

## My ARPS Experience

Like many of us I am a member of a camera club, in my case Cheltenham, which is a large and active club with members interested in many genres of photography. Over the years I have tried many of these genres and achieved my LRPS in 2021 with a variety of images including landscape, travel and nature, my main areas of interest.

But when I started to analyse which areas of photography excited me the most, I always returned to nature, and so it was, with the encouragement and advice from some of my fellow club-members that I decided to try for my ARPS in the Nature category.

This brought a number of challenges, not least to understand what the assessors are looking for, and then how to put together a panel of 15 images that met the criteria. Looking at panels that have already succeeded offers a good pointer because there is not a lot of guidance written down. Sharing pictures with other club members is also helpful as often what you might consider good, may have defects which others pick up on, and which you may have missed.

I am extremely fortunate to live in the countryside, right next to a river and adjacent to farmland and a wooded area. My wife loves gardening and the flowers, shrubs, trees and ponds attract a wide variety of wildlife which changes during the year in each of the habitat areas.

It is very tempting to travel around photographing rarer species, but when you really look very close to home, through the changing seasons, you start to realise that often, some of the more common species that we take for granted are not only beautiful, but very accessible. If a photograph fails to make the grade for whatever reason, it is easier to retake and go through the learning curve if the subject is close by.

Over a period of two years I slowly built a portfolio of images that I hoped might make the grade. In the course of doing this I experimented with and implemented focus stacking, often with a tripod but occasionally hand-held depending on the subject.

The big advantage of this technique is that it allows multiple images with a shallow depth of field to be stacked together to produce a sharp image of the subject, while rendering the background out of focus. The disadvantage being a sometimes high failure rate, and the processing required to stack them all together. Fortunately many cameras now have a high shutter rate and some have focus stacking built-in.

This technique was particularly useful for the fungi, seed-heads and a few of the insects in my panel where the background was difficult to handle. With static subjects such as fungi, experimentation with reflectors or diffusers and perhaps a panel light can pay dividends.

Having had valuable input from an ARPS friend at the camera club, I applied for an advisory day to see where I was. It is possible to apply for a 1:1 mentor who can be valuable as well, but I felt the advisory day may gain input from a number of judges and might give a cross-section of comments. This indeed proved to be the case with each judge picking up on different aspects of the 15 digital images submitted and a number of spare images as a fall-back. All comments I thought were fixable, especially with some positives with the reserve images.

At this stage the layout of the panel is also important and I had spent a lot of time laying out laser-print pictures to get a feeling about light and dark, subject matter, and how the images worked together. The assessors also had useful comments about the layout as well which led to some changes.

And then we come to the statement of intent, which quite clearly was not good enough. The statement needs to be succinct and clear about the aims and objectives of the panel, and a good number of re-writes followed before it was hopefully good enough.

I applied for a print assessment which was actually only just a few weeks away, and of course quite different from the lower resolution digital images on the advisory day.

With prints, the panel layout is very important as the body of work is seen as one, with the assessors then looking at each individual image. What I had completely underestimated was just how hard it was to get accurate commercial prints that matched what I was seeing on my monitor. Prints invariably come back darker than expected (screens are backlit and prints are not), and the choice of papers can be bewildering.

Having sent pictures to a few labs I selected what I thought was a suitable paper and sent the rest of the pictures to be printed. They all came back not as I was expecting! By this time I was running out of time and phoned a few of the labs, all of which offered different advice which was not helpful. In the event I selected one who sent a good sample, and all the pictures came back correct, even if the paper finish was not ideal.

In the meantime I purchased pre-cut mounts and backing boards from a local specialist supplier, aiming for a mount colour that complemented the pictures. The end result was a set of images I was more or less happy with.

I attended the assessment day in person and was absolutely delighted to learn that I had been successful, albeit it with a comment from the judges about the paper being a disappointing choice! I would most definitely buy my own printer if doing it again.

Was it a stressful experience? - somewhat! Was it a valuable experience? - most definitely, as was the LRPS. The process is challenging, makes you think more about what you are doing and how you are doing it. It makes you more critical of your work and I hope will act as a basis of improving further in the future. I would definitely recommend anyone to try for an award.

Mark Wardle ARPS

## Panel Layout



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## Species List

- 01 - Magpie Inkcap - *Coprinosopsis picacea*.
- 02 - Purple Jellydisc fungus - *Ascocoryne sarcoides*
- 03 - Shaggy Inkcap - *Coprinus comatus*
- 04 - Common Darter Dragonfly - *Sympetrum striolatum*
- 05 - Cow Parsley seedhead - *Anthriscus sylvestris*
- 06 - Snake's-head fritillary - *Fritillaria meleagris*
- 07 - Four-spotted Chaser - *Libellula quadrimaculata*
- 08 - Goat's-beard seedhead - *Tragopogon pratensis*
- 09 - Eurasian Blue Tit - *Cyanistes caeruleus*
- 10 - Common Blue Damselfly - *Enallagma cyathigerum*
- 11 - Comma Butterfly - *Polygonia c-album*
- 12 - Marbled White Butterfly - *Melanargia galathea*
- 13 - Peacock Butterfly - *Aglais io*
- 14 - 7-spot ladybird - *Coccinella septempunctata*
- 15 - Kingfisher - *Alcedo atthis*

## Statement of Intent

Our garden is adjacent to a river and some woodland, and has been developed to make it attractive to a variety of wildlife and wild flowers, with ponds and trees providing habitat for many birds, insects and wild flowers.

My portfolio aims to show some of the variety of flora and fauna which can often be enjoyed close to home without the need to travel any great distance to do so.

My objective was to include largely common species, and some that can be found around woodlands and water close by using a variety of photographic techniques to reveal their beauty which is sometimes overlooked,

Many of these species can easily be attracted to gardens, and it is my hope that this panel might inspire others to garden for nature and derive as much pleasure as it does to me.

140 Words

Images - Presented mounted as A4 as per panel layout





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