

50 TIPS FOR SHOOTING AWESOME MACRO PHOTOS

The miniature world of insects, bugs and plants offers some of the most powerful nature photographs imaginable... for those who take a little time to explore. Award-winning macro expert, **Ross Hoddinott**, shares his hottest tips for ensuring that your macro and close-up images always have the wow factor...



1

MACRO TECHNIQUE

1 Ensure your subject is pristine

When working in close-up, any imperfection or defect will be highlighted, potentially looking ugly and distracting in the final shot. Examine subjects carefully before reaching for your camera, and avoid tatty or damaged insects, flowers, fungi or foliage. Finding pristine subjects can be a time-consuming business, but it

will be time well spent in the longer run.

2 Negative space

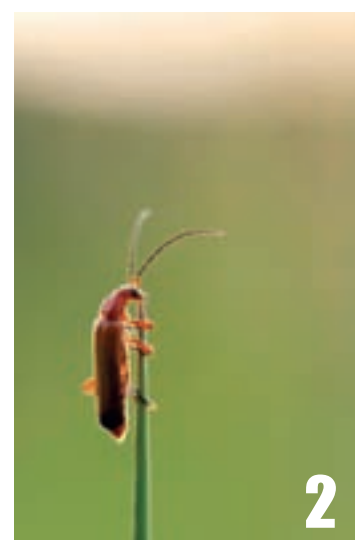
It is easy to assume that to achieve maximum impact you should fill the frame with your subject. Including a degree of negative space, however, will often create a far stronger, more stimulating composition. Negative space is

the parts of the image your subject doesn't occupy. It can help create a feeling of context, scale, or even isolation and is able to convey much about the subject and/or its environment. Creating negative space is easy to do; simply use a wider focal length, or move further away from the subject. It can even add meaning to an image, giving the subject somewhere to 'move into'.



3 Focus on the eyes

You have probably come across this tip countless times before, but it is so important that it is worth reiterating. Simply, always focus on the subject's eyes. While there are exceptions to the rule, it is rare for an image to succeed if the subject's eyes aren't razor sharp. Eyes are engaging and help us to connect with the subject, which is why they are one of the first things we instinctively look at.



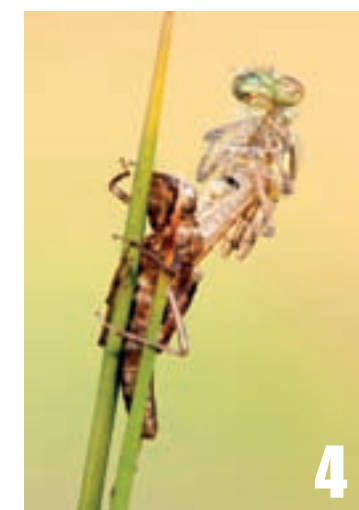
2

4 Capture behaviour

If you want your wildlife close-ups to stand out from the crowd, try capturing interesting or unusual behaviour. For example, a photo of an insect hatching, mating, flying or devouring its prey will have far more impact than a simple, standard portrait. A good knowledge of your subject is essential if you wish to achieve intimate shots of behaviour, so research potential subjects thoroughly in order to know where to go and what to look for.

5 Keep your camera parallel

To maximise the available depth of field at any given f-stop, keep your camera parallel to the subject. If the camera's sensor plane (indicated on the camera body) isn't parallel to the subject, parts of it will drift out of focus.



4

8 Pre-focus your lens

When photographing flighty or timid subjects that are easily disturbed, it is important to keep your movements to an absolute minimum when moving into position. Even the movement



5

7 Switch to manual focusing

Generally speaking, using autofocus is best avoided when shooting close-ups. Autofocus tends to be less accurate when working in such close proximity to the subject, with the lens hunting back and forth in an attempt to achieve focus. Not only will this waste valuable time, but it can disturb or frighten your subject. Switch instead to manual focusing. This will allow you to place your point of focus with pinpoint accuracy. With practice, you will work quicker and more efficiently in manual.



10

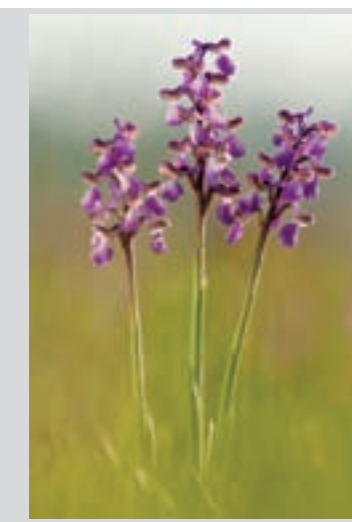
of your hand adjusting the focus ring may send your subject flying or scurrying away. Therefore, pre-focus your lens in advance and then move slowly forward until your subject appears sharp through the viewfinder. Pre-focus on a nearby object of similar size to that of your subject.

9 Makeshift windbreak

A close-up photographer's biggest enemy is windy weather. Even the slightest breeze can appear vastly exaggerated when working up close. Thankfully, when shooting static subjects, like flowers, it is often possible to shelter your subject. Try using your body or your camera backpack, placed to the side of the subject, to shield it from the wind, and release the shutter remotely if necessary - either using the camera's self-timer facility or a remote device.

10 Approach carefully

Insects and reptiles are very sensitive to movement. Therefore, when stalking a subject, think about every step you take. Keep movements slow and deliberate, and anticipate how you may disturb nearby plants.



TOP TIP

6 Check for background clutter

What you exclude from the frame is often as important as what you include. It is commonplace to get so preoccupied with your subject that you completely overlook what is going on in the image's background. A messy backdrop can completely ruin an otherwise good close-up. For example, distracting grasses, or ugly highlights will draw the viewer's eye away from the intended focal point. Prior to releasing the shutter, get into the habit of allowing your eye time to fully explore the frame. If your camera has a preview button, use it - it will allow you to preview exactly what will be in, and out, of focus in the final image. Distracting elements can be quickly removed by 'gardening' (don't cut flowers), or excluded by slightly altering viewpoint or opting for a shallower depth of field. A simple, clean backdrop will help your subject stand out.



11

CREATIVE ADVICE

11 Learn to 'see'

One of the key factors in capturing great close-ups is the ability to 'see' the image in the first place. Macro photographers have the ability to reveal a hidden world, highlighting or isolating small, interesting detail, texture, shape and form. You need to rediscover childlike curiosity and get down on your hands and knees to see what is there. Learn to closely study objects that you might otherwise walk by or overlook. For example, mossy logs, lichen-encrusted boulders and seaweed-clad rocks can all present a host of opportunities when viewed up-close.

12 Shoot from above

Photographers are often taught to shoot from the subject's eye-level in order to create a natural looking perspective. While this is true, don't be afraid to try a fresh perspective. An overhead view, looking directly down on the subject, can alter our perception of the subject and distort scale. It can also help highlight the subject's shape and form, and turn it into a more abstract interpretation. Worth a try!



13 Shoot from below

Look for viewpoints that capture the subject from below. A 'worm's eye' view will provide a distorted perspective, creating the appearance that the subject is larger and more imposing than it is. LiveView is a great tool for this, allowing you to compose from awkward angles without using the viewfinder.



12

14 Selective focusing

Want your subject or point of focus to stand out against its surroundings? Try selective focusing. Opt for a large aperture, f/2.8 or f/4, for example, in order to creatively throw everything out of focus other than your chosen focal point. Depth of field is naturally shallow at high magnifications anyway, but using a large aperture will exaggerate the effect. Results can look striking, with your subject standing out sharply against a beautifully diffused background. Pinpoint focusing is required, so using a tripod is recommended.

15 Add water droplets

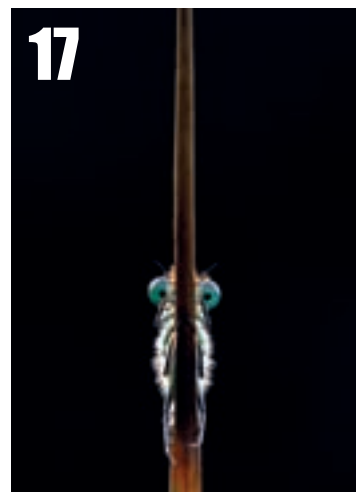
Whether you're shooting a flower, spider's web or leaf, tiny water droplets can help add scale, depth and sparkle to your close-up shots. On still, fine mornings, tiny dew drops will cling to everything, glistening in the early morning light. They quickly evaporate, though, which is why it can be helpful to add your own. This is simple to do using an atomiser or spray bottle costing just a few quid from your local chemist or garden centre. Carefully spray your subject from a distance of 30-40cm to create a fine mist. Droplets will form, giving the appearance of dew or rain, adding an extra dimension to your shots.

16 Visit the beach

The beach is a great place for close-up photography. Sand patterns, rock formations, driftwood, pebbles, shells, seaweed, mussels and limpets clinging onto rocks all look fascinating in close-up. Explore rock pools carefully, and seek out interesting detail and texture.

17 Break the rules

Don't always feel compelled to conform to old-school compositional rules. After all, rules are designed to be broken. For example, placing your subject centrally, rather than on an intersecting third, can produce more striking, eye-catching results. Compose instinctively.



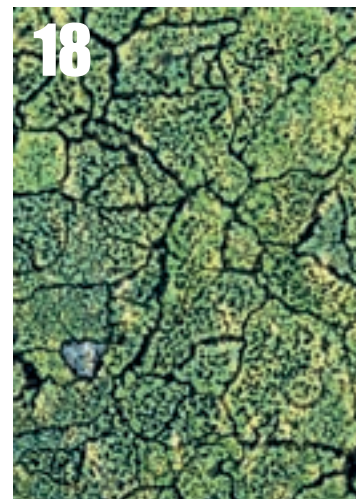
17

18 Look for repetition

The miniature world is full of patterns and repetitive shapes. Repetition in photos provides structure, order, interest and intrigue. Look for texture, colour and shapes, both natural and man-made, that repeat. Wood grain, bark, ice, sand, feathers and rust are also great potential subjects. Using a close-up attachment, you can isolate and highlight repetition, creating simple, abstract results.

19 Create a silhouette

A silhouette is a simple, inky black outline, devoid of colour or detail, contrasted against a lighter background. It is the most extreme form of backlighting. To cast your subject into silhouette, shoot into the light; morning and evening are best, as the sun is lower in the

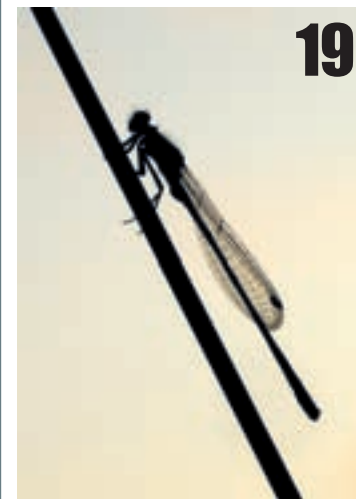


18

sky. Use your camera's spot metering mode to meter correctly for the subject's brighter background. Doing so will result in your subject being grossly underexposed, thus creating a silhouette. Opt for instantly recognisable subject shapes, such as a spider, dragonfly, flower or leaf.

21 Get close; then move closer still

You don't need to photograph your subject in its entirety. Shooting a subject in extreme close-up, isolating just part of it - maybe its wings, scales, skin, fur or eyes - can create the most striking result. Images can look abstract or surreal. Through a macro lens, photographers are able to highlight form and fine detail normally not seen or appreciated. This unusualness guarantees to grab attention.



19



21

22 KISS

'Keep It Simple Stupid' is a principal particularly relevant to close-up photography. So many images fail due to them being made overly complex. You'll notice that the

majority of successful macro images often involve just one or two key elements, for example, shape, texture, light or colour. Don't try to be clever just for the sake of it; keep it simple and your images will markedly improve.

TOP TIP 20

Place lines diagonally

Diagonal lines are particularly effective in close-up images. While horizontal lines can divide an image, placed diagonally, they appear more dynamic and help the composition look less static. For example, place the rachis of a feather so that it cuts from corner to corner; rather than from side to side of the frame. To do this, simply rotate your camera when composing your photo.



22





27

MACRO LIGHTING

23 Backlighting is best

The light's direction will greatly influence the look, feel and mood of your images. Arguably, the most dramatic form of light is backlighting. It works particularly well with translucent subjects, like petals, foliage, insects' wings and water droplets. Light passing through the subject reveals fine detail, such as the tiny, intricate veins of a leaf. Backlighting, however, can fool TTL metering systems, typically causing underexposure. Check the histogram regularly and apply positive exposure compensation if you need to lighten images.



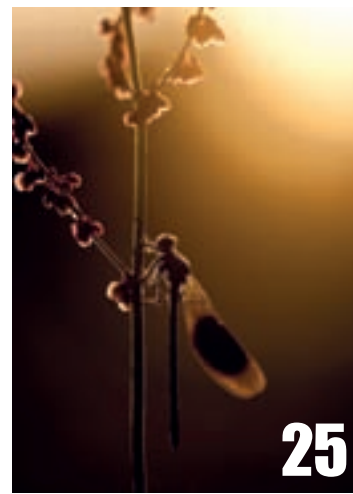
24

24 Attach a lens hood

When shooting backlit or silhouetted subjects, the risk of flare is enhanced, due to shooting into the light's direction. Attach a lens hood to help prevent flare. If necessary, also shield the lens with your hand or a card.

25 Set your alarm early

Getting up early isn't fun, but mornings often produce the best opportunities of the day for photography. Reptiles are less active; insects can be found still resting among tall grasses and foliage; while plants



25

and flowers will glisten with tiny dewdrops. The light is softer and warmer first thing in the morning, and the sun's low position in the sky makes it possible to backlight your subject, creating more striking, atmospheric results.

26 Mind your shadow

When shooting insects and mini-beasts, always be careful of your shadow. If you cast it across your subject, the shadow will alert it to potential danger and it will likely scurry or fly away. When approaching your subject, therefore, be aware of the sun's position. Let this guide your direction of approach.



26

27 Don't be afraid of flash

While I prefer using natural light when possible, it isn't always practical. Light is often limited when working in close-up and, unless the subject is completely static, subject motion is a genuine risk at slower shutter speeds. Using flash has a number of benefits. It can freeze subject movement; allows a smaller aperture to be employed in order to provide a larger depth of field; and generally create opportunities that wouldn't have existed with only natural light. A dedicated ring or macro flash, which attaches to the front of the lens, is the best option.

28 Prevent specular 'hotspots'

Many beetles and insects have highly reflective bodies and wing cases that can create reflective 'hotspots' when flash is used. Diffuse flash bursts by attaching tissue or tracing paper to your flashgun. Better still, buy a soft box to diffuse light and reduce specular reflections.



29 Convert your flash into a ringflash

Due to its relatively high position, the flash burst from a hotshoe mounted flashgun can miss or only partly illuminate nearby objects. Adapters are available, however, to convert your existing speedlight into a ringflash; Rayflash are among the manufacturers. The adapter simply pushes onto the front of the flash and employs a system of internal prisms and reflectors



to distribute the light evenly around the lens. It still, however, lacks the versatility you get with a dedicated ringflash unit.

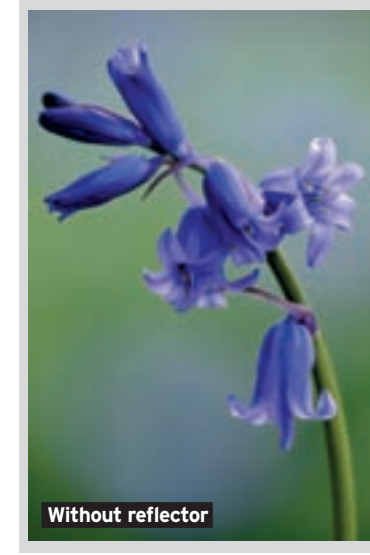
30 Diffuse the light

One of the benefits of working so close to the subject is that photographers have more control over lighting. When sunlight is harsh and unflattering, diffuse the light to soften its strength and reduce contrast. Lastolite are among the companies that market diffusers. Alternatively, a sheet of translucent, opaque plastic will do the job. I've even seen photographers make diffusers from a coat-hanger and semi-clear shower curtain! Simply bend the wire hanger into a square or circular shape, cut the shower curtain to fit, and secure it onto the hanger frame using tape. Using a diffuser is straightforward; simply hold it between the sunlight and your subject to soften the light. The closer to the subject, the better.

TOP TIP

31 Make a reflector

When photographing miniature subjects, like insects, flowers, texture or fungi, light is often in short supply. One of the best ways to supplement natural light is by using a reflector. You can also relieve dark, ugly shadows by bouncing light onto the subject. Compact, foldaway reflectors are available for around £20, but you could save a few quid by making your own. Simply tape some silver foil onto a piece of stiff card. A4 is a good size, being large enough to be able to illuminate small subjects, like plants and flowers, yet small enough to slip into most camera bags without being folded.



Without reflector



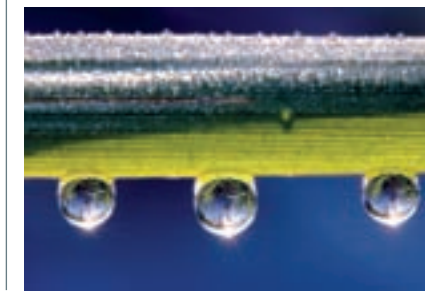
With reflector

30



33 Shoot whatever the weather

Regardless of the season, weather or light, there are always opportunities to shoot great close-ups. For example, after rainfall, foliage will be vibrant and tiny droplets of water will cling to every branch and leaf. In winter, wrap up warm and shoot abstract looking close-ups of ice patterns and frost-covered vegetation. Dull, grey days can produce beautiful, even lighting - perfect for floral close-ups.



32 Use a lightbox

Don't let wet weather stop you. If you own a lightbox - maybe a remnant from your days of shooting film - dust it off and use it to create beautifully backlit images, all within the comfort of your home. Translucent subjects, like leaves, work best. Visit a local park or woodland and collect a handful of colourful or interestingly shaped leaves. Arrange them on your lightbox and shoot them from above to make great abstracts.



CLOSE-UP EQUIPMENT



34 You don't need a macro lens

Even if you don't own a dedicated macro lens, you can still capture great close-ups. My interest in close-up photography was ignited thanks to a set of inexpensive close-up filters. They simply screw onto the front of your lens and act like a magnifying lens. They are available in a range of strengths - try a +3 or +4 dioptre as a good starting point. Hoya are among the filter brands that produce them, typically costing in the region of £10-£20.

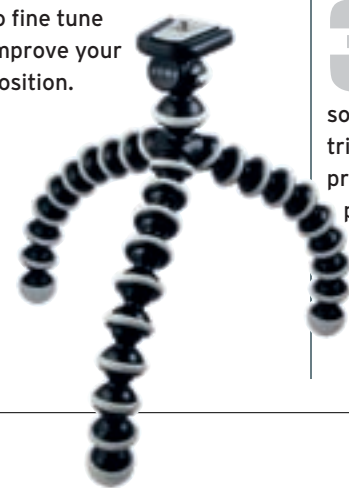
35 Extend your lens

Extension rings are another excellent close-up attachment. They are hollow tubes that fit between the lens and camera body and work by reducing the lens' minimum focusing distance. They are constructed without any optics, so don't degrade image quality. Although more costly, auto extension tubes are the best choice, as they retain all the camera's automatic functions. They are best combined with short focal lengths - a standard 50mm lens is the ideal choice.



36 Keep it steady

At high magnifications, the smallest movement can appear greatly exaggerated - it is easy to overestimate just how steady you can keep your camera. Selecting a fast shutter speed, or using image stabilising, will greatly reduce the risk of shake, but better still, use a tripod, beanbag (like those made by Stealth Gear) or even a Joby Gorillapod. Tripods offer the best possible stability, while a beanbag is great when shooting from ground level. Not only will a support give you stability, but it will also allow you to fine tune and improve your composition.



37 Use a remote device

When practical to do so, use a remote cord or device to trigger the shutter. Doing so will prevent you from having to physically press the shutter release button, which can potentially create a small degree of camera movement and soften the final image.



38 Maximise sharpness

Better still; use a remote cable in combination with your camera's mirror lockup facility. This is designed to allow photographers to lock the reflex mirror in the up position prior to actually taking the shot, so that any internal vibrations caused by 'mirror slap' have dissipated. This is particularly good practice for close-up photographers, as even the slightest movement is exaggerated when shooting at large magnifications.

39 Plamp it

Close-up photography can be a fiddly business. When you're trying to peer through the viewfinder, focus, hold a reflector in place and trigger the shutter all at the same time, you often wish you had a third hand. The Wimberley Plamp is exactly that. It is an arm with a clamp fixed at either end. One clamp fastens to your tripod leg, while the other can be used to hold a reflector in place or an off-camera flash. It can even be employed to hold a branch or flower in position in blowy conditions. Thanks to its innovative ball-and-socket segmented arm, it can be positioned quickly and easily and then folded up in order to fit in your camera bag.

40 Use a right-angle finder

When taking photos at, or near, ground level, there is no better macro accessory than a right-angle finder. A low-level approach is often best when shooting close-ups, but unless you own a digital SLR with a tilt-swivel articulated LCD - like the Nikon D5100 or Canon 60D - composing images with any accuracy can be tricky or impossible. With a right-angle finder attached to the eyepiece, the image can be comfortably viewed at right angles to the camera's optical axis.



41 Carry a soft brush

Through a macro lens, even the smallest particles of dirt, dust or pollen can prove ugly or distracting. You could simply remove them during post-processing using the Clone Tool or Healing Brush in Photoshop, but this can be fiddly and time consuming. Instead, use a small,



TOP TIP

43 Attach a polariser

Polarising filters are known for their ability to saturate clear blue skies in wideangle views. The way in which they can reduce subject glare and reflections, however, makes them equally suitable for close-up photography. They are most useful when shooting flowers and foliage. Simply rotate the filter in its mount until natural colour saturation is restored. A polariser will help give your floral close-ups more vibrancy and impact. Due to their two-stop filter factor, shutter speed will be slower as a result of attaching one.



41

42 Use a groundsheet

Photographers are often kneeling down, lying prone on the ground or crawling through undergrowth. To avoid getting extremely muddy or soggy, use a groundsheet, like the the Linpix Photography Mat, to help keep you and your equipment clean and dry. Alternatively, wear waterproof clothing, or buy garden kneeling pads.

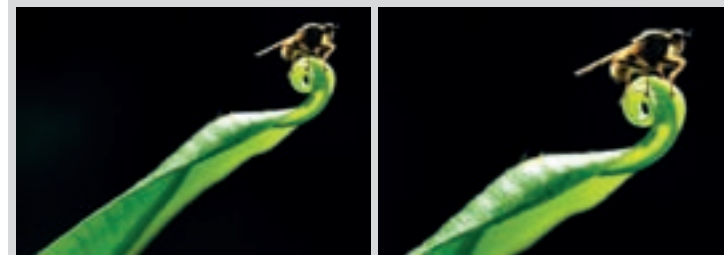
42





The ability to reveal the unseen details of everyday life is one of the great draws of taking macro photographs

POST-PROCESSING MACRO SHOTS



TOP TIP 44 Crop your image

Due to the challenges involved when shooting close-ups, photographers can be excused for not always achieving the perfect composition in-camera. Cropping is part of the compositional process. Thanks to the high resolution of digital SLRs today, discarding a few pixels won't significantly degrade image quality. Cropping allows you to enhance composition, or exclude distracting background elements. All photo editing software has a crop tool. In Photoshop, click on the Crop Tool from the toolbar. Make your selection - the area to be retained is highlighted. You can move or transform the crop area by dragging the selection or the selection handles. To perform the crop, simply double click or hit Enter.

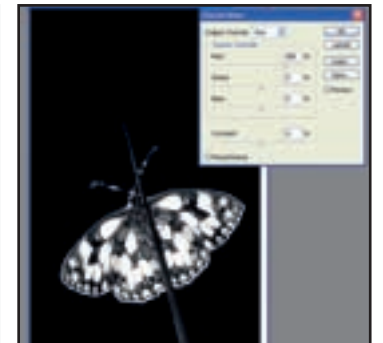
45 Tidy up your shot

Using the Clone Tool, Healing Brush or Content-Aware Brush - available in the latest version of Photoshop - it is possible to tidy up your close-ups. Not only do these tools allow you to remove distracting background detail - like grasses or twigs - but also eliminate specks or dirt, dust or pollen from your subject that you couldn't remove in the field.

46 Try focus stacking

Focus stacking is designed to extend depth of field. Put simply, it is a blending technique where a number of images - each captured at different focal depths - are combined. In principal, it is not dissimilar to High Dynamic Range (HDR) photography, only it is aimed to extend back-to-front sharpness instead. It is a technique well-suited to macro

work, when it is not always possible to achieve sufficient depth of field. Subjects need to be static and a tripod is essential. Shoot a series of images and manually alter the point of focus on each so that a different part of the subject is in sharp focus. While none of the individual shots will capture the subject entirely in focus, the sequence should contain all the data required to generate an image where the subject will be rendered sharp throughout in the final image. The images need to be blended and aligned in post-processing. This is possible using the latest versions of Photoshop, using Auto Blend Layers. There are also good, dedicated programmes available online; CombineZP is one of the most popular and free to download.



48 Convert your close-ups into mono

Don't overlook the impact and drama of black & white. It particularly suits images of texture, shape and form. Converting images is quick and simple in post-processing. The Channel Mixer in Photoshop offers users a high level of control. Click: **Image>Adjustments>Channel Mixer**.

And finally...

49 Respect your subject

When shooting natural subjects, like mini-beasts, reptiles, wild plants and flowers, always place the subject's welfare first. Try not to disturb your subject; be careful of where you tread; don't cut or pick flowers; and be careful not to squish anything when kneeling or lying prone.

50 Start taking photos

Finally...stop reading, grab your camera and begin shooting great close-ups! ■

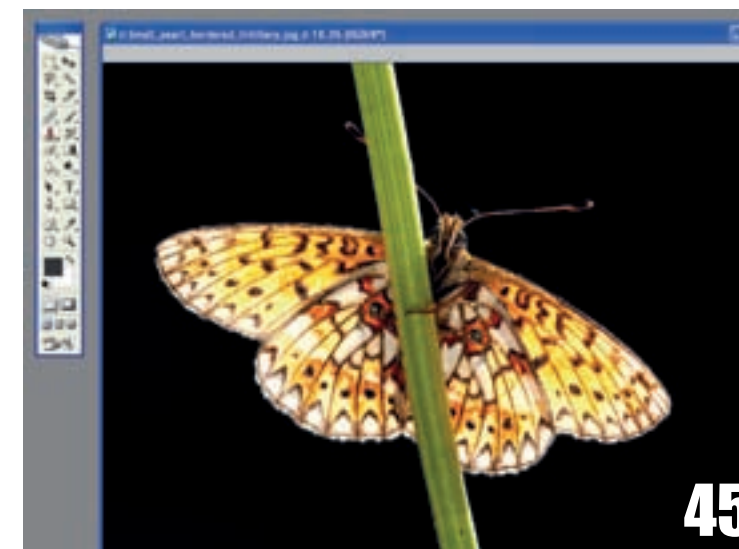
Your chance to get published!

Turn to page 111 to find out about our 'macro' photography competition



47 Blur distracting background detail

If you find background detail is too prominent or distracting, all is not lost. It is possible to blur a subject's background post-capture. There are many ways to do this. One quick method is to create a Duplicate Layer in Photoshop and apply Gaussian Blur to the new layer by clicking **Filter>Blur>Gaussian Blur** - alter Radius to taste. Next, add a Layer Mask and, using the Eraser Tool, carefully brush over the area of the image you wish to be sharp. The subject will then stand out boldly against its now blurred surroundings.



45