisfied, the bear ambles off into the forest. As the light starts to fall the forest takes on a whole new beauty, and photographically has a much greater appeal for me. I concentrate on the shorter lens, trying to get the bears in the context of the forest where they live. As the light falls even more the sun angles itself straight into the hide and I'm shooting straight into it, something which I hate. To cut down the flare I put tape across the top portion of the lens hood; I can see through the viewfinder that it works straight away and my foresight is immediately rewarded. A bear sits right in the setting rays of the sun and is beautifully backlit, with mosquitoes buzzing around its head. I shoot it deliberately underexposed as I know that any detail in the bear will show up as noise in the final image and will mean a lot of noise reduction processing. Personally I can't be bothered with all that and would rather get it right at shoot time. My attention is suddenly taken away from the bear by the sound of two bears fighting behind my hide. Its one thing to hear it on TV, but quite another to hear it from 100 feet! My lens is in the wrong position so I move it painstakingly slowly, taking care that any movement is stopped whilst the bears aren't fighting. The fight however gains in intensity and I manage to get a few shots before peace and calm returns to the forest. At midnight, just as the sun makes it final few seconds' appearance for the day, I'm given the reward for all my patience. A female sits in the red light against a tree, she looks stunning and I know it's an important shot. Seeing that the light is low I switch the ISO up to 200 and am careful to select the focus directly on the eyes and keep all movement to a minimum. Then, in a few seconds, the light has faded, as if someone has flicked the off switch. I take a few more shots but know that my photography is over for the night. Quietly I creep into my sleeping bag and within a few seconds am fast asleep, it's been an amazing night. Tomorrow it'll start all over



again.

## Red Throated Divers

I'm not a specialist bird photographer by any means and prefer to concentrate on those species that are slightly more difficult to get than others. I also prefer to stay away from "the usual places," i.e., the locations where everyone goes to get the same shots of the same species. My second major project for this month featured one such species, the Red Throated Diver, a really stunning bird. American readers will know its cousin, the Black Throated Diver, as it's also called the Arctic Loon.

The key to getting great shots of the Divers is to know the precise time to go, and for me this was during their nesting season. The nest in question was in the middle of a huge marsh and my hide was a small box on skis to stop it from sinking! Unfortunately the same could not be said of the photographer, the first time out to the hide yours truly went up to his thigh in mud and had to be pulled out by two laughing friends, a great start! The drill for the divers was the same as for the bears - get in early and stay overnight. This would guarantee that I would be in place for the best light in the evening and morning, and more importantly, that the birds would be unaware of my presence (as the parents only came back to feed the chicks). In fact this was my prime concern and I always felt extremely nervous going into the hide as this is the time when the parent could easily fly over and see us (resulting in them staying away from the chicks for a few hours). It's always a fine line between getting a picture and causing disturbance and if I thought there was any risk of predators taking the chicks then I would not have bothered with this nest.

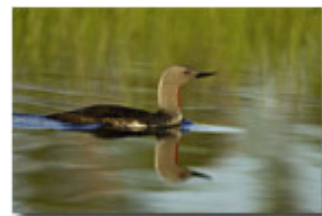
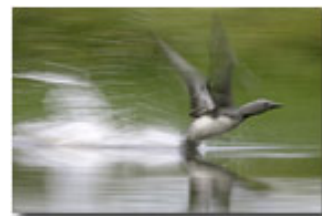
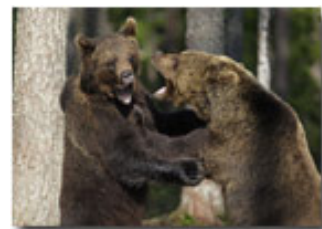
So, everyday for 4 days, my routine would be to get into the hide at 4 PM, stay until 12 noon the next day, have a quick lunch, charge my batteries, do my necessities then drive back to the hide. Unlike the bear hide, which had tremendous visibility, the driver hide had very poor visibility and I had to rely on the parents calling as they approached to tell me to get ready. Landings were almost impossible to judge but take-offs were always spectacular and I managed to nail a few. Luckily I had the new Canon EOS 1D MK2 (you can check out my online review at [www.warehouseexpress.com](http://www.warehouseexpress.com)) which certainly helped with the action, although it didn't lock on as often as I'd like.

The light was a mixture of sunshine and mist, so I had to be ready to shoot in all conditions. When the sun was out I'd use ISO 100 and deliberately overexpose most images to bring out the colours of the divers and the water. When it was misty I'd try to use the low light to create some mood, either with the wide angle shot you see here or the slow shutter speed take off. Working with the vagaries of the weather is one of my greatest challenges, although with a DSLR I am learning to cope with it much better. Perhaps the greatest challenge that I faced with the divers, apart from doing your necessities into a very small lipped bottle, was to fend off the thousands of biting insects that called the marsh home. Sitting into the hide was definitely a trial by mosquito and I had no choice but to wear a whole body suit for my entire stay. Yes it looks ridiculous (some people might say it improves my looks immensely) but it stopped me getting nailed by those little suckers.

Over these two projects I probably spent at least 90% of my time in the hides and I loved every minute of it. Time passes so quickly too, although I have to concentrate every waking minute to get the shots. For this reason I never take a book or MP3 player into the hide as they are not only distracting but unnecessary. Sitting in the hide there is entertainment all around, with birds singing and wildlife going about its business blissfully unaware of your presence. It's been a great experience and I hope that you really like the shots this month.

August for me will be a really busy month as I've got 2 books to write plus two long term projects which will be taking up most of my time. I'm also preparing for a month away in September, first leading two tours to the annual migration in Kenya, then back across to Alaska for Grizzlies. So hopefully I will have a lot to show you in the next few months.

I'm also setting the tour program for 2005 and so far am working on tours to Antarctica, Grizzlies in Alaska, European Brown Bears in snow (as above), Polar Bears and a winter trip for birds of prey in Finland. So if you are interested, please send me an email to [andy@andyrouse.co.uk](mailto:andy@andyrouse.co.uk). I'll then



add you to the mailing list for the tour info. Please note that we are currently sounding out interest for the Antarctica tour so if you are interested please mention that in your email.

AR-NPN 1153

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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](http://www.andyrouse.co.uk).

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