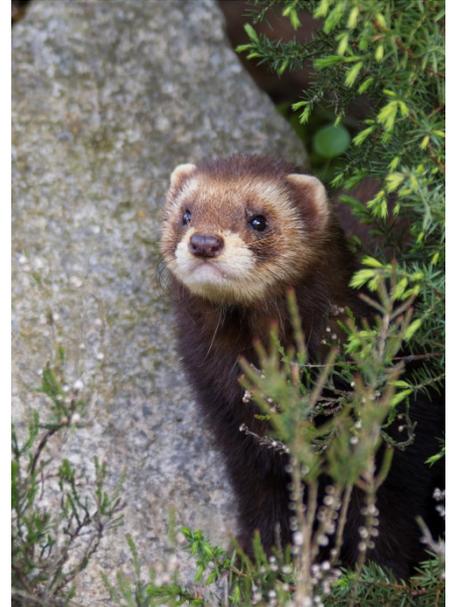




How I go about selecting my “keeper” photos

I have been asked many times how I go about sorting my photos. This is not a new question and as some of you will know prompted me to put together one of my camera club talks, “My Digital Workflow”. In this talk I go through the processes I adopt both in the field and at home for a) preserving my photos and b) sorting and cataloguing them. This is very much a technical approach and revolves, in my case, around the use of a superb package from Adobe called LightRoom™. In my opinion there are few better solutions other perhaps than PhotoMechanic™ from Camera Bits (www.camerabits.com). While lacking the depth of LightRoom™, PhotoMechanic™ is considerably faster at rendering previews and thus permitting you to view and select your photos. PhotoMechanic™ doesn't however have the raw editing tools of LightRoom™. I use PhotoMechanic™ for sorting, selecting and grading large numbers of photos and LightRoom™ for finally honing and cataloguing this selection and any RAW editing. As photographers we all need to develop our own approach to using the sets of tools we have so that we can efficiently and effectively sort and manage our photos. This whole process can become very technical and very time consuming and we often put it off. For me if this process becomes a burden and starts to stifle my creativity then it is not worthwhile and I need to abandon it or look for a different approach. We must never however abandon the process of sorting our photos, this is as important as shooting them in the first place if that is we want to easily look back, find and enjoy them in the future. Instead we must actively seek a process that makes it slicker and more manageable. I could write a whole series of articles exploring options for this but whilst that might be helpful and I will probably do this in the future I fear that it might itself become a technical discussion and might not meet your individual needs. I and others can explain our own workflow but you need to develop one that works for you building it based on the best advice and the approaches adopted by those who you talk to and trust.



When recently asked this question whilst running a safari in Tanzania I launched into just such an explanation of the software tools I use but as I did so it occurred to me that there is another side to this namely how do we *select* our best photos and how do we continually hone our *craft* to ensure that we improve. Whilst sitting at Heathrow waiting for my flight I had listened to a podcast by a professional photographer I regularly follow – Martin Bailey. The podcast entitled “The Evolution of the Photographer” discussed how we evolve and continually strive to improve as a photographer and how we learn lessons along the way. Martin was answering a question he had recently been posed on his forum namely



“how we push through the mental barriers and doubt as we try to create beautiful photographs after making some earlier spectacular work”.

You can find a link to Martins Podcast here - <http://www.martinbaileyphotography.com/2014/09/09/the-evolution-of-the-photographer-podcast-438/>. On my return from Tanzania I have found myself reflecting on both Martin's comments and the questions I was asked regarding how I sort and select my photos.

One problem for me is that I, as do I suspect all of us, always have an emotional attachment to my photos. I took them and I so enjoyed the moment, especially on a trip like this recent one, that I find it very hard to reject and

delete for ever photos that perhaps are not that special. They are my creation after all. Martin sums this up when he says

“Sometimes the emotion of the shoot or the memory of all the effort or even money that we spent to enable ourselves to make those images is so strong that it makes us love the work even more than the actual merit that the images themselves hold, but if we truly created beautiful art, then time will not diminish our appreciation of them, and months and years into the future, we’ll still be able to look at these images and they’ll bring a smile to our face, or remind us of the cold wind in our face, or burning sand under our feet”.



Thinking back on this recent trip and many of my photographic adventures in the past I can completely understand this. I can distinctly remember a series of shots I took of a wild otter back in the early 70’s. I had sat in a cold makeshift hide on a dark and wet river bank near a known otter holt for more than 20 hours over 7 days and eventually in the dim evening light on the last day saw an otter swimming toward me down the river and climbing the bank into its holt under an old oak tree. It was only in view for a few minutes and I picked up my camera and fired off a few shots. This was the days of film and I only had 36 photos at most on a roll, the light was very poor and my “craft” wasn’t as fully developed in those days. The memory of the event was clear and exhilarating but the photos mediocre at best. I wanted to shout out and punch the air but resisted the challenge hoping that the otter would return again for another fleeting view. It didn’t, at least not before I had to trudge home in the dark stopping only to eagerly post my film off for developing – no *chimping* on the back of the camera in those days. A few days later when the transparencies arrived through the post I rushed to open them and view them on my light table. They were poor but the exhilaration, still strong in my memory from my evening’s sightings and thus I couldn’t bear to throw any away. I did, after considerable mental effort, manage to reduce them to 9 of the better ones but kept the rejected ones in a slide box for another 17 years! I filed the 9 “keepers” in my slide collection drawers, numbering and meticulously cataloguing them in a hard backed foolscap book I kept for this purpose labelling them “good considering”.

7 years later when looking back at these photos I realised that I had never shown them to anyone because they were actually not even “good considering”. Furthermore I realised that I would probably never ever show them to anyone. Was the memory of the moment still strong in my mind, yes, was this supported buy these photos, no. Could I tell someone of that evening and the magic I felt, yes, would I ever show them my photos, no. Why thus was I keeping them? Initially I told myself that if I threw them away I would have a gap in the slide box which I would never again use so given they were so unique perhaps I ought to keep them but of course that was only an excuse. When many years later still I met and married my wife and most trusted critic Mary she helped me to face the difficult decision, would I ever use these pictures and would my craft and art improve any more by keeping them. The answer of course was no and thus I consigned these, the 15 additional rejected slides, plus many others in the “good considering” category to the dustbin. Have I ever taken any more photos of wild otters, no, have I ever had such great experiences watching wild otters, no, but to the question “has my art (and to me photography is an art form) suffered because I didn’t keep them” and “do I regret disposing of them” the answer also has to be a definitive **NO**. My experiences on that night are still etched in my memory but these wouldn’t have been enhanced any further if I had kept the slides. To a totally different question “has my craft improved since those days” the answer has however to be a resounding YES. The memory of these events is one thing and the art I create is something very different.



In these days where we post pictures of everything on social networks the drive to keep photos as a way to remember things is very great but do we ever look back at these collections of photos from many years ago – the

answer is usually no. I do realise of course that there is great merit in looking back at important events in our history and again I have Mary to thank here as she has been a meticulous cataloguer of family events when, still in the film era, she selected and stuck photos in albums we still look at today. I do believe however that if she hadn't been as critical as she was and only kept the really important photos and only 1 not 10 of each, we would never have looked back at them and probably never enjoyed them as much. I wonder in many years' time will we still treasure and look back at our Flickr albums? My eldest son got married in July and we now have an online album of 100's of photos. We can hardly face sorting them to create a manageable collection to reflect this happy day. I do hope that Rachael and Philip can distil enough from the album to ensure that they look back often and reflect on their wedding in years to come.

How do I select my photo then? Well for me there are two types of selection. 1) the important events in my life and that of my family and 2) the photos I create which are developments of my art and my journey as a wildlife photographer. I approach my selection in two very different ways. For the former I rely on Mary to help me select those photos that sum up a moment and bring back an important memory like her father's 90th birthday party recently - even if they are not "technically perfect". With her help I don't keep everything only those which tell the important aspects of the story and the event. For the later I apply a very different logic and only keep those photos that are "special" and not just "good considering", those which advance my art. That's not to say I only keep pictures that are perfect - far from it - but I do revisit my collection periodically and delete those where I know my craft has advanced. This is of course much easier in digital and using tools such as LightRoom™ but is, I find, a very rewarding exercise and the 'inner me' gets a real lift when I look back and realise how much I have progressed. When I started I was keen to amass as large a collection of photos as I could in a strange way I felt that was my "duty to my art". Now I am more content to have a collection that reflects my journey as a wildlife photographer and of which I am proud not just because of the number of photos but because of the progress I have made.

I have had the great fortune to have had some really great teachers, of both photography and natural history, and have learnt so very much with their help. I also like to think however that I have become the person I have because I have asked questions some of which are - which pictures should I keep. Everything we do in life contributes to who we are at this moment in time, one of the reasons I don't want to be 21 again! All our experiences, and the same goes for photography, are part of a journey. We can't help but be effected by all that we do and all our experiences but to me there are two ways I use my photography to help me appreciate these.

Firstly I rely on my wife to help me collect and catalogue memorable moments and second where I strive to take my art forward and develop better and better pictures revisiting my old work every so often to a) remind me that I have progressed and b) act as a signpost to where I might go next. It is true that great locations and great opportunities take us to a higher place as do the photos we take on occasions such as my recent safari to Tanzania. However to me it's equally important to use the lessons I have learnt to ensure that, if ever I get the chance to sit back on that cold wet river bank watching for otters, I am capable of better than "good considering". This way my photography will continue to improve and I will continue to have those wow moments when I look back at my shots and can measure my own progress.



More reflections and musings of a wildlife photographer.

If you have found this interesting please visit <http://www.naturesphotos.co.uk/pages/musings-of-a-wildlife-photographer.php> for more of my thoughts

Bob Brind-Surch