

Tour Report

UK – Red Kite & Night Sky Photography

26 – 29 April 2022

Red kite



Night sky over Elan Valley



Bottlenose dolphin



Pied flycatcher



Compiled by Sean Weekly

Day 1: Elan Valley Hotel

Tuesday 26 April 2022

I met the group in our hotel in Rhayader, Mid Wales which was to be our home for the next three nights.

Once everyone was settled into their rooms and checked in I sat everyone around a table in an empty room downstairs in the hotel's bar. I gave a nice introduction on what the next few days had in store for us, showing the group a short presentation including various images of mine from previous trips, and explaining what would be possible to achieve from the days ahead.

It was time to head out for a short drive around the Elan Valley to show the group what an amazing place it is during daylight hours and help them get their bearings for when we venture here in the dark and hopefully photograph some awesome dark skies. Everyone enjoyed the brief visit looking at the amazing Victorian architecture of the dams. We then rushed back to the hotel for our dinner which was at 19:30.

Following our rather good pub-style dinner, I checked the weather forecast which looked to be clear from 23:00 onwards. At this time we hopped into the minibus and drove back into the Elan Valley. Sadly the forecast was wrong and despite there being a few stars around it was mostly cloudy. However, all was not lost as I still spent a couple of hours teaching the group how to photograph at night. Including settings, exposures, manually focusing and also a little about composition. We were expecting some clear evenings over the next couple of nights so the group would be able to put these skills to practice.

After a few hours, it was time to head back to our hotel and get some sleep ready for another busy day in the morning.

Day 2: Gilfach Nature Reserve and Gigrin Farm

Wednesday 27 April 2022

This morning we had a leisurely breakfast after our late night of astrophotography. After breakfast we headed to the Elan Valley RSPB reserve for a walk and to look for the resident Pied Flycatchers that call this area home during Spring. After arriving at the reserve I taught the group a little bit about camera settings and learning how to expose for harsh/ directional light.

After a nice walk I bumped into a local friend and birder who gave me a tip off of a local pied flycatcher higher up on the reserve. The group and I headed to the spot and it was not long until we saw the flycatcher coming and going to the nest box. It put on a great display and gave everyone some lovely sightings and photos.

After lunch it was time to head to Gigrin farm to spend the rest of the afternoon photographing the hundreds of Red Kites that feed here daily. On arrival at Gigrin I split the group into two groups one group was in my ground level hide concentrating on low level in flight images. The other group was in the tower hide, focussing on in flight photos of the birds in the sky and against the rolling hills. I was teaching the group in the tower hide the best settings to photograph the Red Kites, and also gave some help in tracking techniques and how to maximise the best photos by keeping focused on one bird instead of getting distracted by all the other birds around diving.

That evening after dinner we headed back up to Elan Valley as the forecast was looking good, this time we headed to Claerwen dam (the biggest in elan). The skies were amazing and everyone got some lovely milky way images. We headed back to our hotel around 2am.

Day 3: Dolphin Boat trip at New Quay

Thursday 27 April 2022

It was tough waking up this morning after our late night out, but it was one of my favourite days knowing we are heading to the coast to see the resident bottlenose dolphins. Breakfast was at 08:00 and we left

sharply at 09:00 to start our two-hour drive to New Quay. I took the group on a slightly longer route to the coast taking them on a scenic drive through the Elan Valley Mountain road. I showed them sites including the famous metal mines of Cwmystwyth. CwmYstwyth is considered the most important non-ferrous metal mining site in Wales providing a premier example of mining heritage in Ceredigion. Within the site, there is evidence for all phases of mining activity, from the Bronze Age, through the mediaeval period, to its revival in the 18th century and the peak of activity with a subsequent decline in the late 19th and the early 20th century. We also drove through the famous waterfalls at Devils Bridge although we couldn't see them as they are deep in a valley.

On arrival at New Quay, we were met by our captain and crew from the Sea Watch Foundation. We boarded our catamaran boat and were ready to enjoy the next three hours looking for dolphins. It did not take too long before we found our first small pod of dolphins fishing on a reef nearby to the harbour. Frustratingly due to the shallow water around the reef we could not get that close to them, however, it was still an amazing sight to watch them breach out of the water.

We then headed along the coast looking at the seabird colonies of nesting kittiwakes, razorbills and guillemots. We were fortunate enough to also see some grey seals basking in the sun on some rocks. Towards the end of the boat trip, we headed further out to sea to find some more dolphins and it didn't take long, as we soon found another small pod including a mother and her calf. They were extremely curious coming alongside the boat to have a look, it was pretty incredible to see them so close and gave the group some fantastic photo opportunities.

That evening after dinner, we checked the forecast for the night and it looked to be very clear. So this time we decided to head to bed but set our alarms for 01:00 to get back out to Elan Valley. The Milky Way core this time of year is not above the horizon until around 03:00 and this is what we were aiming to photograph. It was a fantastic evening with incredibly clear skies. Two of the guests stayed behind to sleep so it was myself and three other guests, and everyone got some fantastic photos.

Day 4: Gilfach Nature Reserve and Gigrin Farm

Friday 28 April 2022

After a long night, we all had a lie-in getting up for breakfast around 09:00. After breakfast, I showed the group some post-production tuition and how I edit my images. Today we headed to Gilfach Nature Reserve which is not far from our hotel. It was nice to show the group the gorgeous scenery and we were lucky enough to see pied flycatcher and nuthatch, and we also heard some distant cuckoos.

In the afternoon it was time to head back to Gigrin Farm for our final session, and this time the group switched hides. It was another great afternoon with everyone getting some lovely photos of the kites in flight. Sadly no birds landed in front of the ground level hide for either group but that is nature. However, some kites did land but some distance away from the ground level hide.

After the Gigrin Farm session it was time to say goodbye to the group and end the workshop.