



ALL-ROUND ROBIN

AS CHILDREN, MANY OF US HAVE FANCIED OURSELVES AS LAWYERS, ARCHITECTS, AND DOCTORS, ONLY TO CHANGE OUR FICKLE MINDS SEVERAL TIMES AS WE GREW OLDER. HAILING FROM ESSEX, NORTH-EAST OF LONDON CITY, ROBIN LOWRY IS ONE OF THE FEW PEOPLE WHOSE CHILDHOOD AMBITIONS ENDURED THE TURBULENT WAVES OF ADOLESCENCE AND EMERGED INTACT — HE DREAMED OF BECOMING A PHOTOGRAPHER. OWLS DOMINATE MOST OF ROBIN LOWRY'S PORTFOLIO, YET ONE CAN NEVER GET BORED. FOR SUCH SMALL CREATURES, THEY ARE SURPRISINGLY CAPABLE OF A WIDE RANGE OF EMOTIONS — FROM LOOKING REGAL AND MAJESTIC, TO DOWNRIGHT GRUMPY, OR SIMPLY ADORABLE — ALL OF WHICH HE HAS CAPTURED IN PERFECT SHOTS.

TEXT BY CHING YEE ALL IMAGES BY ROBIN LOWRY

There is so much pun in writing a story about a Robin who loves birds, but we'll let that slide and let his story speak for itself. Born and bred in the United Kingdom, Robin was exposed to the world of photography at a very young age. His grandfather, a keen black and white photography enthusiast, would let him into his darkroom to process film and prints. Naturally, Robin went on to study photography, fine art, and graphic design in the mid 1980s where computers were not a common sight in universities, so he had only his eyes to look at lights, shades, and forms. It was a very 'manual' method of learning that honed his skills in a way that many will not have the opportunity of experiencing in this digital age. He had also learnt to capture the essence of a scene not only on film, but also in various mediums such as ink and pastel. Arguably, this is one of the factors that has helped him in his commercial career as a creative director in graphic design. He explains,

"This was a good thing as it taught me some of the main fundamentals of composition, colour and conceptual art — these are vital to making stories with visuals and imagery."

GOING WILD

Currently, he's now more of a Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI) creative director than a photographer, but looking at Robin's images, one can definitely say that it has done a whole lot more good than harm, if at all. Apart from sharpening his skills at work, Robin dedicates most of his time towards his love for photography. As fate would have it, residing near the River Thames Estuary provides him with all the wildlife subjects he could ask for and more! With just a few hours' drive away, he can get a whole new scenery. "There are so many things to discover and you don't have to travel far for different species or environments," he says. In an age where much of photography is synonymous with travel,

Robin's statement is certainly a breath of fresh air.

Through his images, one gets a sense that Robin aims to capture fleeting moments, especially with wildlife. "It fascinates me how different and beautiful everything is in nature; you just have to stop and take the time to look at it," he says, "Everything on our planet deserves to be here and I hope that people can see how wonderful it is through my imagery." He has a special interest in birds and describes them as "exquisitely designed and extremely photogenic". His two favourite birds also happen to be his all-too-familiar subject — the tawny owl (*Strix aluco*) and the barn owl (*Tyto alba*), which is also known as the ghost owl due to its reputation with rural populations as a bird of evil omen.

When he's not photographing birds in the wild, Robin's viewfinder will be directed at metal, man-made 'birds'



— airplanes! "Sometimes it is good to photograph something else. It is almost like a holiday in some ways and it provides inspiration for my main subjects. A lot of skill and dedication is needed to make a great image, so when you see hundreds of people at air shows taking pictures, my guess is that only a handful will have a true and compelling story in their image!"

THE MAGIC TRICK

Birds or any other form of wildlife can be very challenging to photograph as it is not simply about your technical skills with the camera; it is also about knowing your subject well so you can be at the right place at the right time. Hence, some research is required and this detailed approach often tests the most dedicated of photographers. A good example of this commitment is Robin's image of little owls hanging about a camera (page 118). A good friend, Russell Savory, had been working on that shot for years, leveraging on

the fact that little owls were highly inquisitive. "But I can't take credit for that," he chuckles. "I just happened to be there when Robin finally got the owls where he wanted them to be!" It debunks the myth that photography is purely an intuitive skill where you simply turn up and take a great shot with one try. On photographing such dynamic subjects, Robin emphasises the need to get your homework done. "Know its habits and habitat so you can capture a moment in its life that conveys a story, whether it's hunting for food, searching for a mate, or defending its territory," he enthuses. "Birds are smaller, sometimes faster than land mammals, plus they fly; that alone makes it a big challenge! Also by nature, birds of prey — especially owls — are mostly active early or late in the day when light is not so great; this poses another problem for any photographer. Again, this comes back to knowing the best time and the bird's habits; it's basically research." Robin's personal, fool-proof method of

mastering the art of bird photography has been "trying and failing, but gaining valuable experience along the way". He reckons that practising at local bird centres, zoos or wildlife parks isn't such a bad idea. "This will get you some knowledge of birds. You can see how they fly and behave, and the handlers will be the best people to go to for answers about birds as they are very knowledgeable," he explains. "The more you know about your subject, the closer it gets you to a great shot." To practise tracking birds in flight, Robin recommends gulls and pigeons as useful targets. They may not make great shots, but it is a platform to get the focus and exposure right in these conditions. Last but definitely not least, it's back to basics: knowing your camera. He has encountered and taught many people who don't know how their camera well enough to operate them properly. Photography may be an art, but there's so much more science to it than meets the eye.



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One ‘shortcut’ Robin recommends is to get connected with your local zoo or wildlife centre. He says making friends with the staff and handlers will be a great way of getting access to a great source of information and at the same time, you can practise photographing the animals. “If you attend a photographic workshop, you will learn a lot too, but your images will look like everyone else’s, unless you had a specific image in mind in the first place.” Robin adds, “It will also help if you try and copy photographs that inspire you. It’s easy to take a picture, but not so easy if you have already set a standard for yourself

to go up against.” For beginners, he believes that one should not worry about the kit. “It is important to have fun and learn,” Robin explains. “Try not to rush your photography. Know your own limitations, the camera, and choose your subjects carefully. You don’t need all the best camera gear to take great pictures — first and foremost you need imagination!” In essence, the first camera kit you have should be a stepping stone to get all the basic skills right, though ultimately it can be a limiting factor as well; but take your time. To venture into wildlife photography seriously, for example, Robin says that the

photographic equipment needed can be quite expensive. “You will always be in positions where light is low or dull, so fast prime lenses are normally required and not everyone can afford a 600mm F4 lens! You’d also need to factor in the speed of your camera — a Canon EOS 1DX or Nikon D4 has huge frame rates and outstanding ISO performance, but again these bodies are very costly. Perhaps start photography with a modest kit — you’ll definitely be able to achieve some outstanding results. As you improve and want to photograph subjects that are more elusive and harder to capture, the camera and lens will limit you in terms of the quality

OLD SCHOOL

Robin used to develop E6 colour transparency films and process Cibachrome prints using a colour Durst enlarger. Having been an avid darkroom and film processor in the 90s, he also had the opportunity to appreciate the once-tedious art of making photographic decisions. "Understanding how and what makes a great picture as well as making the right decisions on an image was crucial in the old days. If it went wrong, it would cost a lot of money and time as well," he explains. He then wonders aloud the possibility of going back to developing darkroom prints. "I still think it has something special — it's a bit like a vinyl record compared to a CD... There is just something magical about it!"

Many would say the same about digital photography, which has now taken over an overwhelming portion of the industry. Robin agrees that it has certainly made photography more accessible to a vast audience, whereby more and more people who don't photograph for a living are investing in increasingly expensive gears and taking part in scores of affordable workshops available out there. "The cost of a beginner's photo kit is low yet the quality they produce is excellent. Camera phones and Photoshop are used pretty much by everybody these days! It allows people to experiment without losing time or money." However, there is always a drawback — the missing 'X factor'. "What it takes away, in my opinion, is the skill to create

something extra special," he explains, "Wildlife is unpredictable; you can't simply turn up somewhere and snap a great shot. Having said that, I'm sure people have been lucky enough to have done just that! But in my view, planning still makes a difference."

The most memorable part of Robin's career was early on, with the first pack shot he did for a toy company. It was a new collection of small cars and a children's road mat with a lot of traffic signs. Taken on a Zenza Bronica ETRS medium format SLR film camera with 6 x 4.5cm 120 roll film, he recalls having to wait anxiously for a few hours for the film to be developed! In comparison to digital cameras, the current generation has lots of pre-determined settings

such as sports mode, night scene, low light, and so on to play with. "You can't automate good composition though, and that is what's lacking in a lot of people's images," he said. "If you only have 12 shots on a roll of film, you have to make sure you get everything right, unlike now where you can wipe a memory card clean and start again instantly. I do love the digital age but I feel the newer generation is missing out." These days where Instagram and all sorts of other mobile applications are used to enhance images instantly, one cannot help but agree that the art and appreciation of photography has become extremely diluted.

STAYING GROUNDED

Robin has been working on a concept



you'd want to achieve." He adds, "Having the best kit doesn't make you take great pictures; it just increases your chances of capturing an award-winning photograph!"

After all those years of hard work looking out for owls, one can find it a bit of a challenge to pick a favourite shot out of Robin's pool of photos as he had dozens, if not hundreds or thousands of them! His favourite, though, is a surprisingly simple image of a perching owl (page 115). "It's so simple and natural, and I took this in one of my first photo classes which I ran for a local Bird of Prey centre. This photo holds a special place in my heart," he reminisces. "What I wanted to create was a warm intimate portrait of this owl, and this shot was one of those times when everything just fell into place. The warm autumnal tones of the leaves hanging on the trees, the milky early morning sun diffused by light patchy clouds, and the owl giving its best pose... It would have been hard

to mess it up, really!"

At one glance through his portfolio, it isn't hard to notice that Robin's images are all aptly titled, even if there are several shots of the same subject. After a photography session, it's easy to pick a shot that he wants, he says, as Robin tends to have the title of the image in his head beforehand. "I always know 'the shot' I am going for... it's a great way to keep yourself focused on what you want to capture in the first place. Sometimes, there are 'lucky' images and I can handle that! Good composition, lighting, and stories are the things I look for, as well as sharp focus around the eyes and the right amount of depth-of-field too." He continues, "If the subject is displaying a behaviour you don't normally see or the wings are in a great position, that helps me in choosing my shots, too; it is about knowing what you want. If you don't know and you have a thousand shots, you are going to be awhile at the computer!"



for weeks, which he has titled "The Graveyard Owl". He has identified the location, but will need to obtain permission to use it for the shoot. "I also want to use a captive barn owl as I don't think a wild one will turn up when I need it!" he says, echoing his earlier advice about planning a shot thoroughly. He is also experimenting with strobes to see how he can create a piece of art with the Canon Speedlite 600EX-RT, but that's still in the works. "It is very exciting indeed! A bird in flight and the way it moves is just perfect for the shot I'm planning to take. As long as the subject is not disturbed by the flash, I will keep experimenting!"

When asked which photographer has inspired him, Robin practically jumped saying "Ansel Adams!" an American photographer and environmentalist, whom he's admired since college days and calls him a 'darkroom genius'. Robin still holds onto Adams' signature quote, "The negative is the equivalent of the composer's score, and the print the performance". To him, these words encompass the creative vision. "For instance, anyone can take a photograph, but not everyone can create a picture that tells a story. Try looking through the lens and at the

same time, imagine what the final picture will be. Nine times out of ten, they'll be different! Something as simple as a crop or a colour tweak can bring you closer to what you want to achieve. So taking the actual shot is half of what makes the final picture, and the rest of it relies on what you do with it on the computer. It's about having a vision and making it happen. I think that's what Ansel Adams did and I can definitely relate to that 100 percent." As for his wildlife counterparts, Robin cites Andy Rouse and Danny Green whose images have motivated him when encountering failures.

Robin tailors his courses to both new and experienced people in wildlife photography who would like some coaching on developing their own creative vision. He says, "I believe everyone has the skill to take good photographs, but very few know what makes them great. In fact, someone with an average camera can still capture great images, but depending on what you want to achieve, gear can be a limiting factor." An art director by profession, Robin's ability to look at the same scene in several ways helps him understand his students' perspectives better, as well as their perceptions on

techniques. "It could be something as simple as depth-of-field, or going for a wider shot to show more of the environment, or even thinking about the tweaks that could be done in post-processing before the shutter is released." he says. There is no 'correct' way to look at a picture, and even simple set-ups are enough to take good shots. For Robin, there are no hard and fast rules about photography.

One would surmise that a photographer's greatest achievement would be a world-class award or recognition, but Robin's idea of success is much more down to earth. In fact, he enjoys teaching others how to take better images of wildlife. By running courses throughout the United Kingdom, he helps people 'see' better shots through the lens and gives them technical advice. Of this, he says, "To get to this stage is a massive achievement for any photographer! That's probably why I like Andy Rouse and Danny Green because that's what they do."

To know more about Robin and see more of his work, visit www.robinlowryphotography.co.uk.

