

FOOD AND PHOTOGRAPHY RETREATS™

with the Benvies

No. 6 • January 2019

MENU

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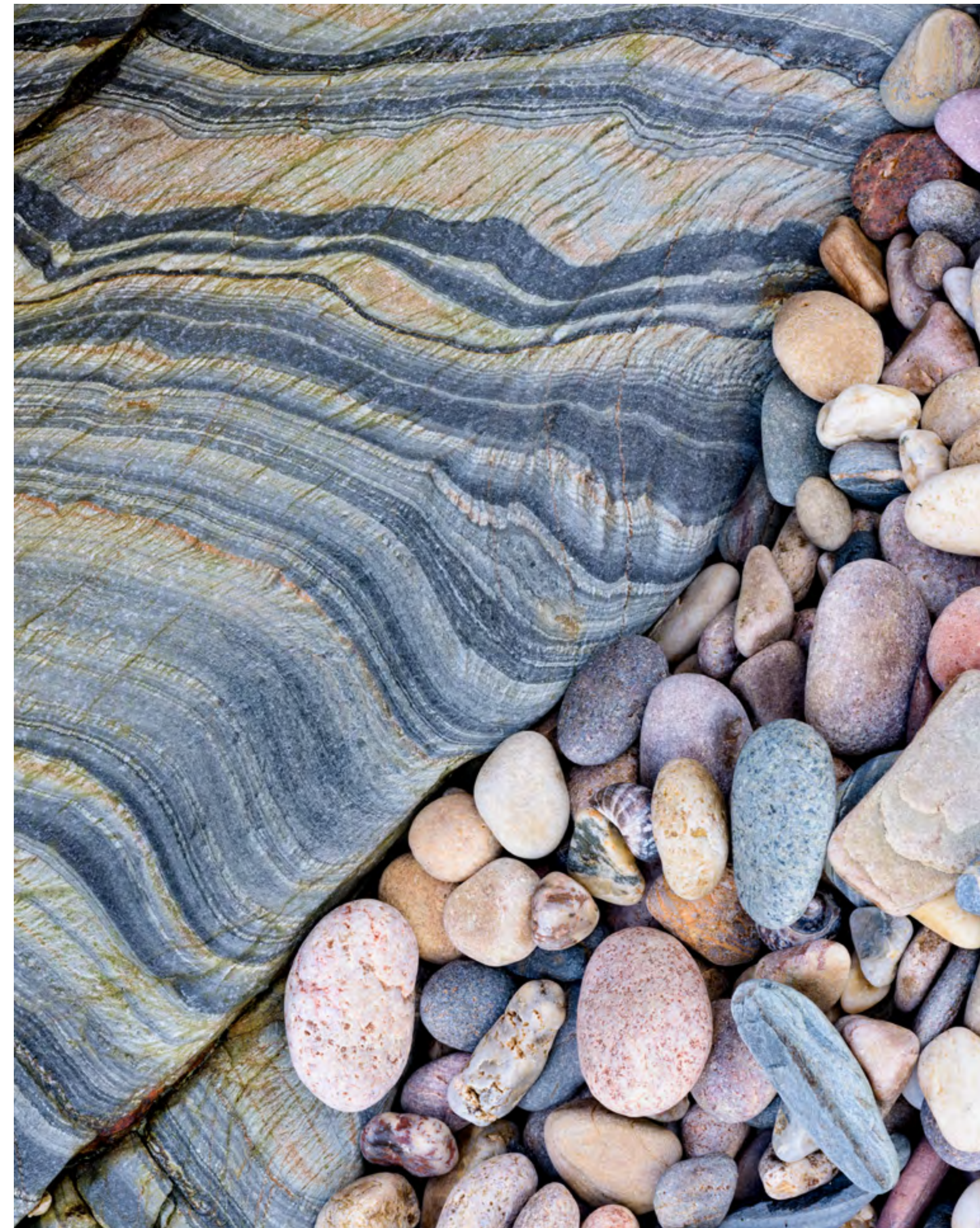
*"I made my first visit to the Hebridean island of Islay in 1984, inspired by Michael Warren's book, **Shorelines**. I've returned many times since, lured back by island's wild coastlines, friendly community and plentiful wildlife. There is nowhere in the UK where so many Greenland barnacle and white-fronted geese come to winter. I like to photograph them at dawn from the head of Loch Indaal, looking east into the rising sun. They spend the night on the safety of the sea loch and mud flats then, as the sun begins to rise, they are joined by geese from elsewhere on the island before making a mass departure to their feeding grounds that day. I no longer use a tripod for action photography, opting instead for a very fast shutter speed (at least 1/2000 second), a high ISO so I can hand-hold the 500 mm lens. This picture was taken in the company of guests on our November 2018 Retreat." - Niall*

News from Niall and Charlotte

Welcome to our first newsletter of 2019 and we extend our best wishes to you for a lovely and creatively fulfilled New Year!

The news in the UK continues to be dominated by our future relationship with mainland Europe and while domestic politics doesn't normally feature in this newsletter, it is relevant to mention it here, particularly for our British readers. At the time of writing (early January), it's not clear if there will be any additional demands made of British passport holders visiting EU/EEA countries. Even in the event of a "no-deal", informed opinion suggests that while we might have to fill in an online form to obtain a visa to visit Europe (cost, about €7), there will be no other impediments to travel. Air passengers should have the easy ride but people planning to cross from Dover to Calais by ferry may face long delays. When we travel to our Burgundy Retreat in early April, we will go via IJmuiden, Holland.

We will keep our guests informed in the weeks ahead as more information is posted on the Government's website and as we hear more from our contacts.



In November we ran our first Retreat, to Islay, applying the principles we've established over the last few years and were pleased to see how well the model works. But we are always interested in refining it so this autumn have introduced: next-day plans, published at dinner time so that everyone knows when and what

is happening and how to prepare; surgeries with "Mr Benvie", during which guests bring their photographic "complaint" or concern to the "consultant" for half an hour of intensive discussion; and more PDF summaries of the key techniques you learn. During 2019, we will also provide each guest with a two way radio when we are in the field, for safety and better communication over a distance.

Charlotte is slowly working her way through the stack of new cookery books she received at Christmas while Niall has until the end of January to write a new book, "Creative Techniques for Outdoor Photographers", for his German publisher. It will be out later this summer.

We've updated our website recently to make navigation easier and there you'll also find details of our new Retreat in the Torridon region of Wester Ross,



featured in this issue.
Hope to see you soon!

Our best wishes
Niall and Charlotte

Idea - history



Bealach na-Ba, Wester Ross, Scotland. Art photographers often deliberately avoid the beautiful, the picturesque or the awe-inspiring because they want to viewer to ask what it's about rather than what it's of.

In the introduction to a massive book marking 60 years of the Magnum photo agency, critic and curator Gerry Badger comments, "As photographers realise that objectivity is probably [impossible to achieve] it becomes more acceptable to wear one's subjectivity on one's sleeve." While he is commenting on the evolution of photojournalism, similar trends can be identified in our field: post-modernism, with its emphasis on ideas rather than form, is slowly creeping into nature photography as photographers dare to put a little more of themselves and their world view into their pictures. Sometimes a picture may amount to more than the sum of its aesthetic parts; the idea may be bigger than the subject, for better or worse.

Even as nature photography is adopting more contemporary sensibilities and maturing into a fully fledged art form, and it is hampered by one fundamental problem: it has no literature – it is hard to define the lineage of the images we see today. While photojournalism can trace its development over time and identify its influential practitioners and their key images, nature photographers have no equivalent to the Magnum tome. There is no record of who first put the camera down to subject level for a new sense of

intimacy, who consciously moved the camera during exposure for a creative blur, who first used ultra wide lenses for macro photography. We all think we know who these photographers are but they almost always have precedents. And this matters because each successive generation of nature photographers is inclined to end up re-inventing the wheel when we should in fact be improving the creative chariot.

There is one important photographer who, arguably, has no significant forerunners in the field of colour nature photography and that is the American, Eliot Porter. A contemporary of Ansel Adams and Alfred Steiglitz, Porter started working with Kodak's new dye transfer colour process soon after it was developed in the 1940's, at a time when colour was not regarded as a credible medium for art photography. But colour was central to his vision. His popular 1962 book, "In Wildness is the Preservation of the World" (Sierra Club) established a way of portraying the intimate landscape that initially looks chaotic but in which, on longer examination, order can be discerned. These pictures lack the immediacy of the dramatic vista but are all the more enduring and satisfying for that. Rather than merely mimicking Porter's work the

Swedish photographer Jan Töve took the portrayal of chaos to a new level in his 2001 book "Beyond Order" with a refined vision and modern colour palette.

Photographers in future who want to explore this field should consider Jan Töve's work as the base camp for their climb to greater creative heights.

There is another good reason to look at what has been done before: changing approaches often mirror wider attitudes within society to the natural world. The prevailing style in British landscape photography at the moment, for example, portrays the landscape as a beautiful, benign place to visit. There is no suggestion that we belong there, only that we may come and "consume" its beauty then leave again. The fact that people are assiduously excluded from most landscape photographs and references to modernity minimised hints at landscape as a refuge. It is all about escapism. This contrasts with pictures showing the American west before it was opened up. In some of William Henry Jackson's work created during Hayden Geological Survey in 1872, for example, there is a palpable sense of menace as people are dwarfed by massive, unsettled landscapes - that have since become tour bus destinations.

In the field of wildlife photography, "celebrity" species – polar bears, penguins, sea eagles, seals and lions – continue to attract far more attention than more humble ones. This is at a time when we are all supposed to be interested in biodiversity but that certainly isn't reflected in what we photograph and what is published. Interestingly though, the fact that some photographers dissemble about the circumstances under which their photographs are made – be it by using game farm models or providing live mice as bait for owls – suggests that many people in society disapprove of these practices and deceptions – something that may not have been the case even 30 years ago.

While post-modernism frees individual photographers to re-define what they mean by nature photography, the primacy of the "artist" rather than the subject can be a mixed blessing if other fields of photography are anything to go by. So that their work is not confused with the romantic, objective photographs they are striving to move beyond many "art" photographers adopt an anti-aesthetic approach. The pictures, though loaded with meaning to those who can interpret them, are often unattractive to look at and do little to inspire

interest in, or empathy with, the subject. If we see our role as ambassadors for the natural world to the rest of society, then that is a dangerous path to tread. Our challenge is to create those Trojan Horse images that bring the viewer in to hear our own story, to understand that nature is more than something to be consumed.



Bergsfjorden, Senja, Norway. While the history of landscape photography is well documented and the key artists recognised, there is no similar literature pertaining to "nature photography". That makes it hard to be taken seriously as an art form.

Skill - hand-holding long telephotos

Forget gimbals and video heads: if you want to shoot pictures of fast-moving subjects, hand holding is the way to go.

There's no need to worry about camera shake: you're going to need a very fast shutter speed to freeze the action - more than fast enough to overcome your wobble.

What you will need, though, is a strong left arm! Holding a 4 kg lens for a few hours is hard work so we prefer Nikon's PF series lenses now.



Arctic tern, 500 mm, f4 lens, 1/5000 sec, ISO 1250

In the old days, all my wildlife work was shot from a beanbag or tripod. The possibility to shoot at a very high ISO with minimal grain, not to mention reliable autofocus, didn't exist. But it still took me a decade of digital photography before I accepted the benefits of

working without a tripod (except in a hide). It all comes down to the speed of response and in my first tripod-free summer, I took more action photographs than in the previous 22 years of my career. The key is to set a high enough ISO to guarantee a shutter speed of at



Snipe, 500 mm, f4 lens, 1/3200 sec, ISO 640

least 1/2000 second (the higher the camera's pixel count, the higher a speed you'll need). Noise, especially with recent generation DSLR's, is unimportant when set alongside the benefits. Group and Auto AF focusing modes tend to give the best results against a sky.

Food - Roasted shallot, rosemary and ricotta tart



As Charlotte goes deeper and deeper into hitherto unexplored realms of vegetarian dishes, Niall finds his lifelong fondness for meat being sorely challenged. And never more so than by the delicious flavours and delightful textures of this tart.

Photography note

Much though I now prefer daylight when I shoot food, there's not always much at 56 ° N in mid-winter. But on this particular afternoon, light streamed through the diffuser covering the open door of my studio space. I flagged the it pretty severely with black foamcore boards to create a gentle spot light on the tart. While it's always tempting to reach for my light-absorbing old French table as a background, on this occasion I used two quarry tiles I bought from [Topps Tiles](#) for a homely, winter feel. I often join tiles in Photoshop with the Clone Tool when a gap between two appears in the shot. Just be careful to keep complex shapes away from the gap, to make cloning more straightforward.



Ingredients

For the pastry

200 g plain flour plus pinch of salt
100 g cold salted butter, cut into small cubes
30 g grated Parmesan cheese
1 medium free-range egg yolk (beaten)
Cold water

For the tart filling

600 g banana shallots, cut into quarters lengthways
1 tbsp olive oil
A few sprigs of freshly cut rosemary from which the leaves are stripped and chopped finely
2 tsp light brown sugar
250 g ricotta cheese
3 medium free-range eggs, lightly whisked together
50 g crème fraîche
50 g Gruyère cheese, finely grated
Salt and pepper (freshly ground is best)

Use a 21 cm square or 23 cm round tart tin

Pre-heat oven to 180 °C / 160 °C fan/gas mark 6

Prepare your tin by greasing and dusting it with flour (shake the tin to remove excess flour).

How-to

1. To make the pastry, sift the flour and salt into a large mixing bowl. Add the cubed butter and using your fingertips, gently rub the butter into the flour until it resembles bread crumbs. Add the Parmesan and rub again until it is all mixed in evenly.

2. Add the beaten egg yolk and about two tablespoons of cold water then use a round bladed knife to bring the dough together. Add another tablespoon of water if the mix is too dry. Gather up the dough in your hands and knead it gently together, briefly, before wrapping it in baking paper and putting it into fridge to chill.

3. Once chilled (say, after 30 minutes) remove it from fridge and roll out onto a floured surface to about 3 mm thick, and line the tart tin with it. Trim the edges and prick the base with a fork. Return to the fridge for about 20 minutes, which will prevent shrinkage when baking. Once re-chilled, remove from the fridge, line the base of the tart case with baking parchment and fill with ceramic baking beans. Blind bake for 25 minutes (removing the baking parchment and beans for the final five minutes.) Remove from the oven and set aside on a large flat baking tray.

4. Toss the shallots in the olive oil with half the rosemary and mix well. Sprinkle the sugar over the mix and then tip it into a large, shallow, heavy based frying pan on a medium to low heat and cook for about 25 minutes until nicely caramelised and softened. You could also do this in the oven in a roasting tin for about the same time, especially if have it on already..

5. In a large bowl, beat together the eggs, ricotta, crème fraiche and Gruyère. Add two thirds of the onion mix (keeping the rest back for the top of the tart). Stir the mix well so everything is evenly distributed. Season, then pour the mix into the blind-baked tart case. Top with the reserved shallots mix, any left-over rosemary and a good grinding of fresh black pepper. Cook for about 25 minutes until the filling has puffed up and is firm to touch.

Serve with a lovely crunchy green leaf salad, drizzled with some walnut oil, quartered vine cherry tomatoes with a dash of syrupy balsamic vinegar. We love Belazu. I like to add some boiled and buttered tiny new potatoes, still with their skins on. A chilled Chardonnay is a lovely accompaniment! This dish is great for freezing, re-heats well and can easily be adapted to individual tartlets if you prefer.

- *Charlotte*



Featured Retreat - the Heights of Torridon

AN AUTUMN LANDSCAPE
AND MACRO PHOTOGRAPHY RETREAT
IN NORTH-WEST SCOTLAND, 2ND - 9TH NOVEMBER 2019

Over the last 20 years, Niall has spent a lot of time in this mountainous area of north west Scotland, shooting personal work and commissions for Scottish Natural Heritage. SNH manages this, the UK's first, National Nature Reserve founded in 1951 in recognition of its internationally important flora - principally of mosses, lichens and liverworts. It is also a redoubt of the once vast Scots pine forest that covered much of the Scottish Highlands for thousands of years but which has been reduced to a few scraps and remnants. At Beinn Eighe, we can see the work being done to re-establish a corridor of woodland from the pine-clad slopes above Loch Maree, down the length of Glen Torridon, to join with other fragments of old forest around Shieldaig.



Mountains built from Torridonian sandstone, capped by glistening quartzite, seem to fill the sky. While it's not necessary to climb to gain a good vantage point, doing so can bring its own rewards, if the fitness of the group permits. The summits conjure with clouds rushing in from the Atlantic to produce squalls then drizzle then brilliant sunshine then hail - all within an hour. On other days it is utterly still and the dark lochs fill with reflections of emergent plants and sombre mountains. It's as if the whole landscape is holding its breathe: a time to be quiet ourselves and get a sense of the endurance of life here.

During the Retreat, you will learn how to:

- assemble "Chocolate Bar" collages;



- create "Colour Transects", to add to your landscape repertoire;
- create mood at the post-production stage using Lightroom, Photoshop and Alien Skin Exposure X and;
- light paint subjects as darkness descends.

Our base for the week will be in the village of Annat at the head of Upper Loch Torridon. Located within easy reach of many of our key locations, Ferroch House and cottage sit back from the road, overlooking the saltmarshes and over towards Ben Alligin on the north side of Loch Torridon. Each room has an en-suite bathroom, there is wi-fi throughout and a spacious lounge for tutorials and processing. See the full brochure [here](#).



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



Inspiration - Allan Magee, paintings

First came across, American artist, Allan Magee's work on the cover of Barry Lopez's essay collection, *Crossing Open Ground*, in the early 1990's. I was captivated not so much by his hyper-realistic style but by the subjects he chose to apply his immense skill to: in this case, pebbles. What could be more ordinary? Yet there was something profoundly beautiful in the gently feathered lighting and exquisite, complex compositions he created, not just of stones, but of other found objects that many would consider too banal to spend weeks painting. In discussing his work, he talks about "sustained attention" and the "application of care". It's a level of scrutiny, of intense focus that is rare, especially when directed towards "ordinary" subjects. By doing so, he dignifies the subject by the application of *such* care, just as we do when we take the trouble to light a sitter properly, set up a view camera, focus stack a macro photograph or follow a wild subject for days until it was grown accustomed to us. Good art requires that you give something of yourself, be it your knowledge or care, experience or time. It's not something that happens casually.

Image © Allan Magee www.alanmagee.com



Bonus footage - The Singing Sands, Islay



Islay's Singing Sands, just to the west of Carraig Fhada lighthouse, are never very easy to photograph, in spite of the bay's impressive geology. But, with a little bit of time and scrutiny, there are compositions to be found, especially if you make the sea and shapes it creates part of the picture. I don't own any strong ND filters, and prefer to use very long exposure times only when the lighting conditions dictate - such as at dusk. It's a more believable look for that time of day.

This edge, where the land meets the sea, is one of relative stability over time: the influence of people is transitory and uncertain. I therefore like to imbue the scene with a timeless mood, in this case, by applying my own split tone preset in Alien Skin Exposure X. In common with more and more of my output today, I shot in a 5 x 4 aspect ratio, which reduced the temptation to reach for an extra- wide lens, resulting in a more natural rendering of perspective. - Niall

MENU is published bimonthly. The next issue, No. 7, is out on 16th March 2019. Words in [turquoise](#) are linked to external web pages. All content is copyright of Niall and Charlotte Benvie, 2019, unless otherwise stated. Food and Photography Retreats Ltd., Wardhill, Brechin, Angus DD9 7PE, Scotland. office@foodandphotographyretreats.com +44 7400 303 930. Company registered in Scotland, SC596219.