



ULSTER  
FROM ABOVE

ROBERT THOMPSON

# Ulster From Above

The majority of landscape photographers create images of landscapes from ground level and sometimes from hill tops. However, as **Robert Thompson** says, photographing the landscape from 2000ft high is a totally different experience





Viewing the landscape from the air is a fascinating experience for most of us, whether it be from a commercial airline or a chartered tour company. Seeing familiar landmarks we all can identify with, takes on a whole new perspective when viewed from a birds-eye position. However, for the majority of photographers, engagement with the landscape is generally at ground level, or from hills and summits of mountains. Shooting aerial

landscapes is something that the vast majority of landscape photographers do not normally undertake; I include myself in this as well as I never imagined that an opportunity to photograph from the air would actually come my way. Aerial landscape photography is generally thought by most people to be expensive and financially unaffordable for most photographers, unless the assignment is commissioned. However, getting airborne these

days is not as costly as it was in the past. There are many local pilots of small planes, helicopters and even microlights, which are more than happy to take photographers up and offer very reasonable rates.

In my last major publication, *The Natural History of Ulster*, which I co-authored with John Faulkner, photography was to be a major part of the book.

I was, therefore, keen to approach the photographic aspect, in particular some of the »

**PREVIOUS PAGE • TRAWBREAGHA BAY, COUNTY DONEGAL**

One of the most photographed bays in Ireland, but much more dramatic when photographed from the air.  
Nikon D3X, 24-70mm, f/8, ISO 200, altitude 1100ft

**ABOVE • WHITE PARK BAY & PORTBRADDAN, COUNTY ANTRIM**

This well known hot spot on the north coast is a favourite location with many landscape photographers.  
Nikon D3X, 24-70mm, f/8, ISO 320, altitude 680ft



**ABOVE • TIDAL STREAMS OF SHEEPHAVEN BAY, DONEGAL**

Only from the air can you appreciate the colour and patterns that are formed on a retreating tide.

Nikon D3X, 24-70mm, f/5.6, ISO 200, altitude 1050ft

**RIGHT • ROUND ISLAND, STRANGFORD LOUGH, COUNTY DOWN**

When shot from the ground many islands often lose their identity. Only when seen from the air does their true shape and beauty reveal itself.

Nikon D3X, 24-70mm, f/8, ISO 200, altitude 1100ft

**BELOW • TORY ISLAND, COUNTY DONEGAL**

When photographed from the air you can clearly see the wedge-like structure of the island and how it rises to form the impressive sea cliffs of Dun Bhaloir.

Nikon D3X, 24-70mm, f/5.6, ISO 200, altitude 1200ft



» landscapes in a slightly more unconventional way. I could have played the percentage, done the customary rounds of the classic locations, stuck my tripod virtually in the same spot as other fellow photographers and took the shot. However, I felt this would bring nothing new to the publication other than perhaps a familiar landscape photographed on a different day. I had considered the idea of aerial photography for some of the advantages it would bring. It would certainly add a new dimension to the book and provide an opportunity to show some of Ulster's unique landscapes in an entirely different light. However, this would require additional funding and I was not sure that I could persuade the sponsor's to buy into the concept.

The commission and publication of the book was the most ambitious project I have ever undertaken. The 590-page tome had over 600 photographs and took five years to complete. It was a steep learning curve in many aspects, but

it gave me an opportunity to see and photograph my own country in a way that it would have been financially prohibitive for any single individual to undertake. I learnt many interesting facts about aerial photography throughout the course of my time on the project and after the book was published, I got a number of aerial commissions in the Republic of Ireland purely on the back of that publication.

**Preparation and planning**

Before undertaking any aerial photography, there needs to be some careful thought given to a number of issues. One of the first decisions you have to make is the choice of aircraft. I did not want to photograph from a plane as I felt it would be too restrictive and my options and creative freedom would be, to some extent, compromised. A helicopter was the obvious choice for me; I would have much more control on altitude and the position of the aircraft prior to shooting the image. To begin »

» with, you need to formulate a flight plan, which has to be approved in advance by air traffic control before you even get off the ground. You also need to plan your route carefully and study your locations in terms of where the sun will be at different times of the day. I found the [Photographer's Ephemeris](#) very helpful in this respect.

Flying with a large commercial helicopter company that was based in Scotland meant that I had to plan the route of each trip in advance and

pass it on to them a couple of days before we were due to fly. You also need to arrive at your point of departure well ahead of your flight time so you can go through the suggested route with the pilot – this is absolutely essential so both of you are on the same wavelength. Once airborne he will be occupied with flying the aircraft. It is his job to get you to the location, but it is up to you to guide him as to where he needs to be and at what height. I also had to be realistic in terms of what could be achieved

in a single day's flying, taking into consideration refueling, comfort breaks and our geographical position at the end of the shoot. We also had to inform air traffic control in the Republic of Ireland in advance when flying over the border into their air space. When this was first put to me I began to wonder: was it all really worth the grief and hassle?

The financial clock starts ticking from the moment you are airborne. Air time is money and if conditions are good, you do invariably spend longer in an »

#### ERRIGAL & DUNLEWY LOUGH, DERRYVEAGH MOUNTAINS

County Donegal

Errigal mountain near Gweedore at 2,464ft is Donegal's highest mountain and the second highest in Ulster. I had this location in mind for the cover, but it was on the third and last attempt that I finally got a break in the weather to nail the picture.

Nikon D3X, 24-70mm, f/8, ISO 400, altitude 800ft





ABOVE • BALLYNESS BAY & DOOLEY PENINSULA, COUNTY DONEGAL

Looking towards the islands of Inishbofin, Inishdooney, Inishbeg and Tory.  
Nikon D3X, 24-70mm, f/8, ISO 400, altitude 1300ft

two-year period it took to cover the entire north of Ireland and all of the major islands. When we did fly, I used the opportunity to photograph as much of the province that I possibly could between locations and ended up with a considerable collection of images.

Health and safety is also a big issue when flying and I had to be briefed carefully regarding what to do in the event of engine failure especially if out on the Atlantic – not a situation I wanted to experience, especially during January and February when I was photographing many of the islands off the coast of Donegal. My hands were so cold at times that you could have cut them off with a bow saw and I wouldn't have felt a thing. Despite wearing a pilot's suit and additional heavy clothing underneath I still felt the cold, especially at higher altitudes during the winter shoots. The temperature drops one degree every five hundred feet, but the wind-chill factor with the doors removed means it is much colder. One important rule, which I really did learn the hard way, was to refrain from drinking water – at least a few hours prior to any flight. The consequence for ignoring this is an encumbered bladder aggravated by the cold, which makes the flight an extremely uncomfortable one. Helicopters can only land at designated airports and airfields

so dropping down into a field to empty one's bladder was completely out of the question.

My first flight was one of familiarising myself with the aircraft and establishing a communication strategy with the pilot – it also takes a little time to adjust to the noise and vibration. Nausea can also be an issue, especially when flying on longer sessions and when there are lots of banking and maneuvering – your stomach's tolerance for this can, in some situations, cause you a problem especially if the conditions are windy.

One of the biggest difficulties for inexperienced photographers in the air is not usually camera settings and general composition, but proper positioning of the aircraft for the shot. Placing yourself and the aircraft in the ideal position and at the correct angle is the key to success, but this comes with practice. You also have to be attentive, opportunities often present themselves quickly and »

BELOW • CARRIGAN HEAD & SLIEVE LEAGUE, COUNTY DONEGAL

These are highest sea cliffs in Europe with almost a virtual drop of 2000ft into the Atlantic Ocean.  
Nikon D3, 24-70mm, f/8, ISO 400, altitude 1500ft

» area than you intend – this is especially the case when a good location throws up several promising possibilities. I decided from the start not to be too ambitious and kept the distance travelled on each flight within reason, otherwise a large percentage of air time would be taken up flying from one location to another. Checking my target areas in advance on Google Maps helped me to identify the most promising locations and from where the ideal shooting position would be. I also made notes of what had to be photographed at each location, which made the process much more efficient.

One of the biggest frustrations for me was not being able to fly at short notice when the weather was ideal. I was not given the option of using local companies, which were able to fly at a day's notice – sometimes even within a couple of hours. This was extremely frustrating at times, especially in the spring when the weather was often clear and settled for several days at a time. Our sponsors already had a contract with a commercial helicopter company. We had to pre-book with them four weeks in advance since they were always heavily booked and then confirm 48 hours prior to departure. The difficulty here was the fact that this is Ireland and having to make the call on the weather two days in advance was challenging even for the weathermen let alone myself – conditions can change here in a short period of time, and frequently did. I spent many frustrating hours in the terminal itching to get up and endured thirteen cancellations in the





» virtually in a blink of an eye they are gone! Another significant issue easily overlooked in the planning, but extremely important is which side of the aircraft you are going to photograph from. This should be discussed as part of your flight plan. You don't want to be secured to the wrong side as it flies along the coast with the sun bathing the bays and rocky coves only to find that you are positioned on the opposite side of the aircraft looking out to sea.

Another important factor that comes with practice is getting to know what altitude is best for the majority of images. Keeping an eye ahead and looking at your height as you approach an area gives you a little time to inform the pilot and make the appropriate adjustments. You don't want to be wasting time making multiple passes over the same spot at different heights – this does really eat into your air time! The pilots I flew with were very experienced and shuttled television camera crews all around the UK. They had a lot of experience and were well tuned in photographically, which made the process of communication on the position of where the aircraft should be more straightforward. I found myself shooting most of the images between 1000ft-1500ft, which seemed to produce the type of result I was looking for. However, there were occasions, particularly with some of the islands where we had to fly between 2000ft and 3000ft to include all of it in the frame. Atmospheric haze can be a problem especially when you go beyond 2,500ft. There were days that looked great at ground level but once airborne haze was an issue. Sometimes flying below 2000ft helped to overcome the problem.

### Photographic considerations

There are a number of things to consider before taking to the air. On the equipment front, you really

need to keep it simple. My own kit consisted of a Nikon D3 and a Nikon D3X. I restricted myself to two lenses, the Nikon 24-70mm on the D3X – this was my main shooting camera and a Nikon 105mm macro on the D3 if I needed to tighten the framing. Nikon GPS units were attached to both bodies; this provided a reference point of the altitude and position from where the photo was taken – this was very useful later when captioning the images. It is also important to test everything on the ground first, including switching on your GPS unit if you are using one as they sometimes fail to operate inside the cockpit. I used two 32gb memory cards in the dual CF slots instead of my usual 16gb versions, as it can be difficult to change them when airborne especially if wearing gloves. I actually ended up cutting out the index finger of the glove so I could operate the shutter button more effectively. It is surprising the number of images you do shoot and how time passes so quickly. I really found the dual card slots a lifesaver on both these cameras, as there was always a risk of losing a card when trying to replace it on the move. As a rule, I changed the

#### ABOVE • CROWNARD & SHALWAY POINT, COUNTY DONEGAL

This area of coastline in southern Donegal has some of the finest coastal scenery in Ireland.  
Nikon D3, 24-70mm, f/8, ISO 400, altitude 1000ft

#### ABOVE - INISHTRAHULL ISLAND, COUNTY DONEGAL

This is the most northerly island of Ireland and the oldest dating back some 17 million years. This was the most challenging of all the aerial images to take. The wind was so severe and cold on that day that we were on the verge of giving up.

Nikon D3, 24-70mm, f/5.6, ISO 400, altitude 1300ft

cards and the battery if necessary each time we made a comfort stop at different airports. Refueling gave me the chance to look more critically at what I had photographed as its very difficult to scrutinise your images in the air other than to keep an eye on the histogram. Obviously, it goes without saying that your battery should be fully charged and you should have spare ones with you. Cameras need to be well secured on your body, either with a neck or wrist strap; this is very important, as the pilot usually checks that all is attached securely.

One of the major problems with helicopters is vibration. Using a gyroscopic stabiliser was out of the question for me so a shutter speed above 1/1000 sec was necessary to ensure the images were sharp and vibration-free. Switching to 'Shutter Priority' is also a good choice when engaged on this type of photography. I also adjusted the ISO to ensure that I maintained the target shutter speed. Anything below 1/500 sec is unlikely to be sharp. Depth of field is not really an issue in aerial photography at an altitude of 1000ft and above since you are shooting at infinity. My target shooting aperture was on average f/8 and sometimes f/5.6, depending on the conditions. The vast majority of photographs were shot at infinity except in cases where I was photographing around sea cliffs or in mountain valleys and was approaching the 500ft altitude limit set by the Civil Aviation Authority. If you are using manual focus then I suggest checking precisely on the lens barrel where infinity is. Many AF lenses actually focus beyond infinity if used manually. If you are using AF then I would recommend the central single focusing point. I did not use any filtration at all on any of the trips. UV and haze filters are of limited use in this type of photography. A polarising filter

is also no real advantage either – you really don't have the time to keep taking it on and off and you also run the risk of losing it if the cockpit is open.

My first flight involved removing the back passenger window and shooting out through the gap. I found this quite restricting in many aspects and was essentially limited to shooting virtually straight ahead. The wind was also a problem, which meant the front end of the lens had to be kept in from the edge of the window frame. It also creates a lot of noise in the cabin and a headset was a must for guiding the pilot to the desired position. It is also important that no part of you or your equipment contacts the structure of the aircraft, as the vibration will be transferred to your camera, which is likely to result in blurred images. Since I was unhappy with the restrictions imposed by the window frame, the pilot suggested that he could remove the double doors, which would give me the freedom to shoot both ahead and behind without any obstruction. However, I would need to wear a safety harness and a lifeline, which were connected into the helicopter floor and the seat could also be rotated so I was actually sitting at the edge, where the doors would be. I was initially hesitant, but then agreed to give it a try. What a difference this made. I had a lot more freedom in which to frame and compose the picture. It also meant that I could now shoot in front and behind as we passed a location. This was a big advantage especially when circling islands. It was much more productive photographically with the doors removed, but obviously more nerve-racking, especially when the helicopter was banking – your stomach felt at times that it was tightly wedged in your throat! If you have a fear of heights then perhaps this approach is not for you! Removing the doors also meant that »





» everything that was mobile had to be securely tied down or stored in the back of the helicopter. Another slight disadvantage was the overall reduction in air speed between locations that the helicopter could do. The wind was like a sand blaster racing round the cockpit, which was not a major issue during summer flights, but a different story in winter when the cold was clearly felt despite the additional clothing layers. Having said that it was a price definitely worth paying for the flexibility it gave me.

Helicopter position prior to the image being shot is also important. I would always try to have the aircraft at right angles to the direction of shooting, but on some occasions, particularly over the Atlantic, this was not always possible due to the wind and the direction it was blowing. Believe it or not, a stationary helicopter produces more vibration and can be much harder to control (especially in windy conditions), than one which is moving along very slowly as you make the pass. When in the appropriate position, I would get the pilot to bank the aircraft slightly in the opposite direction when shooting; this generally prevented the rotary blades appearing in the skyline. This was more of an issue when shooting at 24mm – anything wider and the blades will be clearly visible as a black blur. One other fact, of which I was not aware at the time, is that helicopters are not allowed to fly after sunset so getting late-evening shots were out of the question as you had to be back at base before the sun had set. This was even more awkward for me since it meant that the helicopter had to be back at base in Scotland before sunset, which meant the pilot needed two hours at the end of the day to refuel and fly home. This was more of a problem in the winter months than during the summer.

**SAINT PATRICK'S RETREAT, LOUGH DERG, COUNTY DONEGAL**

A famous pilgrim site built on Station Island and dating back to the 5th century.  
Nikon D3, 24-70mm, f/8, ISO 400, altitude 600ft

**Some final thoughts**

Having spent many hours in the air during the time that the project ran, I became totally hooked on shooting aerial landscapes. I shot hundreds of images but only a small number were actually used in the publication. One of the most interesting aspects for me was the fact that totally ordinary landscapes on the ground, which were scarcely interesting, when seen in context from the air, were often inspirational. This proved to be the case time and again especially with islands and sea loughs. In an age where landscape photography is highly competitive and widely practised by so many, finding a new approach is perhaps one of the most difficult things to achieve in this photographic discipline. Aerial landscape photography is perhaps one of the few less-tapped areas and definitely worth considering. ✦



**Robert Thompson**

Robert Thompson is an accomplished Natural History Photographer, writer, and naturalist living in Ireland. He is an acclaimed macro specialist and author of a number of books on natural history and photography. His work is widely published in the UK, Ireland and internationally. To view more of his work visit

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