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EXPERTS

Landscapes

The Amateur Photographer Masterclass with **Tom Mackie**

Landscape photographer **Tom Mackie** whisks five readers off to Hertfordshire's Ashridge Forest and explains how to capture creative woodland images. **Oliver Atwell** joins them

THERE'S no better time to photograph woodlands than in the spring and summer. The leaf shoots are a vibrant green and the floors are covered in abundant foliage and wildflowers. One such woodland is Ashridge Forest in Hertfordshire, and that's where photographer Tom Mackie took four AP readers who were eager to capture the lush seasonal colours.

'There are various subjects you can tackle in a forest or wood,' says Tom. 'In this kind of setting you'll find opportunities to explore textures, colours and macro shots.'

Unlike some other forest settings, Ashridge is notable for the care that has

gone into its preservation. 'Ashridge is a particularly good location,' says Tom. 'You'll find a lot of footpaths that can add an interesting element to your images. There are also a lot of nice features, such as wildflowers and numerous beech trees. Something else you'll find here is bluebells. You'll only find these in the spring, but the techniques that we'll look at today can be applied all year round.'

Tom explains to the readers that the forest environment can often be overwhelming in its detail.

'We're going to learn how best to utilise

a variety of techniques and equipment,' says Tom. 'Today we'll look at such things as how we can create dynamic compositions using different types of lenses, controlling exposure, determining the right type of light and focusing on the details.'

Rather than hoping for a day of bright sunshine, Tom wanted conditions that would provide something a little softer.

'You should shoot forest scenes in a fairly dull light,' says Tom. 'The best conditions are bright but overcast skies, where you have a canopy of cloud cover over your environment. The clouds act as a giant softbox that diffuses the light. In bright sunshine you have too much contrast, which carries the risk of losing a lot of the details and colours.'

And on that note, Tom and the readers venture into the deep forest with their cameras and tripods at the ready.



Your AP Master... Tom Mackie



A former contributor to AP's *Photo insight* series, Tom Mackie is one of the world's leading photographers. He has spent many years as an architectural, industrial and landscape photographer, and has a penchant for panoramic photography. Tom has published several books and written numerous articles for photography magazines. He also lectures on photography and regularly holds workshops in the UK and abroad.
www.tommackie.com

The AP readers... Peter Collins



Peter uses a Samsung NX10 with 30mm pancake and 18-50mm lenses. 'I liked the experimental ideas such as Vaseline on the front of the lens,' says Peter.

David Harris



David enjoys shooting street photography and landscapes. He uses a Nikon D90 with an 18-105mm lens. 'Tom didn't hold anything back and was very generous with his knowledge,' says David.

Polly Jedrzejak



Polly uses a Nikon D90 with 18-105mm, 50mm, 55-200mm and 105mm macro lenses plus a Lensbaby. 'The tips Tom gave us about live view were great,' says Polly.

Norman Norris



Norman's interests include landscapes and portraiture. He uses a Canon EOS 450D with 18-55mm, 50mm, 70-300mm and 500mm lenses. 'It was excellent learning what to look for in the forest environment,' says Norman.

Andrew Scoggins



Andrew uses a Canon EOS 5D Mark I with 24-105mm, a 100-400mm telephoto and 100mm macro lenses 'I thought the day was fantastic,' says Andrew. Tom was a really great tutor who paid attention to all our questions.'

The best settings

TOM ADVISES that the photographers take control over their exposure rather than relying on the camera's automatic settings. 'I generally use aperture priority when shooting in the forest,' says Tom. 'That's because a lot of the time my main concern is how much depth of field I need. In these kinds of scenes you shouldn't be too concerned with your shutter speed unless you're faced with a heavy breeze that is creating excessive motion in the foliage.' To avoid capturing subject movement, Tom explained that the participants could either wait for the breeze to subside or increase their ISO. 'If you set your ISO to 400, for example, you get a faster shutter speed,' he says. 'With ISO 400 you shouldn't see a great deal of visual

noise, especially in a forest scene where that kind of grain will get lost among the detail of the trees and foliage anyway. If you can get away with it, though, always work with the lowest possible ISO setting.'

The way you've composed your shot will often have an impact on your choice of aperture, Tom adds. 'You'll need to ask yourself how much of the environment you intend to show in your image,' he says. 'Do you want a smaller aperture to show off the foreground and background, or do you want to keep your depth of field shallow to emphasise your subject?' In terms of focusing, Tom uses the camera's autofocus. Then, when the lens has fixed onto the subject, he switches to manual and tweaks the focus if he needs to. According to Tom, a setting that is often neglected by photographers is the white balance. 'You must always

remember to take your camera off auto white balance,' he says. 'Set it to cloudy white balance because those are the kinds of conditions that you're going to be working with, assuming you have just the right overcast light. If you rely on auto white balance, you're likely to end up with a lot of strange colour casts in your image.'

Finally, Tom suggests that the participants shoot in raw and explains why this is beneficial. 'When you shoot in JPEG format, what you see on the back of the camera is what you'll be working with on your computer at home,' he says. 'JPEGs essentially compress the image, which in terms of memory is a great thing, but it also means that the quality will suffer. However, if you shoot raw files you have a lot more control over your images. Raw is basically the digital equivalent of a negative.'



Tom demonstrated that a simple everyday bin bag can be used as an effective windbreak to reduce movement in small subjects

Working with live view

LIVE view can be a great advantage to the photographer and on the day Tom strongly recommended the participants give it a go if their cameras had this facility. 'When camera manufacturers first released live view, I soon came to realise that it was an incredibly beneficial feature,' he explains. 'By viewing your image on the screen in real time, you can compose your shot with ease. I always use it to check my focus point. I'll switch on live view and zoom right in on my subject. Then I can see what's in focus and what needs adjusting. Also, if you're trying to get a shot that's at a particularly high or low angle, then you may have trouble putting your eye to the viewfinder. Live view can save you a lot of time and frustration.'



Filters and reflectors



PETER COLLINS

IT GOES without saying that filters are a fundamental part of the landscape photographer's kit bag. One filter Tom wouldn't be without when photographing in a woodland setting is a polariser. 'I am particularly fond of using a polariser when shooting forests,' he says. 'It helps to take the glare off the leaves and foliage. It also brings out the rich colours of the environment so the greens stand out really nicely.'

According to Tom, a reflector is one piece of kit that the photographer should always have tucked away in their bag. 'Reflectors are particularly good when shooting with a macro lens,' he says. 'A gold reflector is nice to use because it introduces a bit more warmth into your subject. You can also use



OLIVER ARMIT

translucent reflectors to diffuse the light if you find it's too strong on your subject. You can use a white reflector to reflect light back into your subject and fill in any shadows. Using silver will give you a stronger reflection of light than the gold, but you may find that silver is a little too cold for some subjects.'

'A gold reflector is nice to use because it introduces warmth into your subject'



Lens choice

WALKING around any forest can present the photographer with countless patterns, lines and compositional elements. Knowing which lens will capture them best is the key to turning an otherwise

drab shot into something far more interesting.

'The lens a lot of people tend to go for is a wideangle optic,' says Tom. 'It allows you to come in close to the detail right at your feet and sweep



Ashridge Estate Visitor Centre

Location

Ashridge Estate Visitor Centre, Moneybury Hill, Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire HP4 1LX. Tel: 01442 851 227. Website: www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-ashridge. Email: ashridge@nationaltrust.org.uk. Ashridge Forest contains 2,000 acres of atmospheric mature forest with lots of marked trails to explore. There's a wide variety of elements and wildlife, such as beech trees, fungi, fallow deer and birds like the nuthatch. The site was notified in 1987 under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and lies on the Buckinghamshire/Hertfordshire border. If you're travelling by road, the estate can be found three miles north of the A41 between Tring and Berkhamsted, off the B4506 from Northchurch (to Ringshall and Dagnall) or off the A489 from Dunstable. If travelling by train, Tring railway station is just over a mile away.

Admission charges

The estate is open all year round and admission is free.

through into the backdrop. Essentially, you're able to show off the expansiveness of the environment's foreground and background.'

Tom suggests that rather than sticking with a wideangle lens, it may be beneficial to experience the virtues of a telephoto optic. 'Where the wideangle takes in a lot of the environment, the telephoto allows you to eliminate a lot of distracting elements,' he says. 'This means you can focus on the finer details and bring them forward. For example, if you see an interesting arrangement of trees, you can compress and centralise them instead of allowing them to clutter your image. A telephoto lens enables you to fine-tune the composition down to the bare essentials.'

Tom also reminds the participants to be open to the idea of using a variety of viewpoints: 'When you are walking around the forest, don't stare straight ahead all the time. Take an occasional look at the canopy of leaves above your head. There are some excellent arrangements of leaves, branches and sky to enjoy and photograph. They can make for some really interesting, almost abstract images. Using a wideangle lens here will cause the canopy and trees to tower over you because you'll be getting a lot more coverage of the area. Using a telephoto lens means you can crop out the trees and instead focus on the contrast between the leaves and sky in the centre of the frame.'

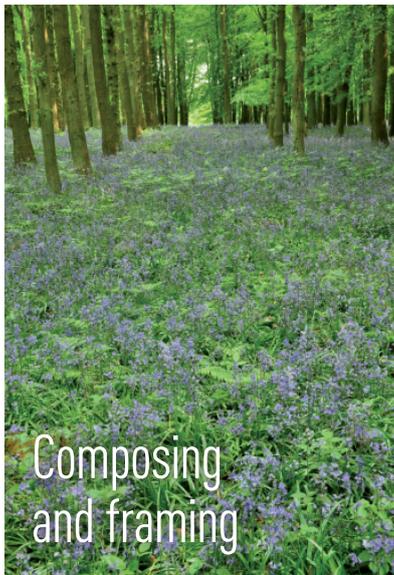
Getting in close

THERE are plenty of fascinating textures and details within a forest setting, but many will be too small to capture using a wideangle or telephoto lens. 'When you're exploring the forest, you'll find lots of textures such as the bark on a tree, strange growths or a beautiful flower,' says Tom. 'This is where a macro lens comes into its own. You can use it to pick out all the intricate elements of the environment and emphasise the beautiful details.'

Tom explains the importance of choosing an appropriate aperture when using a macro lens based on what you are trying to show in your image. 'Generally, when shooting up close, you'd use quite a shallow depth of field to keep your background blurred and emphasise your subject,' he says. 'However, there are times when your subject is so close to the background that the image is more about the contrast of textures and colours. That's a more abstract approach.'



POLLY JOHNSON/AM



POLLY JOHNSON/AM

THROUGHOUT the day, Tom talked to the participants about the myriad compositional possibilities of shooting in a woodland setting. First, he explained the importance of choosing a subject and sticking with it.

'When you're shooting, it can be tempting to show more of the trees than the rich details of the ground,' says Tom. 'That means you're neglecting a whole area of the forest. You have to be clear about what your subject is going to be. If you want to show some ground-level foliage, then it's no good if it is only taking up one-third of the frame and you appear to be emphasising the trees. If you angle your camera down just a fraction, it can shift the perspective and give you a much clearer view of the subject. Make sure you pay attention to merging elements, such as trees. Position yourself in such a way as to balance them in the frame and separate them.'

'A common problem when composing in the forest is a tree cutting into the edge

of the frame,' adds Tom. 'When you have a huge dark chunk on the side of your photograph it can throw an image right out of balance. It's best to have the whole tree or no tree at all. It's such an easy detail to miss through the viewfinder, so make sure you don't do it.'

Next, Tom explained how footpaths could be used to create impact in an image.

'A feature that you are likely to come across in forest scenes is footpaths, and compositionally these can make an interesting detail,' he says. 'There are a few ways that you can treat footpaths within your image,' says Tom. 'The most obvious is to include one going straight into the frame from the bottom. This can draw the eye in and means you have a lot of vertical trees surrounding the path. However, it also means that the image is divided in half, which can sometimes be a little confusing to the eye. Perhaps a more interesting idea is to have a footpath coming in from an angle (see images right and above right). It makes a big difference to the composition. Just by taking a few steps to the left or right, so the path enters from the corner, can add a dynamic element to your composition.'

Another compositional device Tom favours is natural frames. 'An interesting effect can be achieved by using the trees and branches as a natural framing device,' he explains. 'In the image bottom right, we can see a huge branch acting as an arch. Using a telephoto lens has made the tree, which is acting as our frame, appear much larger than it actually is. If we were to use a wideangle lens then everything would look a lot smaller, particularly in the background.'

'In this shot we've also decided to include two people,' he continues. 'This creates a central point of interest. The viewer's eye looks at the arch, shifts to the pattern of the trees, then lands on the couple in the distance. It's a technique that prevents your eye wandering out of the frame. The people act as a visual anchor.'



Using footpaths...1

NORRAN MORRIS



Using footpaths...2

ANDREW SCROGGS



Natural frames

DAVE HARRIS



Would you like to take part?

EVERY month we invite three to five AP readers to join one of our experts on an assignment over the course of a day. The experts are Tom Mackie (landscapes), Paul Hobson (wildlife) and Cathal McNaughton (street photography). Tom's next workshops will take place in August and November, while Cathal will be holding sessions in June and September, and Paul in July and October.

If you would like to take part, visit www.amateurphotographer.co.uk/masterclass for details of how to apply. Please remember to state which *Masterclass* you would like to attend and make sure you include your name, address, email address, daytime telephone number and two or three examples of your work in your application. Each participant will be able to use his or her own camera, lenses and other equipment.



Getting creative

ONCE the participants had explored all the traditional compositional approaches, Tom encouraged them to be a little more adventurous. 'The tilt-and-shift lens is useful if you are looking for a creative approach,' says Tom. 'Sometimes you'll compose your shot and get in a lot of the foreground, but find that you're cutting off half the trees. However, if you shift the front of your tilt-and-shift lens upwards (making sure to readjust your exposure) you'll

have all the trees included and they will be vertical. It also means that you can keep the details in the foreground nice and sharp.'

Another lens the readers experimented with was the Lensbaby. 'A lens like this opens up all sorts of possibilities,' says Tom. 'A particular part of your scene can be sharp while everything else around it is out of focus, even if all the elements are the same distance from the camera (see above). You essentially use it to centralise your

point of focus, much in the same way that you use a tilt-and-shift lens.

'When you start to experiment with things, such as zooming the lens in and out while using a slow shutter speed, you'll get a lot of impressionistic images of the environment with just a hint of the details,' he adds. 'One technique I like is to place a clear filter on the front of the lens and smear it with Vaseline. That can create some great results, with some of them almost looking like paintings.'



Piecing it all together

AS THE day draws to a close, Tom has one final technique to share with the participants. 'When shooting forests, a good technique is to experiment with pan stitches,' he says. 'Pan stitches give you a panoramic view of a selected area (see above). It basically involves you shooting a series of images and then stitching them together to form a whole. When capturing your images you have the option of

either using a tripod or shooting handheld. Shooting handheld will depend on how quick and steady you are. I wouldn't recommend doing this because you have to ensure that you are level at all times so the images match up. With this in mind it's better to use a tripod.' To ensure the exposure was consistent throughout all their shots, Tom recommends that the photographers switch their camera settings to

manual. 'The same applies to the focus,' he adds. 'If you leave it on auto there will be a lot of points that your lens will try to latch onto while you're panning round. When I shoot each image I try to ensure that there's one-third of an overlap. Once you have all your images, you can load them into Photoshop and use Photo Merge (File>Automate>Photomerge) to generate your panorama.'

For more information see Tom's previous *Masterclass* on creating panoramic images from the landscape (AP 13 November 2010) or visit the *Masterclass* page on the AP website