



# WILL NICHOLLS: LIFE & TIMES

A unique and inspirational perspective by award-winning wildlife photographer **Will Nicholls**.

**Will Nicholls is a 17-year old self-taught wildlife photographer from Haydon Bridge in Northumberland, England. In 2009 he was awarded the title of "Young Wildlife Photographer of the Year" in the British Wildlife Photography Awards (BPA). He also gained a Highly Commended in the same competition the following year. In 2011, he was announced as the 16-18 Category Winner and the overall winner at the RSPCA Young Photographer Awards in the same year.**

Will Nicholls plans to study Zoology at university and ultimately hopes to go on to present natural history documentaries, following in the footsteps of Sir David Attenborough and Steve Backshall.

He has already taken part in expeditions to Ethiopia and the Borneo jungle, trekking across the indigenous landscape and helping to conserve the local communities. He has hosted numerous wildlife photography talks, where he speaks about his experiences so far and the animals he encounters.

In this article written for *Nikon Owner* magazine, he tells us why wildlife photography has become such an integral part of his life.

“ The Northumberland countryside is, in my opinion, the most beautiful region in the country. It provides stunning landscapes that play host to a huge variety of incredible wildlife. I feel very privileged to have this all on my doorstep, having moved from the city in 2006. Our house is situated on the corner of a field, and it was in fact the sheep that graze there every year that sparked my interest in wildlife. This, I am certain, is a lifelong passion and I aspire to pursue a career in presenting natural history documentaries. This dream is not because I want to become rich and famous, but because I cannot imagine myself in a “9-5” job, and I want to see all four corners of the globe, working to explore the last few remaining wildernesses and discover the species that remain unknown to science. I want to dive below the ice in the Arctic and see the hidden world that lies beneath.

But back to the beginning. In September 2007, I remember borrowing my mother’s small compact digital camera and walking down the country lane to photograph the spring lambs. The photographs were world class! Or so I thought they were when I looked at them with my inexperienced eye! Looking back at them now they were blurred, full of noise, and they would have been deleted without hesitation. Even so, it is after taking these pictures that I decided I would spend my savings



◆ A juvenile little owl stares down the lens of my camera in Haydon Bridge, Northumberland. This image won "Highly Commended" in the British Wildlife Photography Awards, 2012



// I soon outgrew the Fujifilm, and used the money I had earned through the sale of my pictures to buy myself my first DSLR camera, a Nikon D80.



on my own camera. I promptly bought myself a small Fujifilm Finepix s6500fd, a camera that I used to take the first few shots which a kind gallery owner put up for sale. This was the very beginning of my photography career.

I soon outgrew the Fujifilm, and used the money I had earned through the sale of my pictures to buy myself my first DSLR camera, a Nikon D80. I was attracted to Nikon purely by its reputation and recommendation from a few photographers I had spoken to. I also bought a Sigma 170-500mm f/5.6-6.3 lens as my first telephoto to accompany the D80. By this time sheep photographs were becoming a thing of the past, and I wanted to photograph some real wildlife.

I was on the hunt for red squirrels, an

animal that I now have a very strong relationship with and have studied for many years. My mother and I headed off to Kielder, spending countless hours in hides waiting and waiting for them. My patience was rewarded eventually, and I captured a photograph of a red squirrel clinging to a post with its ears being blown over in the wind. I then decided to enter this photograph into a competition in 2009, and was astounded to find I had actually won the title of "Young British Wildlife Photographer of the Year". From then on I took wildlife photography a little more seriously and began learning through trial and error what makes a good picture.

It soon became apparent that in the woodland just a minute from my house there was a small population of red

squirrels. The enclosure is untouched by the farmer and is truly beautiful. When it snows the trees become outlined in white, and the whole wood looks like a scene from C.S. Lewis' Narnia. Every year this happens and it is a breathtaking sight each time. For such a small area it holds a surprising range of species, anything from badgers and tawny owls, to roe deer and woodpeckers. The main focus, of course, was the red squirrels and so I set up a feeding station in a clearing within the trees. I have kept the feeders running for four years now, and it has provided me with incredible views of this characterful mammal. Every now and then the population switches around; some red squirrels move on and others move in, and each individual squirrel has its own personality. As I have studied them for such a long time, I am able, to

an extent, to predict their behaviour and spot their habits. The most comical squirrel that came to the clearing was one with the biggest ear tufts I have ever seen; they were almost the size of its head!

Northumberland plays host to the famous Farne Islands. Owned by the National Trust, this is a hot spot for viewing puffins and other seabirds such as the Arctic tern. My thirst for photography soon forced me to pay a visit, and I have been every year since. My first trip there, a few years ago now, was fantastic. I had originally thought puffins were much larger, but when you see them

waddling around on the rocks they are in fact rather small. Also known as the clown of the sea, Atlantic puffins have a famous multicoloured beak. This beak is not just a pretty feature; it has an extra bone which allows the puffins to keep both parts parallel so they can secure a row of fish without the fish at the tip falling out. Their rough tongues hold the fish, usually sand eels, against the spines on the roofs of their mouths. Consequently, you are provided with excellent opportunities to take the classic image of a puffin with a beak full of fish. However, my Sigma lens wasn't up to standard and couldn't track the puffins in flight.



◆ **Above:**  
A red squirrel pauses in a ray of evening sunlight. This image won the overall prize in the RSPCA Young Photographer Awards

◆ **Top right:**  
Two puffins fly in parallel with each other on the Farne Islands

◆ **Right:**  
A portrait of a puffin with a beak full of sand eels. This was photographed on the Farne Islands

◆ **Next page:**  
A buzzard swoops across the beautiful landscape on the Isle of Skye





I spent a week on the Isle of Skye in April last year, and it is an incredible place. The huge cliffs are featured in many films and it is no surprise as to why as they make up some stunning views. Skye is also teeming with bird life; I remember seeing hundreds of buzzards during my short stay there, amongst other birds of prey. Unfortunately I didn't see a golden eagle, but my main target of the trip was the white-tailed eagle. As the

delay meant we turned up just as the eagle was flying back to its nest having performed for everyone else who was there on time. Although extremely frustrating, I wasn't too worried as I had chartered a boat for the next day to go to see the eagle alone. We set off bright and early, emerging around the corner of the cliff whilst conditions were perfect. There was a gorgeous golden light shining down onto the water where the eagle would be flying. I could see the eagle through the binoculars, perched high on a branch and surprisingly well camouflaged against the rocky background. The skipper threw a fish into the water and the eagle sat staring, then looked away completely uninterested. Straight away the great black-backed gulls swooped down and began fighting over the fish. After a few attempts we were left with one large pollock and nothing else, so we sailed away from the nest and spent an hour trying to catch some more fish outside of a cave in the cliff. This was, predictably, unsuccessful and by now the beautiful morning light had gone and blue skies had taken its place. Nevertheless, we came back to the nest site and the skipper held the pollock high in the air whilst I locked my camera's focus onto the distant dot that was the white-tailed eagle. He threw the final pollock, our last hope,

fourth largest raptor in the world, and with a massive seven foot wingspan, this bird makes for an impressive sight. A short boat ride from Portree Harbour allows you to float, at a distance, in front of the nest high up on the cliff face. The plan was that a group of boats would line up and then the skipper would throw in a fish and the eagle would come down to take it from the water. If only it had been that simple! The first day out on the boat my skipper decided he would check his crab nets on the way out. This

I stood next to the other photographers who were firing off hundreds of shots, whilst I found it impossible to take just one. This encouraged me to hire a Nikon 200-400mm f/4 VR lens a couple of years later, and what an incredible lens it is. A huge improvement on the Sigma, it focused extremely quickly and silently. This allowed me to get the puffins in flight, and I found myself hiring it again for another venture, this time on the Isle of Skye.

◆ Awarded highly commended in the 2010 British Wildlife Photography Awards, this photograph shows four puffins braving the elements on the Farne Islands





◊ A white-tailed eagle on the Isle of Skye swoops down to the surface of the water with a great black-backed gull in pursuit



◊ A buzzard stares down the camera's lens on the Isle of Skye





✧ My first attempt at photographing red squirrels with a wide-angle lens. This shot inspired me to purchase a Nikon 14mm f/2.8.

out onto the water. I could see the eagle's head turn towards it, and after a few very long seconds, the eagle dropped from the branch and extended its huge wings. Straight away the AF-S Nikon 200-400mm f/4G VR lens exceeded all expectations, silently and quickly keeping the focus pin sharp on the fast approaching bird, seemingly without any effort.

... I have surprised many people when I say I have been shooting red squirrels at 14mm!

White-tailed eagles fly like old bomber airplanes, swinging their bodies out to adjust the flight path, never taking their eyes off their target. The gulls that had already assembled on the water around the fish quickly dispersed as the massive bird of prey swooped in. However, the eagle missed the fish and flew back up to its nest with the gulls in pursuit. Great

black-backed gulls are themselves large birds, but they are dwarfed by the massive size of the white-tailed eagle and you would not expect them to mob something that is so much bigger.

It was not long after this that I got my hands on my own AF-S Nikon 200-400mm f/4G VR II lens as the cost of hiring for every photography trip was unsustainable. It was on one of my first projects with this lens that I took my favourite photograph so far of a juvenile little owl. I knew of a group of little owls nesting in a derelict barn which stood in a small field, and so I set up my camouflage tent hide under a big oak tree facing the entrance in the wall to the nest. I left the hide there for two weeks so that the birds would become used to it first without the added factor of me pointing a lens at them. I also walked through a nearby woodland and found a mossy old tree branch, a very suitable perch, which I then dug into the ground in front of my hide. Occasional visits to the location provided tantalizing glimpses of a silhouetted little owl on the corner of the barn roof. With clear skies and bright sunshine, I eventually headed to the hide for the first time

with the intention of seeing how the birds would react to me. An hour and a half passed without any sightings, and I began to wonder if the owls were waiting for me to leave before they emerged from the old barn. Turning to look to my right, my doubts were gone in an instant. An adult little owl swooped towards me, landing on a branch just meters from my hide window. Suddenly I could hear sharp screeches all around me, and looking to my left I noticed a juvenile also sitting very close by. Soon the entire family had surrounded my hide, and I shifted the camera to the smaller left-hand side window, being careful not to scare them away. Their incredible eyesight was evident straight away as they could see straight through the camouflaged netting and were looking directly into my eyes. I gazed back at the owls with their yellowy-green eyes always watching, the colour of which shows that they hunt during daylight hours. One of the juvenile owls jumped across to a beautiful, gnarled branch that was hanging down from the canopy above. It could have chosen one of many branches that were obscured by twigs and leaves, but luck was on my side. I had never taken a photograph





that I am proud of without having had to first wait for what is often days and days in hides. Subsequent visits to the little owls showed how magical that evening was, for any sightings were further away and harshly lit, making for much less impressive photographs.

More recently, I have undertaken a project of photographing red squirrels with a wide angle lens using a remote release. This involved the squirrels being just a few inches from the lens, so close that I am surprised they don't mist up the lens with their breath! At first I hired an AF-S Nikon 24-70mm f/2.8G ED lens, allowing me to test the water and see if this was an achievable aim. I spent a few days with this lens, and by the end of it I had a close-up shot I was pleased with. Even so, I wanted to get even closer to my subjects.



So I bought myself an ultra-wide angle lens, the Nikon 14mm f/2.8D. This lens is mostly used to photograph landscapes and I have surprised many people when I say I have been shooting red squirrels at 14mm! For this to work I had to set the focus to manual and choose the correct shutter speed and aperture.

Occasionally lighting conditions would change half-way through the shoot and I would have to run out of the hide and adjust the camera, returning quickly to ensure I didn't scare away any approaching squirrels. It took many attempts to get the focus perfect, with the results of several five-hour long sessions being out of focus. However, each time I learnt from the previous mistakes, finally achieving the shots I wanted. I still have many more plans for my red squirrel photography and I am constantly trying to come up with something new and individual as they are such a popular subject nowadays.





For a long time I have wanted to photograph hares, specifically the beautiful mountain hare. My chance arose this year when I spent a weekend in the Cairngorms in Scotland. The first target of this trip, however, was the rare capercaillie. I hired a guide for one of the days, as without anyone to point me in the right direction I would have been wandering lost in the highlands. The first location we went to was a beautiful old woodland with mosses growing all over the ground, the perfect location for a

Just as we were about to give up, a black shape moved through the field on our right. It was a male capercaillie in all its glory...

photograph of a capercaillie, but it could never be this easy. We arrived at the lekking<sup>1</sup> ground, but the turkey-sized bird was nowhere to be seen. After walking around the woodland one more time, we moved on to the next location. This was a much more unlikely area, a dirt track through some Caledonian pines, many of which had been felled by strong winds. We had been walking for about an hour, and my luck seemed to have run out for this trip. Just as we were about to give up, a black shape moved through the field on our right. It was a male capercaillie in all its glory, having been displaying to the females which

we had previously seen fly from the trees beside the road. Striking impressive poses with an arched neck, it slowly made its way towards us. I sat waiting, tracking the huge bird's progress through the branches with my camera. Eventually it appeared on a small clearing, calling deeply with sharp clicks. It stepped onto a photogenic clump of moss and struck a pose, the key for me to instantly click the shutter. It soon became apparent that the capercaillie thought the camera's shutter was the call of another male, as it dropped its wings and ran towards me. This was the cue to make a sharp retreat backwards, and I was faced with the problem of getting around the bird and back down the track. Edging around the capercaillie, we headed back to the van and left it in peace. Amazingly, this large bird roosts in the tops of pine trees and feeds on pine needles.

The next day I headed to a valley that I had been told had a resident population of mountain hares. Through my binoculars I could see their white coats against the green hillside. They were still surprisingly well camouflaged though, looking like one of the many white rocks scattered over the hill. I spent a few hours crawling on my front towards the hares, most of which shot up the hill before I could even get close. With one individual however, I managed to use a ledge to hide myself whilst I advanced towards it. Kneeling up every now and then to check my location, I eventually arrived just ten or twelve feet away from the hare. At first it seemed oblivious of me shuffling around it, firing the shutter at every opportunity. Finally

it took flight, and I crept up on one more hare to achieve a shot that I am pleased to have taken.

Closer to home, I have been photographing black grouse lekking on the moorlands. I discovered this location several months earlier when I stumbled upon a group of them feeding in a field. Having set my alarm for 3.30 a.m., I headed to the hills and set up my hide before first light, having previously acquired permission from the farmer. I had made it just in time, for just seconds after I got settled in the hide, the black grouse flew down from the surrounding hillsides and filled the silence with their challenging calls. I was shocked that the grouse came so close, landing metres in front of me, undeterred by my presence. Battling with the low light, it was difficult to get a photograph that was sharp. However, I wanted to get a photograph with motion blur in the wings so didn't require a very high shutter speed. I utilised the high ISO capabilities of the Nikon D700 and managed to get an image of two males covered in frost battling for mating rights. After around four hours the black grouse quietened down, having established their territories for the day. Suddenly they all took flight at once and I was able to leave the location without disturbing their lek.

As well as taking wildlife stills, I am dabbling in the art of videography by filming, presenting and producing my own natural history documentaries. Having completed my first piece on Northumberland wildlife, I am already working to produce a second. This encourages me to learn about the wildlife around me, and is something I thoroughly enjoy doing. Capturing an animal's behaviour, researching it and then speaking about it on video provides challenges that I relish. Hopefully, presenting and learning about the planet's diversity is something I will be doing for the rest of my life." ■

<sup>1</sup>Lekking: A lek is a gathering of males, of certain animal species, for the purposes of competitive mating display. Leks assemble before and during the breeding season, on a daily basis.

◆ A portrait of a mountain hare photographed in the Cairngorms, Scotland. It took a lot of attempts at stalking to get close enough

