

# FOOD AND PHOTOGRAPHY RETREATS™

*with the Benvies*

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## MENU

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*"It's eleven years since I made my first field studio photographs - shot in nature with live, wild subjects, against pure white, backlit backgrounds. But I have to say that in recent years, the opportunities to expand the collection have been limited by the sorts of places I've travelled to and the fact I've covered a lot of species already. My enthusiasm, however, has been rekindled this summer after being introduced to a technique in Photoshop that allows me successfully to overlay images and create depth to these composites by grey-scaling the background elements. We are sharing this knowledge on some of our Retreats now in the hope that some other novel uses of these simple but elegant images will emerge. It was, after all, from a Retreat guest that I learned the technique in the first place." - Niall*

## News from Niall and Charlotte

We're home for a few days between tours, just enough to put this newsletter together and reflect on recent work in France and Slovenia.

For the first time this September, we used the barn conversion at the Château de Magny en Morvan in Burgundy for a group - the same accommodation we will use for our own Retreat next April. We loved it and so did our guests from Scotland, the US, South Africa and Australia. Charlotte shone in the fabulous kitchen, assisted by one guest who was much more interested in cooking French food than photography. Encouraged by that experience, we will continue to develop the two strand approach to encourage non-photography spouses and partners to come along too.

Since it is "our" part of France, it's not always easy to see it as first time visitors do. For example, we had under-estimated the appeal of its "authenticity" (that is to say, the Morvan doesn't dress itself up to woo tourists). In a frantic world, the fact that nothing ever happens here to disturb the global order is actually quite reassuring. It's a place to cultivate some



*Beaune - a must-visit town on our Burgundy Retreats.*

perspective, in misty, web-festooned meadows; down dark hedge-bound lanes in the thrall of a nightingale's song or in a lively crowd of friends gathered out on a still, warm evening around a laden table.

After delivering 25 tours in Iceland during the last 5 years, we're enjoying working in warmer climes - be it Slovenia, France or, next summer, in the Austrian Tyrol - this month's featured Retreat. I did an eight day commission for the [Wild Wonders of Europe](#) project there almost a decade ago and was overwhelmed by the abundance of plant and insect life, not to say the alpine setting. We've found some fabulous accommodation so all the ingredients are there for a great Retreat. The Park Director I worked with then is still in post and is keen to help with the planning. It's not always easy to keep up with the many friends we've made through our work so please don't worry if replies are a little slow sometimes: we haven't forgotten you!

If you fancy a Retreat with us this winter, we still have some space on our [Harris one](#) in February. We hope you'll join us.



Niall and Charlotte,  
Directors

## Idea - Photo tourism



*Sea eagle, Alam Pedja, Estonia. Working at locations you or friends have developed for their own use gives the possibility of more distinctive images than those from paid-for sites - if you have the time to invest.*

Hey, well done!" I greeted a friend a couple of years ago; a photograph of a red squirrel at his bait site had just won a national wildlife photo contest. But I'd jumped to the wrong conclusion. "Actually, it's a client's picture," he replied without any hint of resentment. Photo tourism, after all, is business: the provider does the work of establishing a bait site, building the trust of the animals and providing a hide; the client pays their money to take pictures there.

I think if I had only four weeks of annual leave and a passion for wildlife photography, I may well end up taking advantage of opportunities provided by my friend and others: with a full-time job, it's not easy to find the time (and energy) to do all the research and preparation required before photography can begin. I might be a little bothered that my pictures looked similar to those of other photographers who had used the same site but by sitting in the same place with the same equipment and intent on capturing the same definitive moment, that is inevitable - and a small price to pay for a rare opportunity.

I would, however, feel decidedly uncomfortable if I was asked to tell the story behind the picture. Part

of the mystique of wildlife photography, after all, is the popular idea that we sequester ourselves in remote, damp hides for unreasonably long periods to bring never-before-seen animal behaviour to public attention. Or, through our own wiliness, are able to gain the trust of shy creatures that normally shun human contact and bring back unique insights into their lives. If the back story amounts to nothing more than, "Well, I paid to use this hide and the animals came to the bait that's put out every day for them," people aren't going to be so impressed. This is perhaps why, when pictures from established photography sites appear in competitions, there is rarely any acknowledgement of the person who created the opportunity and made the pictures possible. Pushing the button is the least of it.

It would be easy to dismiss this perspective as élitist, as an argument that the only worthwhile pictures are those for which the photographer has done all the work him or herself. But on the contrary, the way in which "bought" pictures are often favoured in competitions - intentionally or otherwise - sends out the message that if you have the money to buy opportunities, you too can have a prize winning picture. The impact and subsequent success of these

pictures normally owes much more to the quality of the opportunity than the photographic skill required to secure a winning shot, especially now that digital capture has to a large extent levelled the technical field.

I would like to see clear differentiation between "nature photo tourism" and "wildlife photography" simply out of fairness to the majority of photographers who lack the resources or inclination to use paid-for locations. I would love for more people to be able to enjoy the amazing experiences offered at a bear, or osprey or sea eagle or red squirrel bait site, but I wish just as fervently that the people who create their own opportunities and bring us genuinely original images receive proper recognition for their work. Their's is an investment in time rather than cash. Without that, the relationship with the subject - and the resulting back story - is altogether more superficial.

Photo tourism sites also raise questions about originality: even with the fastest reactions and most up to date equipment, there is a certain sameness about the images, no matter how spectacular they are, from well known sites. While many people seem happy to

emulate their photographic heroes and bring back images which are almost indistinguishable from their's, I'd like to think many more (and I'm in this camp) take pleasure from creating something novel and previously unseen. Why? Because on one level it is simply more gratifying than merely "gilding the lily". On another, the viewer is likely to be more curious about your subject if it is presented to them in a fresh way or in an unfamiliar setting. The picture then has the potential to inform as well as entertain.

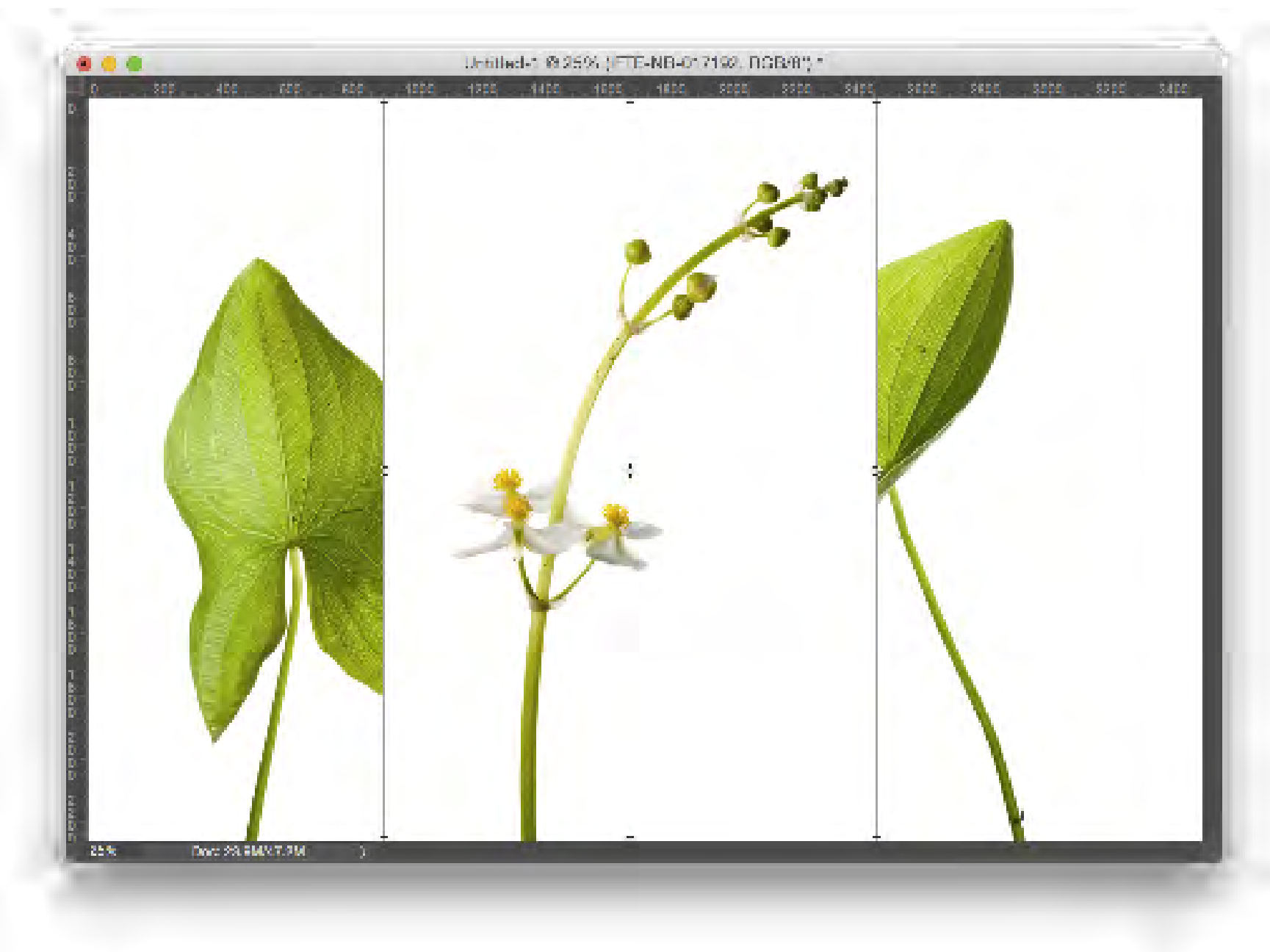
In practice, the majority of judges I have worked alongside in various competitions seem ignorant of, or un-swayed by, these arguments and are wedded to the idea that appearance is all, no matter how familiar the motif. And we shouldn't forget that the red squirrel picture I mentioned at the outset was a "viewers' winner." I for one hope that dedicated "local patch" wildlife photographers aren't deterred and I will continue to champion this sort of photography whenever I'm invited to judge.



*Red squirrel, Meikleour, Scotland. Taken in the early 1990's, this photograph was published a lot - before such pictures became commonplace with the development of paid-for bait sites.*

# Skill - Darker Colour Blending mode

The pure white (R:255; G:255; B:255) background of a field studio photograph means that it can be dropped seamlessly onto a white page without any cutting out. If you want to create a composite with several elements, however, you will need to get rid of the white background of upper layers so that they don't obscure what's below.



The simplest way to do this is to change the Blending Mode from "Normal" to "Darker Colour". You'll find the Blending Modes near the top left of the Layers panel. What this particular one does is selectively to display the darker colour when one layer overlays another. If the background of the top one is pure white, it is going to give way to anything beneath it that is not.

If the subject below is very pale, it may not all show through perfectly. That, however, is easily solved by using the Eraser tool on the upper layer to rub out the white background over the subject below. It's rarely a big problem.

Darker Colour blending mode not only saves time



in getting rid of excess background, it also allows you to overlap elements - something that isn't practical if you simply cut away most of the background - there will always be a little white left around the subject. So long as the subject below is paler than that super-imposed on it, the white background of the upper

will disappear and the upper subject will sit in front of the ones beneath - unless they are darker. You can make things easier for yourself, as I've done below, by lightening these elements so that they don't compete too much with the foreground ones, I applied a monochrome Channel Mixer adjustment later to the "background" layers further to reduce visual competition.

*Thanks to Martin Santbergen for introducing this technique to me.*



## Food - Lemon and poppy seed cake



What better way to be welcomed back to your accommodation than with a cup of tea and a slice of this delicious, yet surprisingly light, cake?

### Photography note

There is something especially beguiling about a dark background in food photography, especially when the subject appears to loom out of it. This is helped, to a great extent, by denying it any fill lighting and indeed, flagging it heavily so that there is no risk of any stray light diminishing the low - key look. In this instance, I positioned the table and cake to the left of an open doorway with a Lastolite diffuser over it. This coincided with a dark background, itself flagged to prevent light from the doorway straying onto it.

In addition to making the cake, Charlotte painted the cake stand with a lavender motif and coloured edging. Some fresh lavender from our garden rounded things off perfectly.



## Ingredients

### *For the cake*

- 225 g self-raising flour
- 225 g butter or baking margarine
- 225 g caster sugar (golden caster sugar is a nice choice)
- 4 large free range eggs (gently whisked together)
- 1 tsp baking powder
- 2 tbsp poppy seeds
- the zest of 2 lemons.

### *For the cream filling and topping*

- 150 g mascarpone cheese
- 100 ml double cream
- Juice of 1/2 a lemon
- 50 g icing sugar
- 3-4 tbsp lemon curd.

*Icing sugar for dusting and delicate decoration to finishing - such as dried cornflowers.*

## How-to

1. Pre-heat the oven to 180° C / 160° C fan / gas mark 4.
2. Grease and line the base of two 20 cm sandwich tins with greaseproof circle papers and set aside.
3. Sieve the flour and baking powder together and stir in the poppy seeds until they are distributed evenly.
4. In a large bowl, cream the sugar and butter until light and fluffy

then mix in the lemon zest and stir well.

5. Gradually add a couple of tablespoons of the flour and egg mixes and stir well between each addition until all the ingredients are added and the mixture is well blended and free of lumps. Alternatively, you can put all the ingredients in a food mixer until they are thoroughly mixed and smooth.

6. Divide the cake mixture evenly between the two cake tins and smooth the top until it's even.

7. Bake in the oven for 25-30 minutes until lightly golden.

8. Remove from oven and after 5 minutes or so, free the cakes from their tins and let them cool on a wire rack.

9. While the cakes are cooling, put in the mascarpone, cream, lemon juice and icing sugar in a large bowl and beat them well until blended and fluffy. At this stage stir in the lemon curd so some is blended and the rest is still recognisable.

10. Once the cakes have cooled, take a large stand, place one cake on it, spread half the mascarpone mix on it and then place the other cake on top and the rest of the mix on that. Spreading it evenly and with attractive swirls. Then scatter your decoration on top and dust with icing sugar.

Serve a slice with a cup of tea in a china cup. This is a cake that deserves to be enjoyed in style!

The cake will be need to be refrigerated between times because of the cream content. Use an airtight container so it doesn't dry out and it will last up to five days, given the chance. - *Charlotte*

*Featured Retreat*

*Magical alpine  
meadows*

A MID-SUMMER MACRO AND LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY  
RETREAT IN THE AUSTRIAN TYROL, 15 - 22ND JUNE 2019



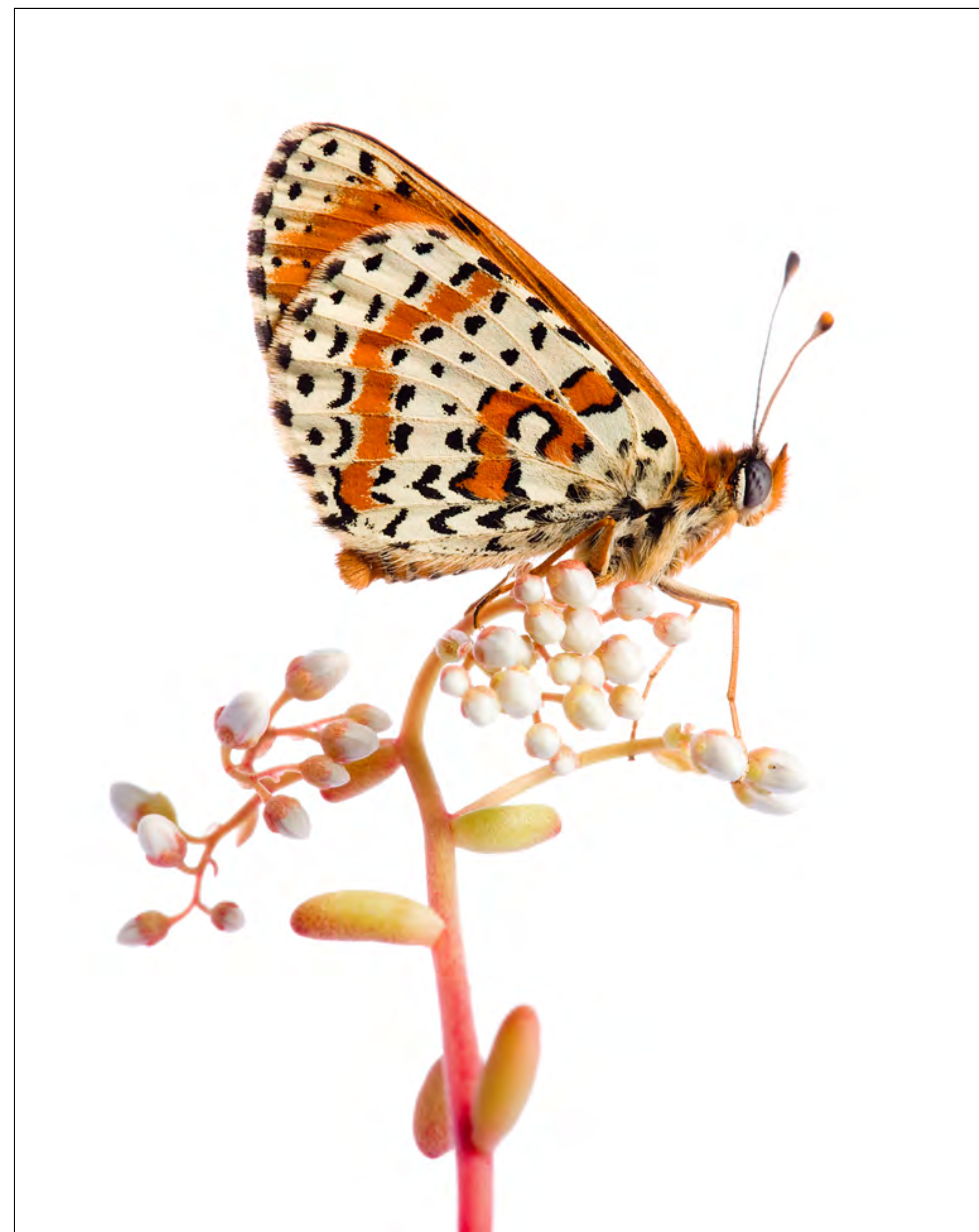
The Kaunergrat Nature Park, at the meeting of the Kaunertal, Pitztal and Inntal valleys, is one of the biological hotspots of central Europe, hosting over 1100 species of moths and butterflies alone - including the dramatic apollo - as well as an extraordinary range of alpine flowers. The Park also contains 84 three-thousand-metre peaks and lots of alpine farms: there is plenty to keep macro and landscape photographers busy. High levels of solar radiation that can lift the temperature at soil level to 70 degrees C, lime-rich soils and less than 60 cm of annual rainfall create the ideal conditions for many species to flourish. On this Retreat, close cooperation with the staff of the Naturepark will help us to get to the best places at the right time.

Leaving the protected "sunny slopes" around the village, we steadily climb up past old Norway spruces and Arolla pines, skirt past bogs, then enter the high alpine pastures, silent except for the clanking of cow bells. Here we can be productive without having to spend a lot of time driving around between locations. But we also give you time to relax amongst wild nature. Sometimes, just sitting and watching is what it takes to make good work.

During the Retreat, you will learn how to:

- shoot field studio photographs, against backlit, white backgrounds;
- composite these images into finished works such as the current Picture of the Month;
- create Colour Transects, to add to your landscape repertoire.

Our base will be in the village of Arzl im Pitztal in fully-



appointed [apartments](#) that were renovated to a very high standard in 2018. They are just 20 minutes from the Naturepark headquarters. Each guest room has its own bathroom and there is wifi, if you need it. It's a great place to relax, to eat, to review your work and to enjoy fabulous mountain vistas. [Booking is open now!](#)



Dates - our Retreats in 2019 and 2020. Full details on our [website](#)



**HARRIS,  
SCOTLAND**  
8 - 15 February, 2019  
15 - 22 February, 2020



**BURGUNDY,  
FRANCE**  
11 - 18 April, 2019  
16 - 23 April, 2020



**THE TYROL,  
AUSTRIA**  
15 - 22 June, 2019  
12 - 19 June, 2020



**QUEYRAS N.P.,  
FRANCE**  
23 - 30 May, 2020



**ISLAY AND JURA,  
SCOTLAND**  
17 - 24 November, 2019  
14 - 21 November, 2020



**TORRIDON,  
SCOTLAND**  
2 - 9 November, 2019

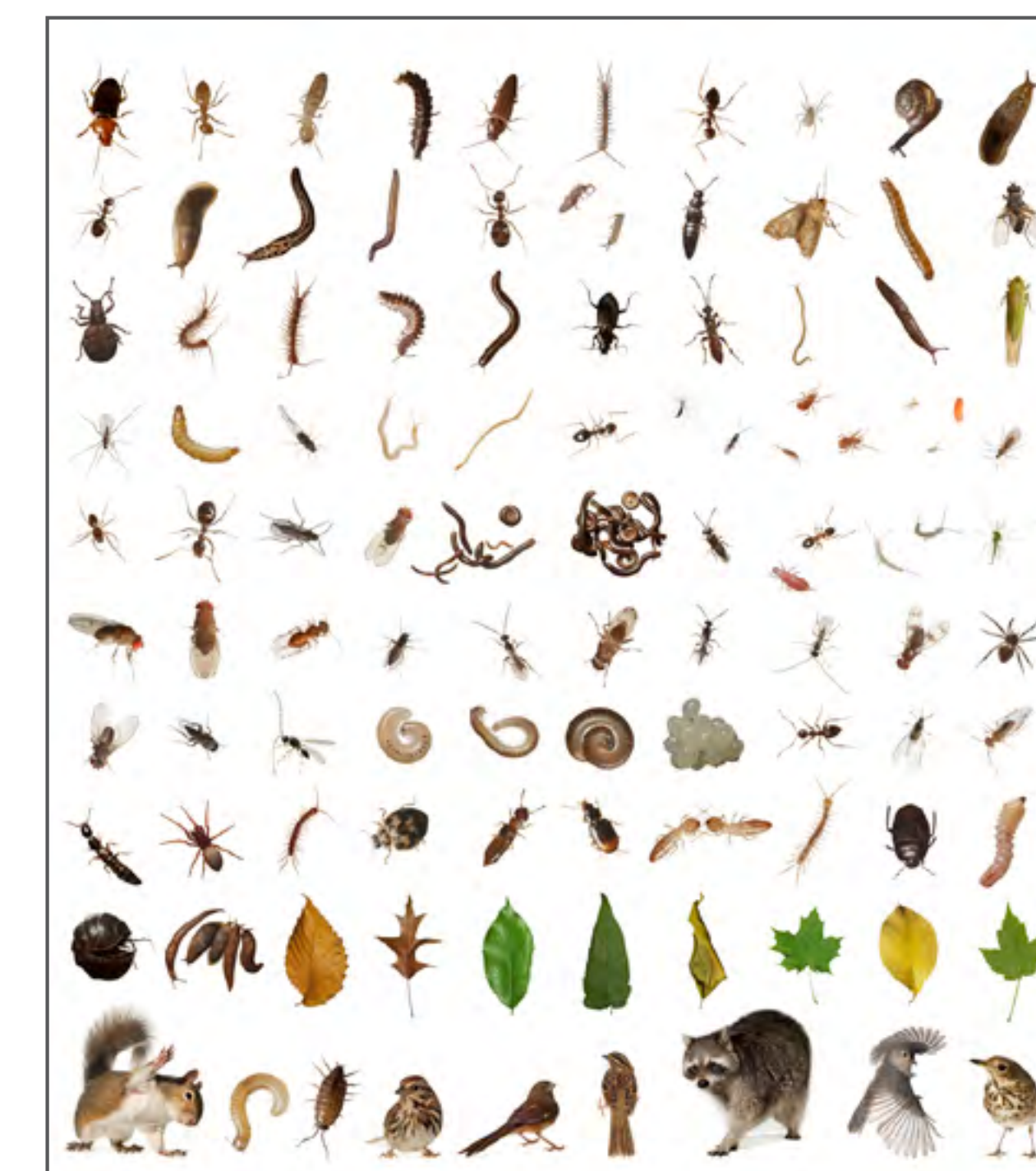
# Inspiration - David Liittschwager

In the mid-1980's, David Liittschwager and his then collaborator, Susan Middleton, worked as assistants to the great portrait photographer, Richard Avedon. Avedon was one of the earliest to recognise and exploit the emotional power of a simple white background in portrait photography and this got his assistants thinking. Could it work for photographs of natural

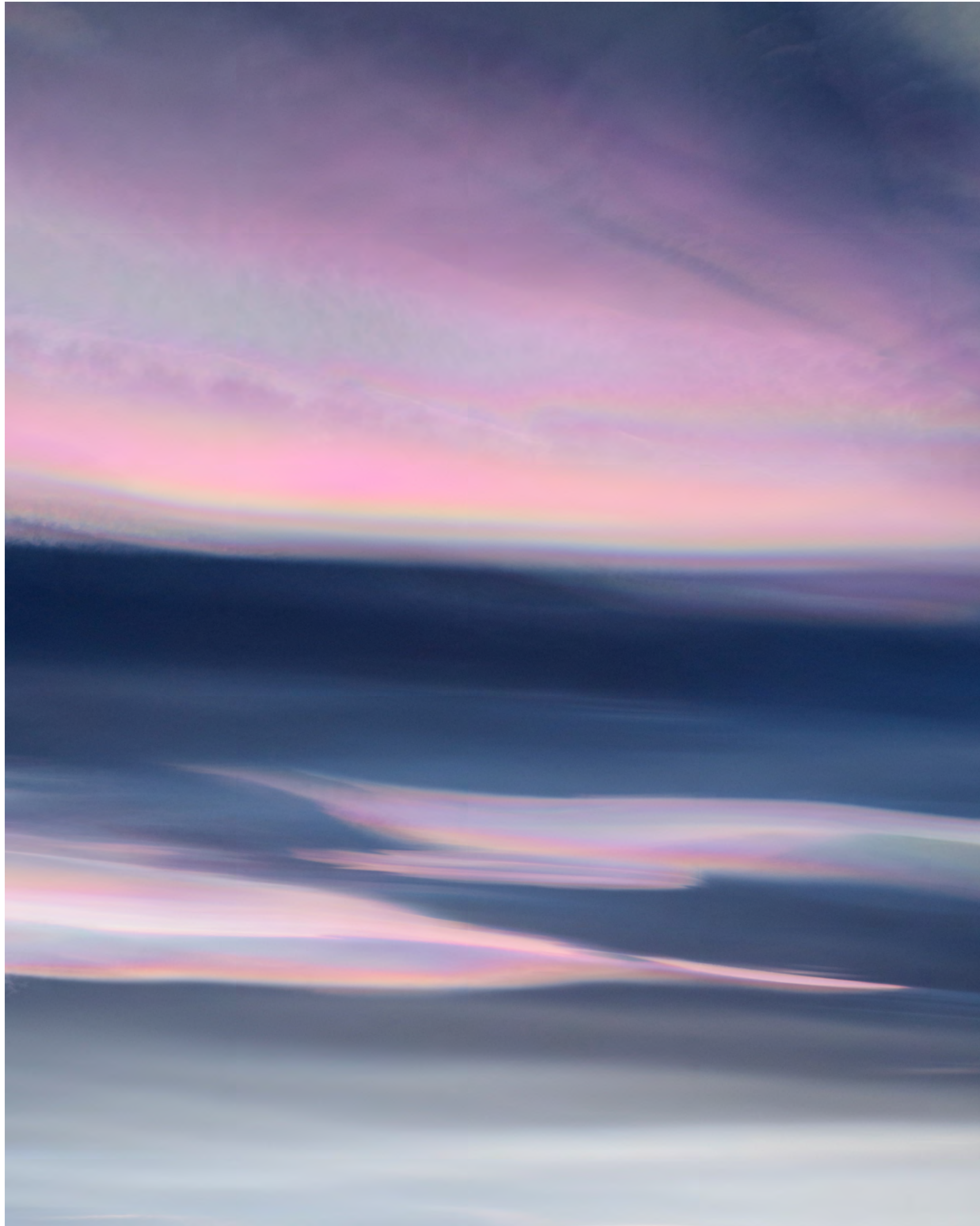
subjects too? During their subsequent careers, together and separately, they answered that with a resounding "yes". Amongst their most important pieces of work was a book on the biodiversity of the Hawaiian archipelago - above and below water - which was used, successfully, to leverage the creation of a new marine national monument under the George W. Bush administration.

Perhaps Liittschwager's most intriguing project to date, however, is [One Cubic Foot](#). This involved recording the individual organisms present in or passing through just one cubic foot in a variety of habitats around the world. These ranged from Costa Rican cloud forest to the South African fynbos; a fresh water river in Tennessee to Central Park, New York City (below) - not to mention a Pacific Ocean reef (left). His composite images, created using field and post-production techniques very similar to those we employ in the [Meet Your Neighbours](#) project, demonstrate the sheer abundance of non-human life we share the Earth with - for now.

*Images © David Liittschwager.*



## Bonus footage - nacreous clouds



*I enjoy the ephemeral nature of clouds and the possibility of unique photographs they offer. I value them as a subject in their own right, unanchored by the land beneath them. In his series, *Equivalents*, created between 1925 and 1934, Alfred Steiglitz explored these same themes in some of the earliest examples of abstract photography.*

*In my lifetime, I've seen only one other display of nacreous - polar stratospheric - clouds as vivid as this one we encountered in Iceland earlier this year. They can form very high in the bone-dry stratosphere when the temperature drops below minus 80° C so are more usually seen in winter. Diffraction of light through thin clouds gives rise to an extraordinary palette of colour - somewhat like a celestial oil slick - that can be hard for viewers to credit. But these colours are real.*

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