



Dusk at Hartland Point, Devon

People

Capturing



South West

Photographer Nigel Hicks shoots for National Geographic all over the world and is a Fellow of the British Institute of Professional Photography. His latest project is closer to home, however - a book of his stunning pictures, all taken here in the Westcountry. Here, he explains why...

Nigel says: I love the South West. It's beautiful, there's plenty of verdant countryside, the woodlands and moors are stunning, and the coastline is utterly magnificent - sometimes the beauty is so intense it actually takes my breath away. And this from a professional photographer who has spent much of his career exploring all kinds of environments around the world.

Yes, the Westcountry has lots of towns and in summer the crowds on the roads can drive me nuts. But once I've parked up in some rural or coastal car park and have started walking, the madness quickly falls away behind me.

This area has been quite lucky. Despite the summer crowds, population pressure is lower than in much of England and industrialisation

and pollution have been less intense, leaving plenty of quite healthy landscapes not only for us to enjoy but for wildlife (both plant and animal) to call home. I'm quite sure that anyone who has spent much time here appreciates its beauty but I'm not sure that many realise just how special it is. In our daily rush it's all too easy to stop really looking and just take it all for granted.

I believe it is so important that we don't forget about what we have here, in our own backyard. So, for nearly two years I photographed the South West's natural landscapes and wildlife, aiming to showcase the best, the most beautiful and the environmentally most important sights that this region has.

The result is Wild Southwest: the Landscapes and Wildlife of Southwest England, a book filled with words and pictures that I hope give a good

overview of just how special the counties of Devon, Cornwall, Somerset and Dorset really are.

Much of my career as a professional photographer has been spent touring the world for a variety of publishers. I spent a decade shooting for Dorling Kindersley's famous Eyewitness Travel Guides and, in more recent times, I have worked extensively for National Geographic Creative, the publishing division of the USA's National Geographic Society. The shoots have taken me as far afield as the glaciers of Alaska, the wilds of Patagonia, the volcanoes of Iceland and the Philippines, and the rainforests of Borneo and the Amazon. It has always been amazing, that's for sure.

But, until recently, all this travelling left little time to turn my camera on my own home area,

People



Pentle Bay, the Isles of Scilly



Valley of Rocks, near Lynton, north Devon

which seemed something of an omission - and an irony.

For several years I toyed with the idea of putting together a project of my own in the South West, but I could never quite crystallise what it should be. Things started to fall into place at a series of meetings I had with other National Geographic Creative photographers during one of the organisation's annual get-togethers in Washington DC a couple of years back. The focus of discussion was - what next for photography? The overall conclusion was, be creative and local - put together own projects and localise them. Wild Southwest was born.

Of course, creating a project is one thing. Getting it out there to the world and making it pay its way is quite another. Initially, I ran the idea past a couple of well-known publishers, but I got the reply I'd expected: they'd love a book on the whole of the UK, the rights to which could be licensed around the world, but not a less commercially attractive regional one. So, I used my own publishing company, Aquaterra Publishing, which until then had produced only calendars and greetings cards. Wild Southwest would be its first book.

It would be wonderful to be able to rush out there and start photographing everything at any time and all simultaneously. Alas, things don't work that way. Not only can I not divide myself into multiple clones but also the seasons have to be followed. Grassland flowers - and many of their butterflies - have to be photographed in May-July, the heather heaths in August, the river estuaries and marshes with their over-wintering birds during the winter months. The rugged north coast cliffs are best captured during the autumn in order to catch the first storms and the wild mood that area deserves, and the Isles of Scilly I reserved for May in order to catch the breeding puffins and guillemots.

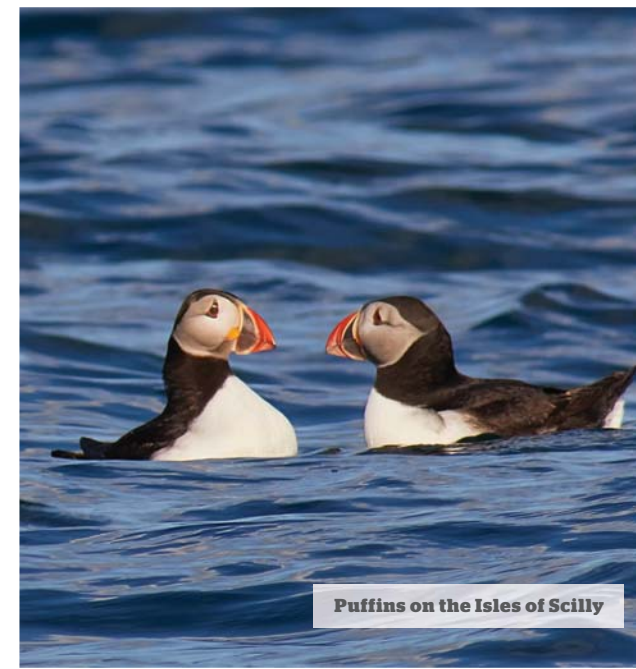
There was a huge amount of planning, research, writing, and yes photography too. The summer months saw an endless series of 3 or 4

am starts, to catch the early morning light and - when photographing grassland flowers - those early, still conditions before the wind kicks in and starts waving the flowers all over the place.

Wind is not the only enemy of the wild flower photographer, especially on Dorset's chalk grasslands. With cattle and deer around, that long lush grass is home to some less welcome residents - ticks, and lots of them. Getting down low and very personal with many of the flowers could have only one consequence. Every trip to those grassland nature reserves was followed at home by a tick-picking session. I think the record for a single outing was 44, all removed one at a time by my (clearly devoted) partner!

Ticks, scratches and stings notwithstanding, it all started to come together surprisingly well, with a large body of photography and text stead-

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Puffins on the Isles of Scilly



Photographer Nigel Hicks



Bossington Hill overlooking Porlock, Exmoor



An otter on Dartmoor

ily accumulating. If the ticks were something of a low point, there were plenty of high ones too - like the grey seal pup I stumbled upon in a cove near St Austell, just as it was making its way to the sea for the first time.

Its impossibly cute face was totally at odds with the very nasty dog-like growl it gave me, quite sufficient to make sure that I kept my distance as the poor thing struggled across the sand towards the water.

Exmoor's red deer were quite obliging during the autumn rut, when Jochen Langbein, a professional deer researcher, lent me his stalking skills to enable us to get close. In the Scillies, Mark and Susie Groves in their wonderful rib, brought me across big Atlantic rollers to come in tight on puffins, razorbills and countless seals. They were quite understanding when at one point I just had to put the camera down and gaze quietly into the distance. Looking through 600mm of camera lens on a boat that is pitching on an ocean swell is not conducive to harmony within the body!

Running in parallel with all the research and photography, our book designer, Exeter-based Andy Jones, was gradually piecing all the material together into what became a great design. Transforming what I could see on our computer screens into the physical book came down to a Singapore-based printer - sadly, even with all the courier and shipping costs included, it is still vastly cheaper to print a book in Asia than in the UK.

Last autumn, the books finally arrived in the UK, bang on time, and allowing our distributor, Star Book Sales, to set to work getting the books into shops across the South West.

So far, it has all gone really rather well. I'm now looking to the future to make Wild Southwest a huge success...

Wild Southwest, £14.99, www.aquaterapublishing.co.uk. www.nigelhicks.com.

