



Wildlife Photography Tips

Hummingbird Hawk-moths migrate each year from Southern Europe in variable numbers. This year was a good one and quite a few of us spotted this stunning day-flying moth in our gardens. Gary Smith's image of a Hummingbird Hawk-moth feeding on Sweet Pea was the outstanding winner of this year's Plumpton and East Chiltington Wildlife Group's wildlife photography competition.



Looking at the range of entries, insects were a popular subject, with some striking butterflies, moths and damselflies. In the hope of inspiring a few more of you to take and share photos of our local wildlife I thought I'd gather together a few tips. It's often said that "the best camera is the one that's with you," and these days that is likely to be a smartphone. I once captured a sparrowhawk on the lawn with its pigeon prey using my phone through the kitchen window - I'd have missed the moment if I'd gone to get my 'better' camera. While phones are great for impromptu captures, it's worth doing a bit of research about the wildlife you might see in your garden or out and about on a walk, and thinking about how, when and where you might be able to take a striking image. When are creatures most active? Are there any behaviours you can learn about beforehand? I know that if I walk up to Blackcap on a warm sunny day I'm going to see plenty of butterflies. But it's not going to be easy to get a good photo as they flit about, seldom settling anywhere for long. Over the years, I've noticed that Common Blues, Marbled Whites and other butterflies roost on the west-facing banks beside the path. On a clear, calm, evening you can get close enough for a phone shot. Tap the screen where you want the focus and the detail to be clearest – on the butterfly, not the bush behind.

When we see an interesting wildlife subject it's easy to 'point and shoot'. But if the subject, and time, allows, think a bit about the composition of your photo. Turning on the 'grid' setting on your phone camera will help you place the subject on one of the 4 points where these lines intersect. This produces a more pleasing image than when the subject is in the middle of the screen. Look at what is in the foreground or background. Arched branches or plant stems can add an attractive natural 'frame' to images. Getting down to ground level can produce images with interesting foreground. Ideally, we want our wildlife subjects to stand out from the background. I've moved the bird feeder in our garden to a place where the background is less 'busy', giving me more chance of getting a pleasing image. If your phone has portrait mode, try using it for wildlife photography. You might be able to get a nice sharp image of your chosen subject with a pleasantly blurred background (this may not always work – my budget smartphone has portrait mode but won't work unless it 'sees' a human face). Some other settings to try include 'Burst' mode, which takes a series of quick shots, useful if you're trying to capture a fast-moving subject. High Dynamic Range (HDR) mode captures better detail in both the darker and lighter areas of the image.

If you've managed to get a nice sharp image of your chosen subject, but it's a little dark, or perhaps the colours don't look quite right, it's worth seeing if you can enhance it. There are numerous apps available but I particularly like Snapseed. It has easy to use tools to tweak brightness, shadows, contrast, white balance etc.

One last tip - phones easily gather dust and fingerprints, so clean the lens regularly with a soft cloth to avoid blurry images.

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