

The Rebirth of Spring

Having spent the winter hibernating, life starts its new cycle again in spring. With a bit of advice from **Robert Thompson**, we'll be ready to capture the beauty of nature again as it unfolds



Spring heralds the start of the macro photographer's year. After months of latency, life returns to the woodlands as the vegetation rejuvenates and the cycle begins again. Winter is always a quieter time in the close-up world with many photographers retreating into hibernation until the days lengthen and spring is looming again. The winter months do, however, provide a much-needed opportunity for many of us to catch up on editing, writing and planning for the new year ahead. Although I'm still active photographically during the winter, it is nice to drop a gear even if it is only for a few months.

Spring is often referred to as the season of 'renewal' or 'rebirth'. Woodlands become revitalised with colour and vibrancy.

Celandines, anemones, bluebells, wild garlic and early-flowering orchids, to name but a few, carpet the woodland landscape with a flush of colour and new growth. Hibernating butterflies along with other spring species take advantage of the nectar bonanza. By April things are well underway and with new found enthusiasm the last of the hibernating photographers are now on the move. The floral explosion continues into summer, with May and June being the peak months in the natural history calendar.

I am fortunate to live close to a secluded woodland glen, which is bordered by a small river and private land. Every spring, it explodes with colour. It's a regular haunt for me and I try to make a point in-between my other photographic

commitments to visit it as much as I can at different times of the year. I have accumulated so much material from it over the years that it proves the point that you don't need to circle the globe to find interesting subjects to photograph. No matter how many times you work an area, there is always something different to be found. However, having said that April is unquestionably the month for capturing the beauty of plants.

I have often heard the remark that flower photography presents little or no real challenge when compared to

other active subjects. This

is, of course, simply untrue; I consider it to be extremely challenging. Their lavish colours, intricate shapes,

textures and elegant curves demand a creative eye and imagination to go beyond

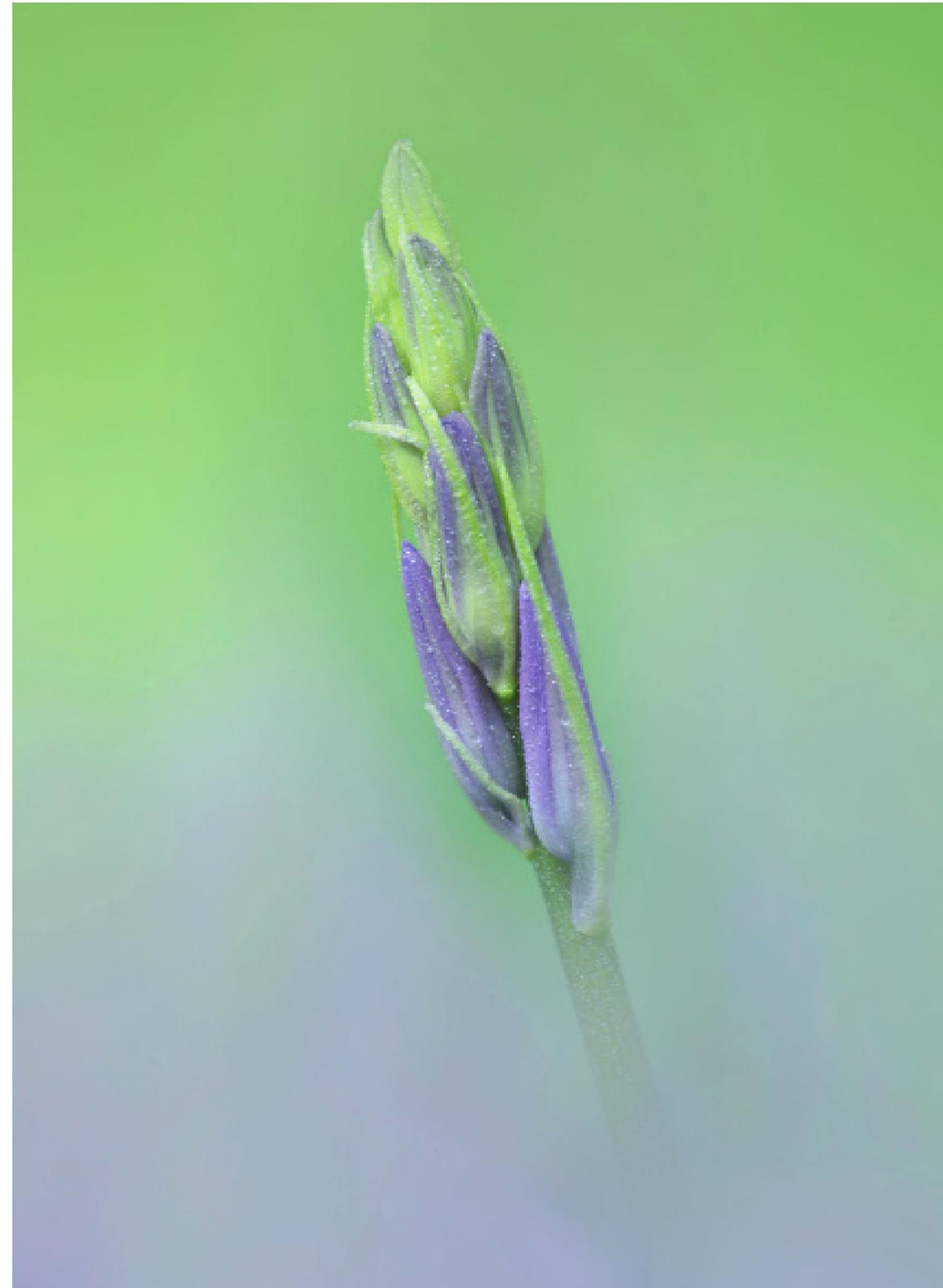
a mere record depiction of something that is essentially so attractive. I love to photograph flowers, especially wild orchids, but I tend to spend considerably more time deliberating over how to portray them compared to insects or other close-up >

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Bluebell • *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*

I used a long lens and from a low viewpoint through the purple haze of other bluebells, allowing them to blur in order to catch the early morning dew on the emerging bluebell buds.

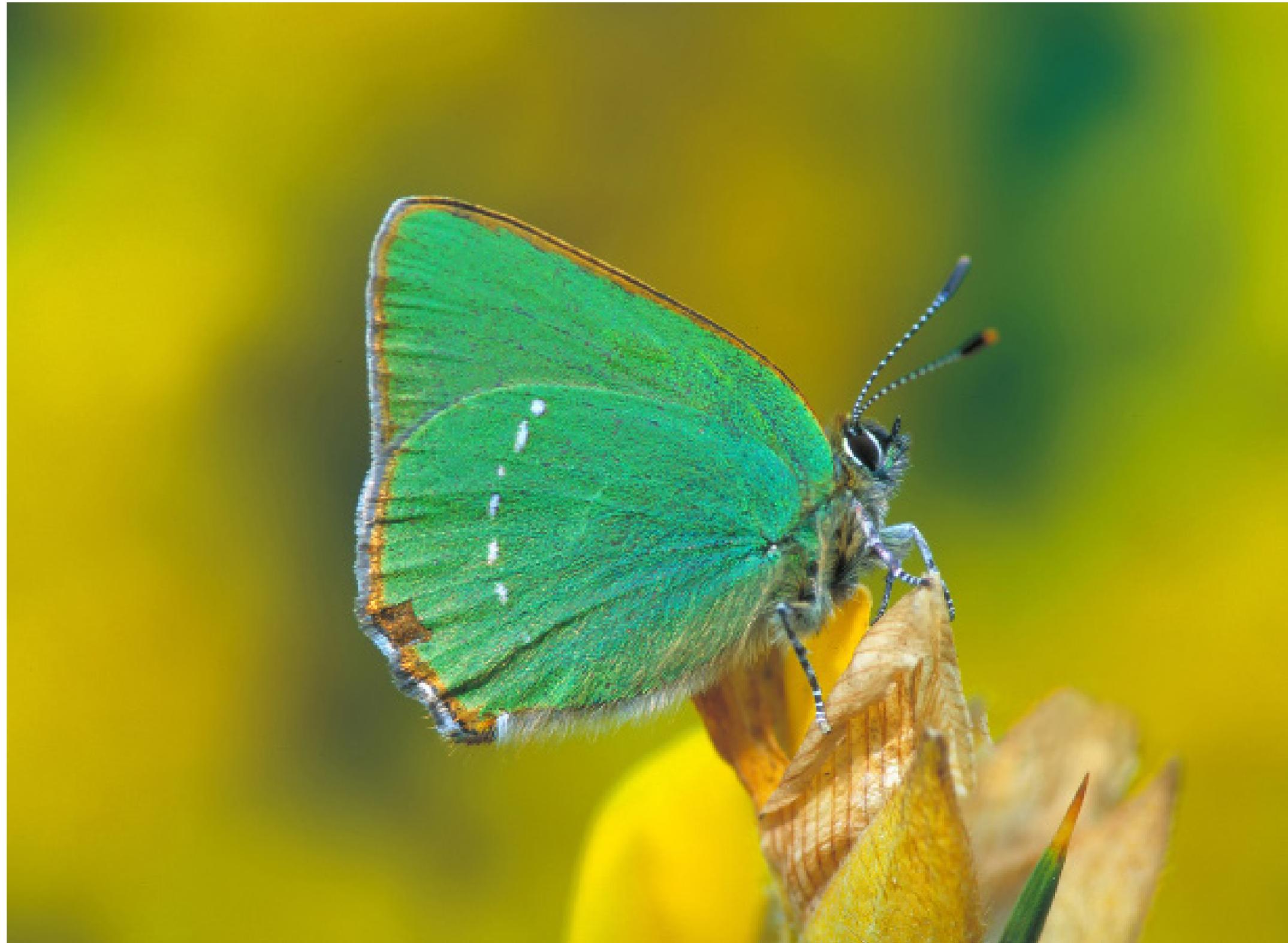
Nikon D800, 300mm, f/5.6, ISO 100



Green Hairstreak • *Callophrys rubi*

This stunning little butterfly is often overlooked. The iridescent metallic green colouration is really vibrant when freshly emerged. As with many green metallic insects, the colour fades quickly with age.

Bronica, 110mm macro lens
1.4x converter, Fuji Velvia film



> subjects. To do justice to any subject you need to be completely competent with your equipment and how to go about achieving the result you desire. When I visit any site be it familiar or new, my priority is to acquaint myself with the general area. I like to take some time wandering and exploring the floral diversity looking for those few plants that have good colour, shape and form, but also growing in promising positions. Inexperienced photographers often make the mistake of photographing the first plant they see on their target list; only to walk 30 metres further on to find another in a better position with a more pleasing structure and background. It is easy to waste a lot of one's time when you first visit a site repeating what you have already photographed. You inevitably come away at the end of the day with photographic overkill on a few species. It makes more sense to set your bag down and explore the area first and identify those species that show promise.

Long Lens

I am a big fan of long lenses, especially when shooting flowers, I prefer a low viewpoint employing shallow depth of field and shooting through the foreground

vegetation keeping it well diffused. The narrow-angle of view and the increased working distance between the lens and subject makes it a lot easier to frame and compose without the fear of damaging or spooking your subject if it happens to have

a pulse. I have often seen the aftermath left by photographers when photographing plants. Most of the other flowers and vegetation surrounding the subject look like a tsunami hit it. Working from a greater distance is a lot more comfortable

for the photographer and reduces the visible disturbance.

Butterflies

The spring emergence of butterflies is always worth the effort and although my >

Orange-tip *Anthocharis cardamines* (male)

The glen is a great location for this species. It was here among the bluebells that I managed to get the cover shot of a resting male for one of my previous photography books.

Nikon D3X, 300mm, f/8, ISO 200



> hard drives are straining with images, I can never resist collecting more of the same species. Orange-tips are the harbingers of spring, being one of the first butterflies to emerge that has not hibernated as an adult. The males have the characteristic orange tips to the forewings and are often seen wandering along the hedgerows in the dappled sunlight, looking for a female and sampling the amber nectar along the way. Another butterfly that is frequently overlooked at this time of the year is the Green Hairstreak. The metallic green underside with an orange-brown edge to its wings helps it to blend seamlessly with the fresh green foliage on which it rests. Adults frequently perch on the tips of gorse flowers, one of its primary food

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plants.

April also sees the emergence of many moths, including some which have hibernated during the winter. The Herald is a very distinctive and colourful species with deeply scalloped forewings. Adults re-emerge from hibernation in spring and are often found in old outbuildings and barns. To my surprise, I once found 13 adults hibernating together in a cave while on a commission to photograph a large underground limestone cave system. I couldn't believe my eyes that all of these moths managed to find their way into this cave through a very small aperture in the woodland floor above. Our entry point was



through a waterlogged sump. Dressed in wetsuits, we had to seal the equipment in a watertight container and drag it underwater through to the other side. I was amazed when I saw them all huddled together in one spot.

Orchids

April also heralds the start of the orchid flowering season. One of the first to emerge is the Early Purple Orchid, a beautiful and varied species adding splashes of purple among the bluebells >

Herald Moth • *Scoliopteryx libatrix*
It overwinters in outbuildings and barns and re-emerges in spring.
Bronica, 110mm macro lens, Fuji Velvia

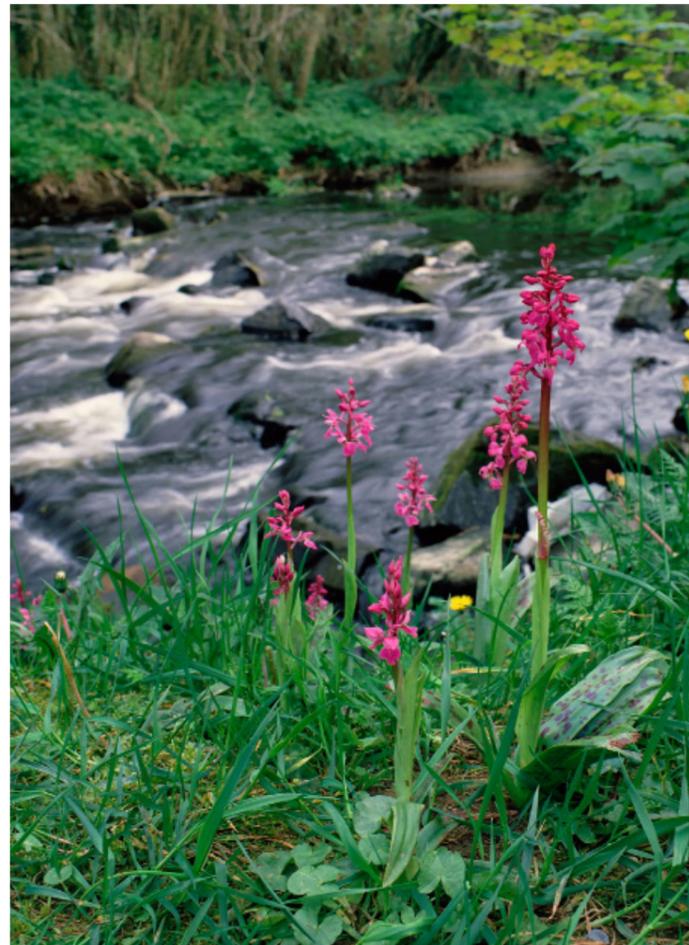
Microcosmos

> and the cowslips. Unfortunately, like so many others, it has declined from many of its former haunts and is now largely confined to woodlands, roadside verges and to a lesser extent, churchyards. It has a pleasant scent, not unlike Lily-of-the-valley and referred to as 'long purple' by Gertrude in Shakespeare's Hamlet. One of the finest displays I have ever seen of this plant is in the Burren, County Clare, Ireland where the colour profusion is simply breathtaking!

Get out and enjoy

One significant advantage for the close-up photographer is the fact that you can visit a local haunt for years throughout different seasons and still only scratch the surface. Although our aspirations often entice us to far away places, sometimes

working at home can be more fulfilling. All of the photographs were taken at the woodland glen near my home during different periods of time. Some were taken on 120 roll film using different camera systems. Those particular images bring back fond memories of my earlier years exploring this beautiful woodland. Wherever your photographic interest lies April is an important month in the close-up photographer's calendar so why not blow the cobwebs of your camera, charge the battery and get out and enjoy!



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.
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