

Red Squirrels of Northumberland

The second planned photography trip on my current UK stay was to photograph the elusive and endangered Red Squirrel. After researching various options I decided on renting a hide for a couple of days from a young professional photographer – Will Nicholls. It was quite expensive at 100 pounds a day (\$176) but I had seen previous photos taken from this site and was very impressed. I will let you be the judge when you see the photos.



To get there I took an East Coast Express train to Newcastle-Upon-Tyne 1st Class of course from London. The journey was very smooth and quiet as I had opted for what is called the 'Quiet' coach – no ruggats or mobile phones. The cost was 54 pounds (\$95). Like all modern CBDs it was made up of confusing one way streets and small lanes blocked to traffic. Finding the Europcar site took me 40 minutes and it was around the corner and down back alleys behind the railway station – what a nightmare lugging a large suitcase and my camera bag. Finally got there and picked up a brand new Fiat 500 Sport – my new ride for three days. Quite cheap at 125 pounds (\$220) I thought. Once I had packed the luggage in and found my HEMA 6 Navigator which I had pre-loaded with UK maps I was ready for the road to my accommodation in the small town of Hexham. NOTE: If you plan on driving whilst overseas it is much cheaper to buy the country maps for the navigator you use at home than hire one from a hire car company. Don't forget to bring your charger and dashmount (*silly me left mine when I parked at Jetport in Melbourne*).



Hexham is a lovely village close to Hadrians Wall and has some fabulous architecture if you like that type of photography. It was only a short one hour drive from Newcastle on good highways once you were out of the city. I stayed at the Beaumont Street Best Western which was very reasonably priced and quite comfortable. Total bill was 221 pounds (\$390) including 3 nights plus drinks & meals.

The next morning I set off for Will's place which was about 12 miles (20 kilometers) away bright and early but first stopped off

at Waitrose's (*an up market Coles*) to buy lunch as I knew I would be in the hide for a long time. After introductions we drove down to the hide about a kilometer away and had my instructions on what to expect for the day. After we had filled the bird feeds and placed a stash of nuts for the squirrel to find the long wait began.

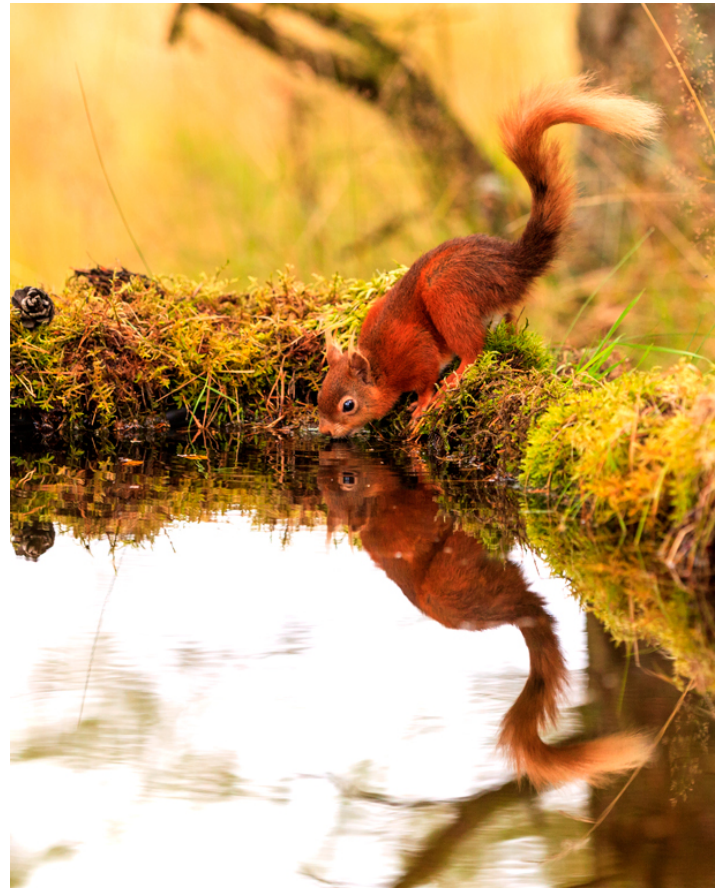
To say it was long long day would be an understatement. I had birds feeding around me all day long plus had a nut thief showing up and scoffing down all the hazelnuts – not once not twice but three times. This male pheasant was as bold as brass even I threw clods of dirt, pine cones and stones to try and deter him he kept coming back. It did allow me to get some very good close up photos of him and his plumage.



Finally after nine hours a single squirrel showed up and started to find what was left of the nuts that I had been stashing around the hide for him/her all day long. It was all over in far too short a time (*less than a half hour*) so I had to furiously take as many shots as I could trying to remember to adjust for the light and get the focus correct as my subject was less than 5 meters away.

I had never been so glad to get out of that hide after such a long period of time as by that stage my back and my knees were killing me. It did not help that the hide was on a slight slope and so was the chair so it made it difficult to climb in and out to go for a quick loo break.

Needless to say I had paid my money so I was back even more enthusiastic the next day hoping the squirrel would show more than once and not only just at the end of the day. It was not to be and the only squirrel I did see very late in the day but not to photograph was a feral grey squirrel who did a runner due to some walker bringing his dog out into the forest at the most inopportune time. To say I was not impressed after sitting there for another nine hours is an understatement.



The price you pay to be a wildlife photographer can be quite steep in time, effort and money but the joy in being able to even get one shot will keep me coming back in pursuit of the perfect shot. All too soon it was time to pack my bags and return to London to plan for my next trip to photograph the elusive red squirrel.

Next trip will be to do something totally different. A night photography tour of the street of London.