

Tour Report Red Kite & Night Sky Photographic Workshop 27 – 30 April 2025

Leucism red kite



Dolphin



Foel Tower



Red kite



Compiled by Sean Weekly

Sunday 27 April 2025

Day 1:

From Bristol to the Elan Valley

I collected one of our guests in the afternoon from Temple Meads Station in Bristol—coffee in hand, cameras packed, spirits high. We hit the road for what would be a scenic two-hour drive through rolling hills and winding roads, bound for our home base: the Elan Valley Hotel.

Tucked just outside the charming market town of Rhayader (pronounced 'Rye-ad-er', for the record), the hotel sits snugly at the gateway to one of Wales' most dramatic landscapes. Rhayader itself gets its name from *Rhaeadr Gwy*, which means "waterfall on the River Wye"—a fitting intro to what awaited us in this land of water and wonder. Fun fact: it's one of the oldest towns in mid Wales, steeped in history and Welsh charm.

Our base couldn't be better placed right on the doorstep of the Elan Valley and the Cambrian Mountains. Dams, reservoirs, dark skies, and nature reserves? All a stone's throw away. It's like someone designed this place specifically for photographers and adventure lovers.

Once checked in and slightly caffeinated, I rallied the group for a mini sunset adventure. We still had a bit of daylight left, and I wasn't going to waste it. So, we jumped back in the van and headed out for a first look at the Elan Valley. A little teaser before dinner—call it an *appetiser* of epic scenery.

We wandered around the Garreg Ddu Dam, cameras already out, shutter fingers twitching. The low golden light bathed the landscape in that perfect kind of glow that makes you want to photograph *everything*. And then photograph it again.

Now, here's where it gets fascinating: the Elan Valley is famous for its network of Victorian-era dams and reservoirs, built over 100 years ago to send clean water to Birmingham. Imagine carving a 117-kilometre aqueduct through wild terrain with nothing but early 1900s engineering. Mad respect. What they left behind is more than just a water supply, it's a photographer's dream. Moody skies, mirror-like reservoirs, stone-built dams... the kind of place that makes you whisper, "Whoa," every five minutes.

There are six main dams in total: Craig Goch, Pen y Garreg, Garreg Ddu, and Caban Coch on the River Elan, plus Claerwen (the beast of the bunch) and the half-finished Dol y Mynach on the River Claerwen.

Back at the hotel, we tucked into a well-earned roast lamb dinner, comfort food at its finest. Plates were cleared, spirits high, and it wasn't long before we were suiting back up for our first proper night shoot.

We returned to Garreg Ddu Dam, this time under a gradually darkening sky. Twilight is that perfect in-between time: dark enough to start seeing stars but still bright enough that we can fiddle with our cameras without using headlamps (yet). We ran through the basics of astrophotography—tripod setup, manual focus, exposure times, ISO settings—and then we were off and shooting.

As night fell fully, the sky put on a crystal-clear performance. No clouds. No light pollution. Just us, the stars, and our little cluster of tripods. We played around with light painting—torches in hand, creating ghostly glows and highlighting the old Foel Tower, a hauntingly beautiful Victorian pumping station perched on the dam.

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As midnight approached, we took a detour to the eerie ruins of Nantgwyllt Church. Lit only with a torch beam, it looked like something straight out of a gothic novel. The atmosphere was equal parts spooky and magical—perfect for dramatic long exposures.



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Eventually, around 12:30 am, the air got heavy with moisture and our lenses started fogging up. That was our cue. We packed it in, a little cold, a little tired, but seriously satisfied with what we'd captured on our first day here in mid-Wales.

Back to the hotel we went, chattering about shutter speeds and constellations, and ready to crash into a well-earned sleep. Day one was a success, I would say!

Monday 28 April 2025

Day 2:

Waterfalls, Raptors & the Return of the Stars

After a seriously top-tier breakfast (shoutout to whoever is responsible for those fluffy scrambled eggs and black pudding!), we piled into the hire car and headed back out into the Elan Valley for a day packed with drama both geological and avian.

This time, we explored a different stretch of the valley. Our first stop? A charming little cascade tucked into a quiet glen, known locally as Fairy Falls. And yes, it's exactly as enchanting as it sounds, moss-covered rocks, dappled light filtering through the trees, and water dancing down the stones like something out of Hobbit land.

We pulled out the tripods and got into the creative groove. I was on hand to help the group experiment with different shutter speeds to blur the motion of the water, turning a simple stream into something soft, silky, and dreamlike. It was a great exercise in slowing things down (literally and metaphorically), and the group nailed some magical shots. Tripods were the unsung heroes of the morning.



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Next stop - **Crib Goch Reservoir**, one of my personal favourites for drone work. Unfortunately, due to some pretty heavy-duty repair work on the dam wall and piping, the reservoir was almost completely drained. Cue sad face.

But! A couple of our more intrepid guests decided to take to the skies anyway. Drones went up, and despite the lack of water, the structure of the dam still made for some striking compositions—moody, raw, and very industrial-chic. Proof that even when conditions aren't perfect, there's always something interesting to shoot.



Photo credit: Bella Flack

We cruised back to the hotel just in time to grab our packed lunches and soak up some sunshine in the garden. Welsh weather behaving itself for once, it was actually a stunning day weather-wise! Sandwiches, crisps, and a bit of camera chat later, it was time for the next highlight of the day: Gigrin Farm, a short drive away and hands-down the best place in the UK to see and photograph wild red kites.

Gigrin is a working cattle and sheep farm that became the official Red Kite Feeding Centre in the early '90s after the RSPB noticed wild kites were regularly dropping in for snacks (originally rabbit leftovers from the family dog—true story). At the time, red kites were on the brink of extinction in the UK, and thanks to a legislative change that stopped farmers from leaving sheep carcasses in fields, their natural food source was disappearing fast.

So Mr. Powell and the family stepped in. With help from the RSPB, they started feeding the birds *every day*, year-round. Eventually, they opened the farm to the public to help cover the cost of all that meat—and the rest is a pretty legendary conservation story. Fast-forward to today, and there are now hundreds of kites feeding daily. They've been fed *every single day* since the early 90s. That's dedication.

The show didn't disappoint. Around feeding time, the sky filled with a whirling, swooping spectacle of red wings and forked tails. It's hard to describe the rush of having dozens of these magnificent birds diving and gliding just overhead. It was pure magic.

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We spent a solid two hours photographing the kites, practising everything from autofocus tracking to burst mode. I was on hand to help dial in camera settings and troubleshoot any issues. The highlight? A rare leucistic red kite made an appearance, pale, ghostly, and completely mesmerising. Leucism, for the uninitiated, is a condition that causes a partial loss of pigmentation. Think: a snowy version of a red kite.

What an incredible bird!

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Back at the hotel, another delicious dinner (seriously, the kitchen here deserves awards) was devoured with much enthusiasm. Then, with memory cards empty and bellies full, we grabbed extra layers, batteries, and tripods for another night shoot.

This time we headed to Claerwen Dam, the largest in the valley. It's a towering, almost otherworldly structure by day, but by night? It becomes something else entirely. We arrived just after dusk and got to work setting up for another astrophotography session.

The stars were out, but with an early start ahead of us (off to the coast tomorrow!), we kept this shoot short and sweet. Just enough time to capture some beautifully crisp shots of the dam under a sky peppered with constellations. The moon stayed tucked away, which helped give us those nice deep blacks in the sky, ideal for pulling out starlight in long exposures.

By 11 pm, we were all fading a bit. Batteries low (both camera and human), we called it a night, packed up the gear, and headed back for some well-earned sleep before another busy day in the morning.

Tuesday 29 April 2025

Day 3:

Sea, Stars, and Just a Splash of Mythology

Alarms went off early. The kind of early where the birds are still snoozing and the sky is just thinking about waking up! But spirits were high because today was a coastal adventure day. We were off to New Quay, a postcard-perfect Welsh seaside town famous for its epic cliffs, abundance of wildlife, ice cream shops, and, of course, bottlenose dolphins.

Rather than taking the quick route, I opted for the scenic backroads cruising over the Elan Valley mountain road. And wow. Rolling hills, dramatic ridgelines, and the morning light clinging to the moorland. It made

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the two-hour drive feel like part of the day's adventure, not just the commute.

We arrived in New Quay with time to spare (rare win!), so we wandered into a local cafe for some proper coastal coffee. The kind that somehow tastes better when you're inhaling sea air and listening to gulls squawk overhead. After fueling up, we strolled down the harbour to meet our private boat charter.

The crew greeted us with warm smiles and instant banter. After a quick safety briefing and a few "oohs" at the harbour's blue, clear water, we pushed off into Cardigan Bay, full of hope.

And boom, not ten minutes out, dolphins! A couple of bottlenose beauties fishing near a reef close to shore. They were playful but kept their distance, so catching decent photos was tricky (wildlife never reads the shot list), but it was still a total thrill.

We cruised further south along the rugged coastline in search of more sightings. No more dolphins, sadly, but the bird life made up for it. Towering cliffs were alive with the calls of nesting kittiwakes, razorbills, fulmars, and guillemots, all jostling for space on the rock ledges. And then gannets! Big, graceful, unmistakable. It felt like flying through an Attenborough documentary.



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After a couple of hours scanning the waves, we had to admit our dolphin luck had mostly run dry. That said, just as we turned back toward the harbour, one final bottlenose surfaced near the boat for a brief, cheeky goodbye. Classic dolphin timing.



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Back on land, we weren't quite ready to leave New Quay. So, naturally, we treated ourselves to ice cream, handmade and worth every single penny for the extra flake! After exploring a few shops, it was time to begin the journey back inland.

But the day wasn't over yet...

On our way back, we made a short but legendary stop at Devil's Bridge, a quirky little village famed for its three stacked bridges, built over centuries one atop the other, and the spooky myth behind them. Legend has it that the Devil himself built the original bridge after being outwitted by a very clever old lady and her dog. Let's just say Welsh grannies don't mess around!

We paid the small entrance fee and took in the view of three bridges spanning a deep gorge, each with its own layer of history. A perfect photo-op and a fun dose of folklore before dinner.

Back at the hotel, we tucked into yet another hearty, well-earned feast. Energy was needed because our final shoot of the trip was going to be a late one (or early, depending on how you see it).



3 am Milky Way Madness – The Grand Finale

Alarms set for 3:00 am. Groggy but determined, we shuffled out under the cloak of night and made our way back to the Foel Tower in the Elan Valley. Why? Because this was our moment the Milky Way core was rising, and we had clear skies.

We got into position and framed up the shot: the Foel Tower silhouetted in the foreground with the Milky Way stretching directly behind it, arching across the night sky like cosmic wallpaper. We waited a little while as the core climbed higher, and then it was showtime. Long exposures, carefully placed foreground lights, and plenty of "oohs" as the images popped up on screens.

It was cold. It was quiet. It was beautiful.

And most importantly, it worked.

Everyone walked away with at least one stunning astro shot, capturing the raw beauty of the universe over an incredible Welsh landmark. A truly unforgettable end to our last night shoot.



Wednesday 30 April 2025

Day 4:

“Binoculars, Birdsong & a Bonus Tip-Off”

After our galactic escapades at 3 a.m., we all agreed today needed to start slow. A leisurely breakfast was in order, complete with extra coffee, sleepy chatter about shutter speeds, and a shared appreciation for warm toast and a cooked breakfast after a cold night under the stars. No alarms. No rush. Just the soft clink of cutlery and that satisfied silence that only comes after a successful shoot under our galaxy.

Once we were all suitably caffeinated and conscious, we packed our gear and headed off for a gentler kind

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of adventure: a birding walk at the Elan Valley RSPB Reserve.

Spring in the reserve is something special. There's this buzz in the air, birds calling from every treetop, the sounds of distant red kites, loads of bees pollinating and the whole reserve bursting with that fresh green energy that only comes this time of year.

We also stopped at the Caban Coch Dam viewpoint near the visitor centre, still as jaw-dropping as ever. A few wheatears flitted along the walls and we caught glimpses of redstarts in the trees. Cameras clicked, binoculars pointed, and the vibe was pure nature-nerd bliss.

Before diving into photography, I paused the group for a mini masterclass on shooting in harsh, directional light, something we were definitely dealing with as shafts of sun cut through the canopy. We talked about exposure compensation, metering modes, and how to balance out those bright highlights and deep shadows that woodland shooting throws at you. It was the perfect little workshop moment.

Our mission? Pied flycatchers. These little black-and-white beauties migrate all the way from Africa to breed in these woods each spring, and Elan Valley happens to be a hotspot for them. We wandered slowly through the trees, taking in the surroundings and keeping our eyes and ears open.

I knew about a local pied flycatcher nest box higher up on the reserve that had been pretty active recently. It was a tip-off from a good friend of mine in the area.

Naturally, we couldn't resist.

So off we went, winding our way up through the woodland trail. And sure enough, not long after arriving, the star of the show arrived right on cue. The male pied flycatcher zipped in and out of the trees, flitting between branches, showing off his glossy plumage like he knew he had an audience. Everyone got a great look, however, (sadly) photos were tricky.



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After a peaceful morning among the trees and flycatchers, and a quick recharge (plus maybe a sneaky biscuit or two back at the hotel), we packed up our gear for one final outing: a return visit to Gigrin Farm, the iconic red kite feeding station just outside Rhayader.

There was a certain calm excitement in the group this time. Having already photographed the kites a couple of days earlier, everyone knew what to expect: the speed, the chaos, the glorious unpredictability of photographing these majestic birds mid-air. But this time, there was something else too: confidence.

We arrived, set up early in the hide. As the feeding time approached, that familiar electricity returned. A few scouts circled above. Then more. And then suddenly boom the sky erupted into motion. Dozens of red kites wheeled and dipped, their long forked tails slicing the air with that signature elegance, their wings catching the light like sails.

This session was different. You could feel it. People were switching between single shot and burst with purpose, tracking birds with smoother movements, and most importantly nailing the focus. There were excited murmurs of "Got that one!" and "That was sharp!" from behind the lenses. Settings were adjusted with intention. Muscles remembered what they'd learned. It was brilliant to witness.

We even had a couple of standout moments where birds swooped particularly low or performed tight mid-air turns that had everyone gasping and grinning behind their cameras.

The two-hour session flew by (pun fully intended), but it was the perfect way to close out the tour. Everyone left with a memory card full of keepers, a few sore necks, achy shoulders, and that deeply satisfying sense of improvement through experience.



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As the session came to a close, there was a quiet sense of completion in the air. A little reluctance to say goodbye to a landscape that had started to feel a lot like home.

Over the past few days, we'd criss-crossed wild Welsh valleys, climbed up into star-filled skies, and pointed our lenses at everything from birds to galaxies. We'd weathered late nights, early mornings, and a fair few memorable moments, but the rewards had been well worth it: dolphins dancing on the distant horizon, red kites in full flight, waterfalls like silk, and the Milky Way rising behind Foel Tower. Not bad for one trip.

What really made the tour special, though, wasn't just the scenery (though let's be honest, Wales absolutely turned it on for us). It was the group. Everyone arrived with their own cameras, experience levels, and expectations but by the end, it felt like we were all part of one shared story. There were laughs, lessons, and genuine "wow" moments we'll all carry with us. Watching everyone grow more confident each day adapting settings, experimenting with compositions, helping each other out was a real highlight for me.

We captured more than just photos. We caught fleeting bits of magic: sightings of the elusive pied flycatcher darting through the trees, a lone dolphin breaking the water's surface, red kites diving from a blue sky, and the stars spinning silently above ancient dams. We paused, looked up, looked closer, and saw the world through new perspectives and different eyes and maybe that's the best thing photography gives us.

As we packed up our bags and said our goodbyes, I couldn't help but feel proud of what we'd shared. Not just a photography tour but a genuine adventure in what used to be my home town.

Images by Bella Falk

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