

FOOD AND PHOTOGRAPHY RETREATS™

with the Benvies

No. 4 • October 2018

MENU

Picture of the month

Arctic skua, Iceland, 2016

News from Niall and Charlotte

Idea

The authenticity of imperfection

Skill

Processing for mood: 1

Food

Orange and ricotta tart

Featured Retreat

Cairngorms, December 2018

Inspiration

Vincent Munier



"The received wisdom, that equipment doesn't matter and that it's all about 'vision' is, to a large extent, true. But not entirely. The equipment I use today, compared to that from 25 years ago, allows me to realise many more ideas than I ever could in the past. My approach to wildlife photography is quite different. Gone are the bait sites, hides and tripods in favour of a more responsive approach and willingness to work with whatever surrounds the subject. While my 20 year old 500 mm f4 lens is hard to hand-hold for any length of time, doing so allows me to respond to action as never before. A modern camera lets me shoot high ISO images with minimal noise, so getting a fast enough speed to stop the subject - and my wobble - is no longer impossible. I used 1/4000 second here. and just waited until the bird took off. Ouch." - Niall

News from Niall and Charlotte

While much of Britain has had a bit of a toasting this summer, here in the east of Scotland it has been rather pleasant, with temperatures rarely higher than the mid- 20's. So much the pity that we chose this summer to stay indoors and work flat out on development work for Food and Photography Retreats. *Forestry Commission Scotland's* massive restructuring this year has meant that there wasn't the customary three weeks of work I normally undertake over the summer, freeing up time to contact dozens of potential partners and news outlets, design promotional material and shoot new photographs, mainly of food, to support our offer. It has also meant some really nice family time at home which, when all is said and done, is what we work for.

The Woodland Trust Scotland's annual contract to photograph the candidate trees for Scottish Tree of the Year, along with their proposers, took me all across southern Scotland a couple of weeks ago and you will be able to see them on the Woodland Trust's [website](#) by the end of September. The sweet chestnut illustrated here, Queen Mary's Tree, in Cumbernauld, was a



candidate a few years ago and illustrates the approach I use to get striking images, whatever the weather. It's quite simple: wait until it is almost dark and the sky has turned a deep blue, then paint the tree with tungsten light during a long exposure. The

contrast in colour temperatures is eye-catching and it is easier to pick out individual specimens. This is a skill we teach on some winter Retreats.

Talking of which.... don't forget about our [two-strand December Retreat](#) in the Cairngorms which caters for photographers **and** foodies. We thought it would be great for couples or friends who'd like to travel together but don't share the same interests. While I will be out in the hills and in the forests with the photographers, the foodies will be enjoying the comfort of Ballintean Lodge while they make macarons and chocolates and do Christmas baking. The bookng window for this Retreat will close on 1st November, so if you're interested, you should, eh, get your skis on.

Our best wishes,

Niall and Charlotte Benvie, Directors



Idea - Authenticity



Pines in sleet shower, Beinn Eighe NNR, Wester Ross, Scotland. The approach I describe here tries to avoid superimposing aesthetic convention on the experience, instead representing nature as it was at that moment rather than how we think it should be.

I love the idea that, with camera in hand, I can make something beautiful that didn't exist before. It's a privilege afforded to all photographers, whether or not it is exercised. Most images I record don't merit a second glance. A few please me. Fewer still please others and, in the process, set up a connection between viewer and subject. As a tour leader, I have seen the intense pleasure some people get in the act of taking photographs. Others, like me, enjoy more having taken pictures, especially if there is a lot of hardship involved. And yet, even at those times, I relish the moments - or minutes - of transcendence experienced when enchanted by the image in the viewfinder. For that time, its frame becomes the limits of our world and we lose awareness of everything else. In our everyday lives little else fosters such a degree of concentration, is so certain to get us "in the zone", as anticipating the moment to release the shutter.

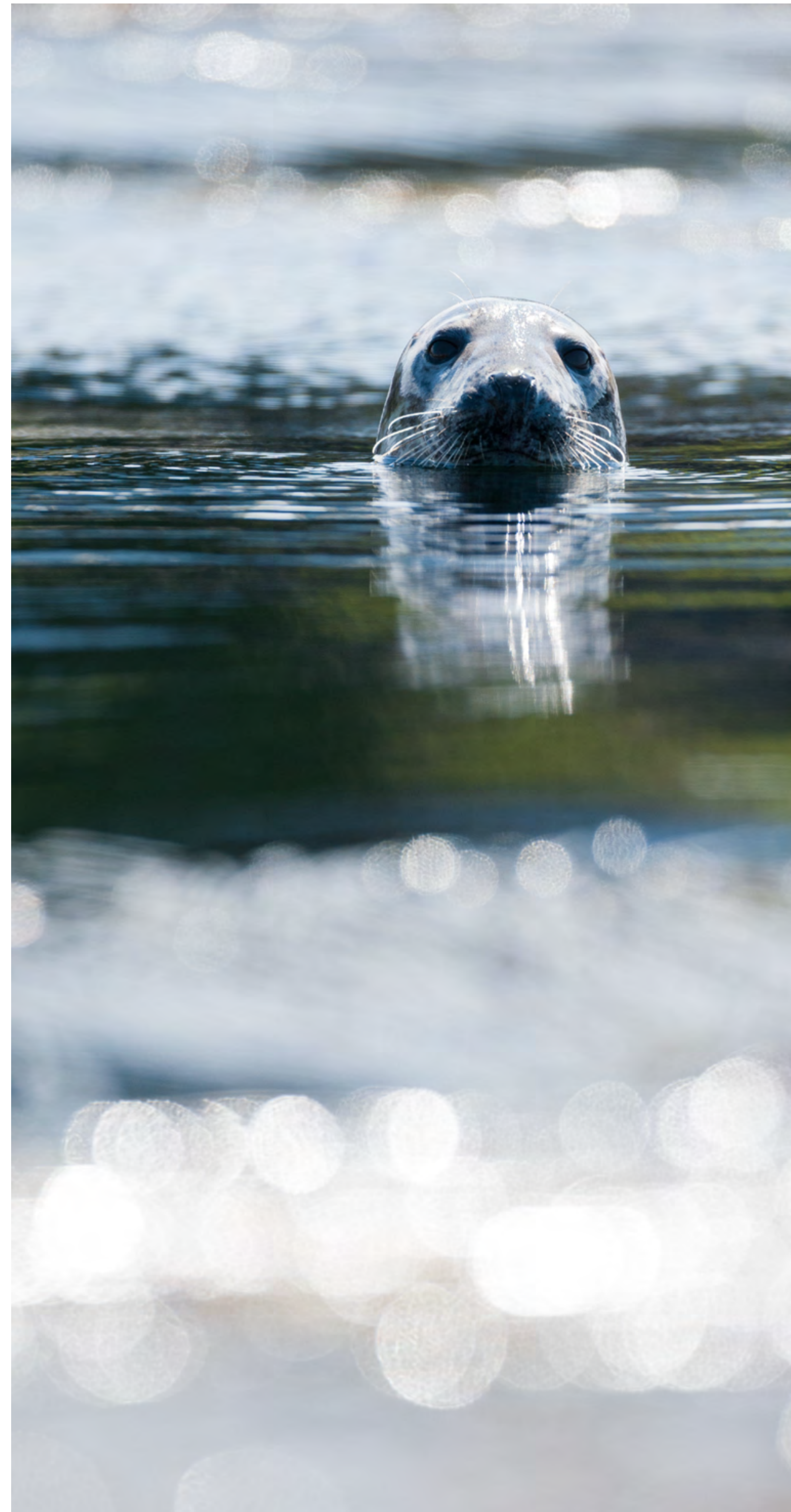
It's only natural that we want to repeat these moments, to feed an internal reward mechanism. That's certainly how it feels. But here is where the beautiful simplicity of encounters, those moments where our life and the subject's cross, then cross again in a moment of transcendence, starts to look vulnerable. It's the

resulting urge to make things repeatable, predictable and conforming that kicks away the stool of wildness and replaces it with something that may look the same but originates in our mind rather than in wild nature: something that lacks authenticity.

It was this way of working that kept me in business for years, making pictures that met expectations of how the natural world was (or should be) rather than, necessarily, how it was. Productivity trumped reality. On one level, there is nothing wrong with introducing perches, creating drinking pools or any one of dozens of other ruses wildlife photographers use to shorten the odds in their favour. But with a growing collective weariness with perfection (why else would we flick past photographs of a diving kingfisher?) I began to recognise that it is a quality of elusiveness and unpredictability that marks out the work that endures. It is Jim Brandenburg's spontaneous photograph of a wild wolf peeking round the side of a tree that has become iconic, not all the cover versions it has spawned.

Working with wolves in the Apennines, Italian photographer, Bruno D'Amicis recalls in his book, *Time*

for *Wolves*, "I tried to increase the frequency of my encounters, making sure that the wolf would show itself where and when I wanted it, but that did not work out. Thus, I changed my strategy ..[and] dedicate[d] much more time to my quest." Bruno ending up spending six years working on the project, reflecting that, "... compared to the hundreds of trips in the field, I only managed to meet wolves on a few, unforgettable occasions." Here then, we are talking about photographs being given rather than taken. Many of the pictures in Bruno's book have been recorded under less than perfect lighting conditions; sometimes parts of the animal are obscured, or the composition seems flawed . There are traits that, rather than diminishing the body of work, enhance it. This is the authenticity of imperfection - reflecting how nature actually is. We saw this quality too in Tom Mangelsen's *Spirit of the Rockies* about a family of wild mountain lions that took up residence above Jackson Hole, Wyoming in the winter of 1999 and, for me, most strikingly in Hannu Hautala's photograph of a wolverine in a foggy forest at dusk that appears in *Winter on the Finnish Taiga*. In this image shot on high ISO slide film the animal, though indistinct and small in the frame, is an electrifying presence, all the more compelling because we can



tell what it is and what it means without a detailed description. It shares some of the mystery - and excitement - we associate more with photographs of Bigfoot or Mokele Mbembe. Once again the sense of "encounter" is to the fore.

You could ask, with some justification, why it matters how you get your photographs if you, the photographer, are happy with the end result. I believe it matters because how we represent the natural world reflects our relationship with it. If we put our images into the public domain, by extension, it reflects how we would like others to think about it too.

I need to lay my cards on the table.

I value life, wildness and diversity more than money. I expect you feel the same too but in reality we are all part of a culture that is founded on an opposite premise, one in which violence against the natural world, against indigenous people and local culture, even against our atmosphere are, ultimately, legitimised in the name of Economic Growth. Of course it's easy to believe, as you ransack the storehouse of natural capital, that your life is getting better - just ask

the 500 million people lifted out of poverty in China by its industrial boom. But in out-running Mother Earth, we have been looking over our shoulder to gloat too much, not noticing the swamp we are heading into. Now it looks like She is getting ready to repay us for our impertinence.

You and I are artists and as such it is not in our gift to change the mindsets of those who continue, with almost universal collusion, to propel us along this path of hatred for life. But in our work at least, we can stage small acts of resistance by making images that reflect a different reality, far removed from the "real world" conjured by economists and their soulless consorts. This need be no more complicated than taking pictures that reflect transcendence, showing the natural world as it is, rather than a commodified, cajoled or entrapped meme of it. That's not to say that there isn't scope for interpretation; many of the pictures from Crossings show my interest in high energy subjects and environments; from raging seas and billowing clouds to birds in flight and the sun itself. Others have a more sinister feel to them, reflecting the prospects for the subjects in decades to come.

The mining and pollution that goes into making the very equipment I use to show "wild nature", not to mention the travel involved, is plainly at odds with these noble intentions. But there are worse things to be than an idealist and to want to leave a record of how wild nature looked, unmediated by man. There are worse weapons to wield than a camera, however futile it may ultimately be.

Great black backed gull passing clouds rolling down from the mountainous spine of Snæfellsnes, Iceland. Transient, enchanting and reassuringly unrepeatably - so time to move on towards the next crossing, wherever, whenever that might be.

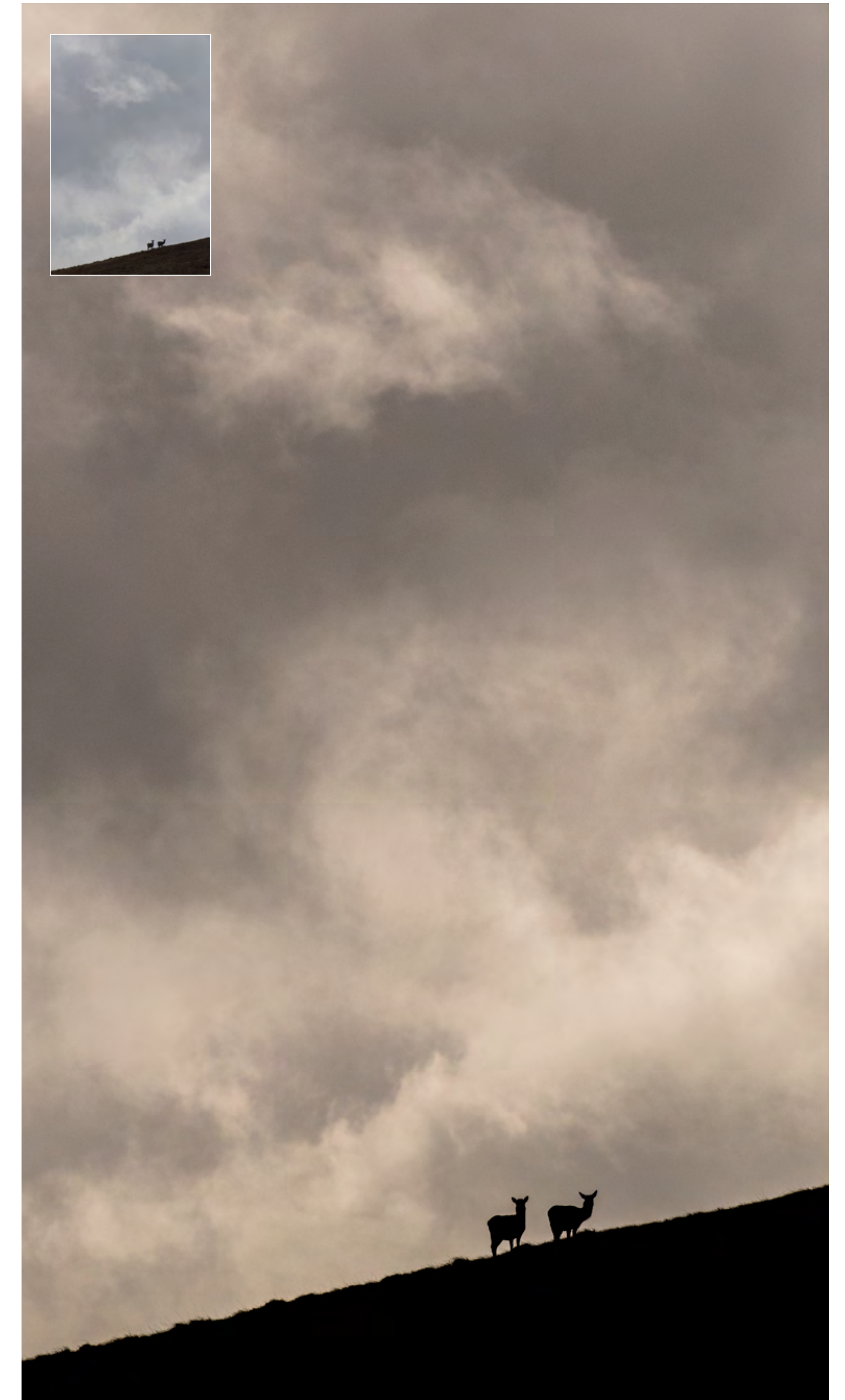
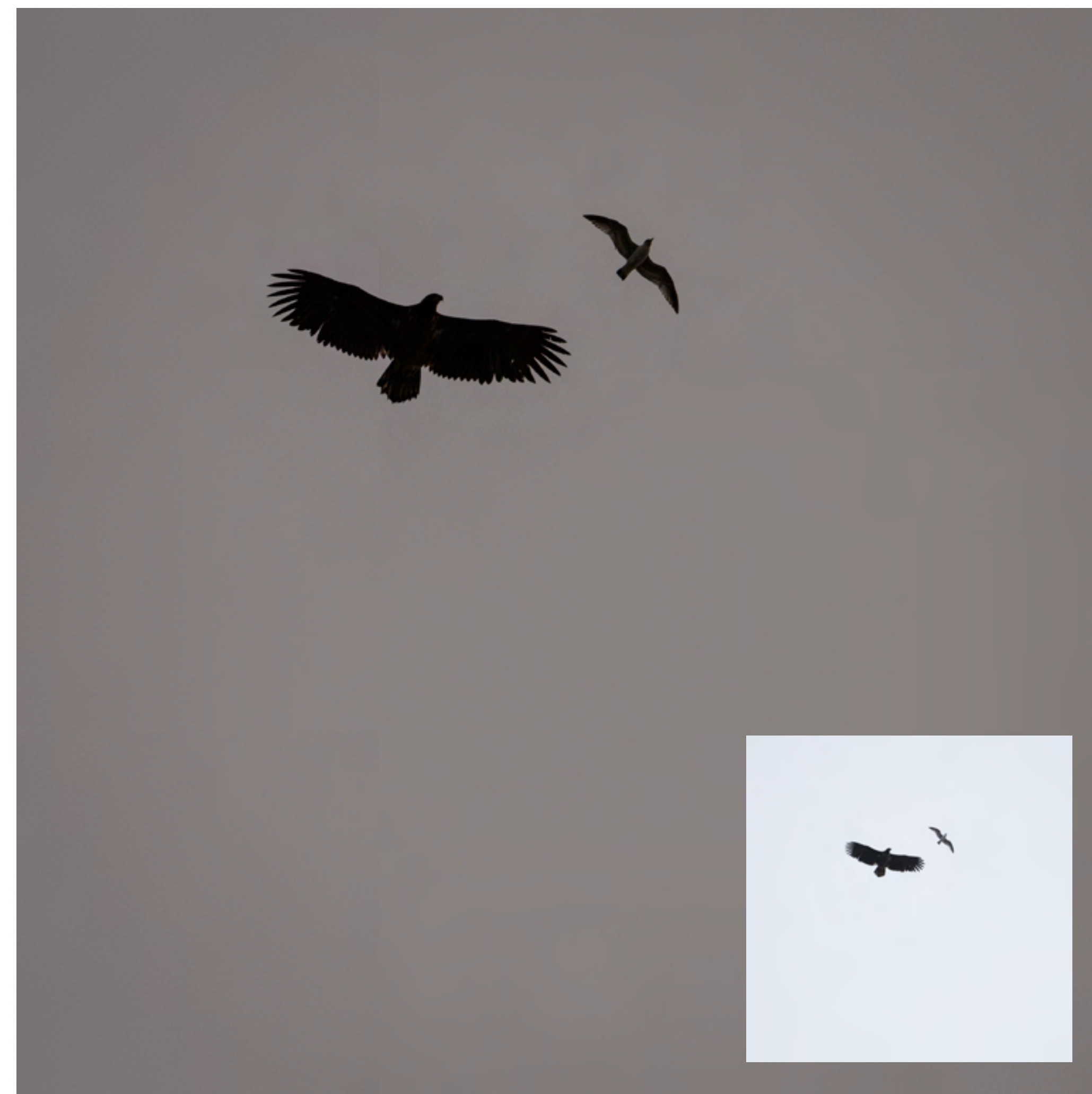


Skill - Processing for mood: 1

Leading on from the essay preceding this, you'll not be surprised to learn that I work with whatever light is available during an "encounter", whether it is considered "good" or "bad" for photography. It is what it is. But that's not to say that I won't process an image to re-enforce a mood or a feeling I want to communicate through the photo. Perhaps because we often work in bleak, northern places under sullen skies, that mood may not always be very up-beat, so I process accordingly.

I'm a great fan of shooting subjects against very bright skies. I know that if I process the file a particular way, I can render the clouds into a magnificent setting for the subject. I believe that Vincent Munier (see Inspiration on page 11) has employed a similar processing technique under these circumstances.

Try to shoot so that even the brightest parts of the sky aren't quite blown out - the subject will most likely be a silhouette. In Lightroom, drop the Exposure until you render the detail you want in the clouds then move the Temperature slider to warm the image. Simple!



Food - Orange and ricotta tart



One of our favourites, this zesty tart is ideal for guests who aren't fond of overly-sweet desserts.

Photography note

When I create a composition where I want to show some of the ingredients as well as the finished dish, it's a matter of giving priority to those that look best. So, I'm afraid that the ricotta cheese didn't get a look in here and the oranges landed the supporting roles instead. While borage doesn't feature in recipe at all, their blue is irresistible alongside the orange and were included to suggest that they could be used to decorate the tart.

The picture was shot using daylight through a [Lastolie Panelite diffuser](#) then carefully flagged used A1 sized [black foam boards](#) from Hobbycraft, to suppress the light at the edges of the frame.

A final tip: if you are using parchment or greaseproof paper in a picture, scrunch it up first then flatten it out before photographing it. The paper takes the light much better now that it's textured.



Ingredients (serves 6)

For the case

- 200 g plain flour
- 50 g icing sugar, plus extra to dust
- 100 g chilled unsalted butter, cubed
- Grated zest of one orange, plus three tablespoons of orange juice
- One egg yolk.

For the filling

- 350 g fresh ricotta cheese
- 155 g caster sugar
- One tablespoon of orange flower water or if you don't have this, grate the zest of another orange

- 2 eggs

For finishing

- 1/2 cup of good-quality orange marmalade
- 30 g pine nuts

How-to

Pre-heat the oven to 180° c/160° c fan/gas mark 4

1. Combine the icing sugar, flour, butter and the zest in a food processor.

2. Add in the orange juice and egg yolk and continue mixing until a smooth ball forms. Wrap this in baking paper and chill in the fridge for 30 minutes.

3. Grease an 11 cm x 35 cm loose-based tart pan. Roll out the pastry on a lightly floured board then use it to line the pan, trimming it to fit.

4. Chill this for 15 minutes.

5. Cover the pastry in the pan with a trimmed piece of baking paper then fill the pan with ceramic pastry beads or uncooked rice.

6. Blind-bake the pastry for 10 minutes, then remove the paper and weights, then bake for a further 5 minutes.

7. Allow to cool a little.

8. Combine the filling ingredients with remaining zest in a food processor.

9. Spread marmalade over the pastry, then add the filling.

10. Sprinkle with the pine nuts and bake for 20 - 30 minutes until the filling is starting to set and turn golden at the edges.

11. Cool for 10 minutes before removing from the pan.

Serve a slice dusted with icing sugar, a good dollop of creme fraiche, and perhaps a small glass of chilled dessert wine.

- Charlotte

Featured Retreat

Kitchen and Forest

A TWO STRAND RETREAT FOR FOODIES & PHOTOGRAPHERS

THE CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK, SCOTLAND, 7TH - 11TH DECEMBER 2018

FOOD AND
PHOTOGRAPHY
RETREATS

with the Benries

It's hard to believe, I know, but it seems that some people would rather make chocolates, bake or do patisserie work than take photographs. It's one of the reasons that a lot of guests we've guided over the years travel alone: the attraction of standing around in gathering darkness getting frozen is lost on friends and partners. So, that's why we have come up with our [pre-Christmas Retreat](#) catering for cooks and photographers, based at Ballintean Lodge in the Cairngorms National Park. Surrounded by pine woods that are home to crested tits, red squirrels and pine martens, the spacious Lodge is an ideal space for learning and relaxing in. We have sole occupancy of it during our stay. All the bedrooms are en-suite and there are comfortable public areas for teaching in.

The mountains and forests of the Cairngorms and Speyside provide photographers with the raw material for their creative work during the Retreat. Their time is divided between the field and studio, to take advantage of the best light but also to allow time to practice new-found production skills as well as assessment and discussion. The cooks will use the Lodge's kitchen and dining room as their creative and learning space.

During the Retreat, photographers will learn:

- How to process images to re-enforce a particular mood or feeling, including split-toning;
- How to create Colour Transects;
- Advanced composition techniques;
- How to shoot and assemble "Chocolate Bar" collages.

Foodies, in the meantime, will be comfortably ensconced in the kitchen:



- Baking macarons then mixing a variety of mouth-watering fillings;
- Creating hand rolled, cream ganache truffles;
- Learning how to temper, handle and mould chocolate;
- Doing seasonal baking, including Charlotte's special sweet and savoury Christmas morning cruffins and Christmas mince pie pops.

The last day to book this Retreat will be 1st November.



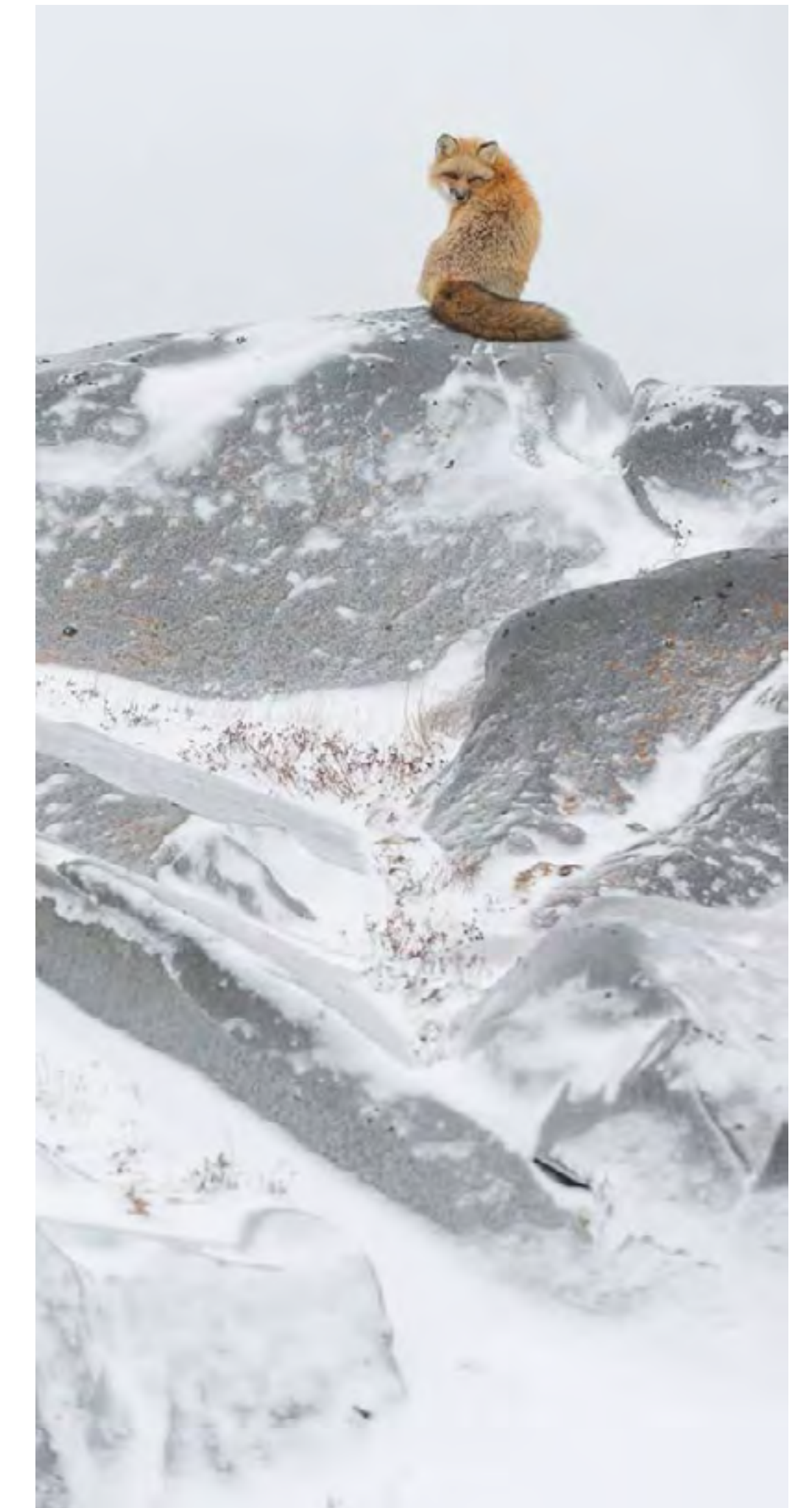
Inspiration - Vincent Munier

I first met Vincent in 2000 at the Natural History Museum in London where the 24 year old Frenchman had just won his first **Eric Hosking Award** in the Wildlife Photographer of the Year Competition. I was to interview him for a piece about his work for one of the UK photo magazines. Now, at that stage, Vincent wasn't known, even within France. He rather ruefully reflected that there, people were far more interested in hunting than wildlife, let alone wildlife photography.

How things have changed. Today Vincent is a rock star in the field of nature photography, making TV appearances in France in which he describes, with quiet passion and charm, his adventures in some of the world's most far-flung corners and the weeks he spends living in the field with the animals he photographs. His own publishing house, Kobalaan, produces exquisite books of his work, to the highest production standards, which don't linger long in the warehouse, despite their high price. He has successfully grown from "wildlife photographer" to artist, publisher and media personality, with integrity intact.



Vincent is perhaps best-known for his work in the world's cold regions, ranging from Ellesmere Island's white wolves, musk ox in Norway, cranes and whooper swans in Hokkaido and, most recently, snow leopards in Mongolia. While many people, before and since, have used the simplifying effects of snow, Vincent has done it with a singular sense of composition in which the landscape becomes a stage set for the subject. He puts



in the days and weeks living with the subject to show aspects of their lives unseen by casual observers.

Vincent's most powerful work, perhaps, is found in his book [Au Fil des Songes](#). The images are about mood and attachment to place and are a world away from "trophy" nature photography. In it, he makes grey the new red... Visit his website [here](#).

Bonus footage - packing apples for winter



Food and still life photography is a very deliberate process that can easily cross from considered to crass. It's wonderful to be able to position every element of the composition exactly as you want it, and to light the set just so, but when everything is too perfect, it just looks phony. This happens, for example, when every element of the shot is contained within the frame. It's very common then, as I have done here, to cut off parts of the supporting characters to help frame and focus attention on the "star", in this case the apple in the yellow tissue paper. There are several other ways you can do this, including using cutlery to "point the way" and, here, a contrasting colour to direct the viewer.

MENU is now published bimonthly. Next issue, No. 5 is out on 16th November 2018.

All content is copyright of Niall and Charlotte Benvie, 2018, 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.