



STAG DO

For over 30 years MATT PEASTER has
photographed the iconic Quantock stags.

CATHERINE WELTON discovers
what it takes to capture our local
deer during their autumnal rut

PHOTO: MATT PEASTER



The first thing you notice in Matt Peaster's Quantocks home, after being enthusiastically greeted by his beautiful Labradors of course, is row upon row of antlers. 'That's just a small selection,' he laughs. He has been collecting shed antlers for as long as he has been photographing the deer up on the hills and many of the antlers are from stags that he has come to know over the course of their lives. 'If a stag lives until he's 10 on the Quantocks, he should get a medal, if he lives until 15, it should be a gold medal.'

Growing up on the Quantocks meant Matt travelled over the hills every day to school, which gave him an appreciation for nature from an early age. 'I would see pheasants, deer, the changing of the seasons, sunrise and sunset,' he remembers. Family holidays to Scotland, where he could observe golden eagles, deer and otters, deepened that interest.

When he was about 14, he asked for his first camera, but his early attempts to photograph wildlife were a steep learning curve. 'I started with a small 100mm lens. When my film came back from being developed, I realised the deer I thought I'd photographed were just small dots!'

Matt quickly realised he had to get closer to his subjects. He sought out books on fieldcraft, including those by the famous British naturalist, author and filmmaker Mike Tomkies, 'He had an Alsatian, he'd go camping up in the mountains and photograph the golden eagles on their nests.'

Tomkies' books gave Matt the practical insight he needed, 'This is how you get closer, you can have a hide, wear camo clothing, think about the wind direction, use trees.'

Gradually he was able to improve his kit too, incorporating better lenses, and he still remembers the anticipatory thrill of getting a film back. 'Out of a roll of 36 pictures, how many good ones did I have?'

Today, of course, Matt works with digital cameras but he prefers not to manipulate his work. 'I'm a bit of a purist, I don't use Photoshop to take out fence posts. If anything, those kinds of mistakes are part of what drives me to go out

again the next day. You're always after the best you can get.' For him, the thrill comes from being as near to his subjects as possible. 'It's a hunter experience but you're photographing,' he explains. 'You're pitting your wits, skills and techniques to try and get as close as you can. When I am within 10 or 20 metres of a big stag, that's an achievement.'

Finding and photographing the same stags, year after year, means some of them inevitably become favourites. 'Big Eric was the first,' he remembers fondly, 'I named him after the stag in *Monarch of the Glen*. That programme used to make me laugh because the keeper would take the Laird out to see 'Big Eric' but they'd show him a different stag every time!'

Another favourite is Big George. 'I think he's about 15, I've known him for 10 years and I'm sure he recognises me. Once I remember he walked past me and looked right at me. I just nodded to him.'

Despite this familiarity, Matt knows you can't be too complacent around the stags, especially during the rut. 'I've had silly moments in the past. I saw a stag lying down in the heather and I knew I couldn't get to him without him seeing me. So, I imitated bellowing to bring him to me. He got up and started walking from about 200m away, he kept coming, walking right at me. He had his head back and he was roaring. He came within 10m of me, and I thought that was a bit silly, in the middle of the rut. I had no protection, I was out in the clear, with no tree, no cover and nothing anywhere near me.'

'You have to read the situation and understand it. The early part of the rut, they're going through the motions but in the middle they're highly charged. You need to read the signs before you get too close. I saw a stag last October, I didn't recognise him, he was walking towards me and had clearly been fighting with other stags, and I thought, I don't like this.'

For all that, the rut is inevitably his favourite time of year. 'I love the drama of it. But also, the bracken's changing colour, greens to golds and browns. The trees

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are changing. The light is softer, you get the first mists, cobwebs and dew. I keep myself going through work and everything else that’s going on in life, for my two weeks off in October watching the rut. If only you could bottle that sense of atmosphere.’

And, although his focus is deer, nature often offers up something else too. ‘You never know what else you’re going to see. Out on the Levels it’s kingfishers and barn owls. Up on the hills, buzzards and kestrels. On Exmoor you have the hen harrier.’

Over the years, his drive to capture the perfect image means he has taken thousands of photographs. ‘A good picture is like a good cake – you need all the ingredients, the light, good background, something happening, an extra bit of magic, the drama of a fight or roaring. A bit of action. You’re looking for that wow factor.’

But his personal favourites aren’t necessarily the most obvious ones, they’re often the ones with a story behind them. ‘Each photo takes on a different representation of a different moment. It might not necessarily be a great photo, but I know it took an extraordinary effort to get close to a particular stag. Certain circumstances just make that whole experience stand out.’

‘I have one photo of a beautiful stag, with perfectly shaped antlers. He’d gone off the hill and into the woods, with his group of hinds. The hinds were playing, and I spent the whole day next to that group of deer. That’s a favourite photo.’

There was a time in Matt’s life when he considered doing photography full time. ‘There was a point about 15 or 20 years ago when I was keen to go professional and I felt like I had to get a picture and I was focussed on getting something that was sellable.’

In the end, though, he chose to keep photography as something he does to unwind from his busy day job, running a land management company. ‘When I go out with my camera, I escape from everything else in life, all my clients who are chasing me, the traffic, everything else, you switch off and concentrate on trying to get a picture or enjoying the moment in what seems to be a busier and busier world.’

‘A lot of the time these days I’m not even that worried about getting the shot. I’d rather immerse myself and enjoy the atmosphere, the drama or whatever else is going on. When I see Big George and he’s looking right at the camera, I’m almost happy not to take the photo and just say, “Hi George”.’ ●



PHOTO: MATT PEETER