

Creative Heathland Photography



GILLMOON
PHOTOGRAPHY

Suffolk Sandlings

The aim of this little guide is to help you get to grips with heathland photography. The information applies to any heathland area but I am going to write about my experiences of photographing the Suffolk Sandlings - an area of lowland heath that once stretched the entire length of the Suffolk Coast.

Today only about 20% of the original Sandlings heath remains split into small fragments dotted along the length of the Suffolk Coast. The best examples can be found at Sutton Heath, Upper and Lower Hollesley Common, Tunstall and Blaxhall heath and Westleton and Dunwich heaths.

Each area of heathland is slightly different and will give you different photographic opportunities.

Sutton Heath and Upper Hollesley Common represent one of the largest continuous areas of Sandlings heathland left in Suffolk. They are designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) Photographically they are worth exploring and offer good opportunities whatever the season.

Sutton Heath has some stunning areas of heather mixed with small silver birch trees. There are plenty of open spaces and some good undulating heathland where it is possible to isolate individual trees amongst the heather. Much of the woodland is mixed with a particularly large glade of silver birch surround by bracken which is one of my favourite places for autumn colour.

Upper Hollesley Common covers a larger area and is the more diverse location with a variety of habitats in close proximity; silver birch glades, beech woodland, pine plantations and open heathland.

Westleton Heath is now a National Nature Reserve (NNR) and is important for the flora and fauna it supports. It has a more open and undulating habitat than Hollesley but it does have some lovely areas of grassland in between the heather which support some interesting wild flowers.

Dunwich heath is probably Suffolk's best know heathland and is famed for its vast open expanse of mauve with the iconic white coastguard cottages as a backdrop.

Both Westleton and Dunwich Heath suffered greatly in the heat and drought of the summer 2022 and the heather hasn't yet recovered. The heaths further south were not so badly affected and the heather is still vibrant.

Photographing in these environments is all about aesthetics, finding a subject that catches your eye, whether that is a single tree, a natural pathway or a shaft of light and then composing an image around it using supporting elements to add depth and interest.



Focal Points

Lowland heaths are flat landscapes comprised of low growing heathers, grasses and shrubs interspersed with scattered silver birch, oak and pine trees. Areas with flat topography can be difficult to photograph so I try to look for elements which will add height and a sense of scale - stand alone trees make great subjects.

Your choice of viewpoint will determine the relationship between your foreground subjects and the background.

Do you want an 'eye level' viewpoint - which is the way we all see the world most of the time - or do you want to get lower to the ground and make your foreground subject appear more prominent in the frame.

Changing your viewpoint changes

the perspective

the lines in your image

the direction and mood of the light

it can also emphasise patterns and texture.

This can be better illustrated with some of the following images.



This shot shows an area of heathland at Upper Hollesey Common. It shows the heathland habitat off well, but as an image it doesn't have a strong focal point or a very interesting foreground. The colours are lovely but on their own nice colours are not strong enough to hold an image together. You need a bit more substance.



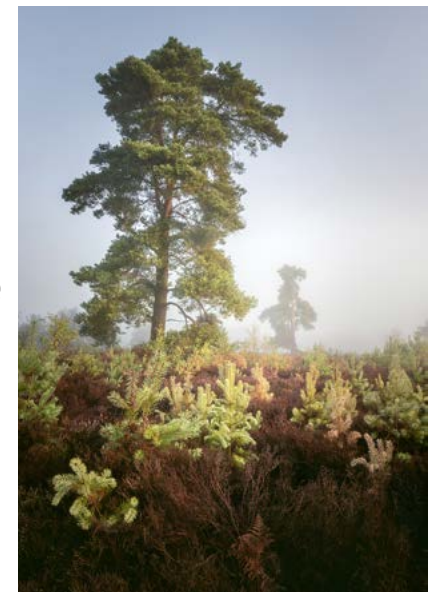
This shot might not be as 'pretty' as the last shot but it is perhaps visually stronger. There is an obvious focal point - the tree in the distance, and there is a strong foreground - the dead area of heather.

The foreground and the background form a relationship and the viewers eye wants to move between the two elements.

The fog in the background also helps to separate the focal point and make it stand out.

This is another image which works in a similar way. The foreground tree and the tiny trees that surround it grab the attention and the background tree in the mist becomes the supporting element. There is a relationship between the two trees and your eye wants to move between these elements.

The mist in the background also helps to simplify the image and separate the background tree from the landscape around it.



Leading Lines



Having a focal point is a great start but now comes the challenge of finding some way to make the foreground connect with the focal point. The two don't need to physically connect but if you can create a relationship between the foreground and the background you will have an image with a natural progression through the frame.

In the shot on the left I have used the lines of heather to create movement through the frame and lead the eye towards the tree.



Similarly the shot on the right uses a line of heather coming in from the right hand corner to lead the eye towards the tree.

The mist helps to separate the tree from its background and simplify the image. The bright colours of the heather help create interest in what could have been a dull and mono toned image.



Textures are a great way of adding foreground interest to a shot without actually using a specific object.

The mix of plants found on the heaths offer fantastic opportunities to incorporate textures into an image.

In the top image I have arranged my composition around a group of 3 trees and used the fluffy seed heads on the grass to create a leading line coming in from the right hand corner.

It is these area of contrasts that I tend to look for when I am out photographing. For me it is the 'transition' zones that make compositions interesting.

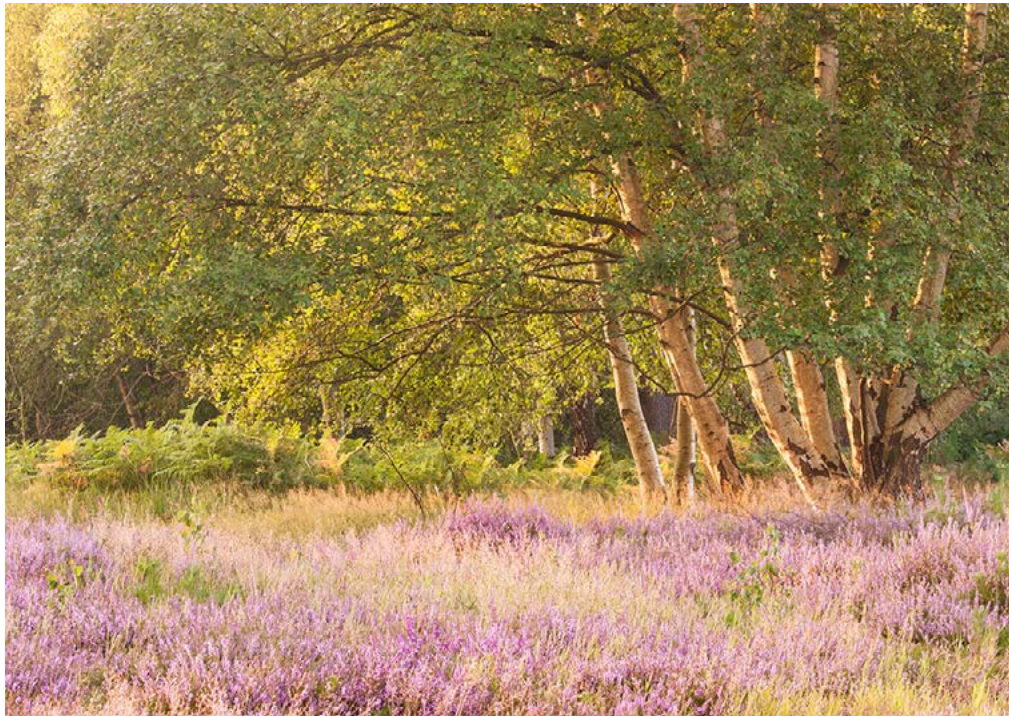
Intimate landscapes and small details

An 'intimate landscape' is one formed by isolating a small part of the scene in front of you. It is the art of putting a frame around a small part of the world and drawing attention to something we might not otherwise notice.

Intimate landscapes focus on shapes, lines, colours, textures and patterns and don't often feature horizons. Despite this the same approach to composition applies and it is still important to consider how the eye moves around the frame.

In my opinion intimate landscapes work best with low view points and wide open apertures. Try getting very close to your foreground, shooting through plants to create blocks of out of focus colour, exclude context and look for texture, shape and colour.

In the shot below I have used a small group of silver birch trees as my focal point and have turned my camera towards the light which was the element that initially caught my attention.



Intimate landscapes can work by playing with your depth of field. In this shot above I have focused on the white trunk of the silver birch and have used the out of focus blocks of colour to create a contrast with the sharply focused tree.

This image was shot at an aperture of F3.5 with a focal length of 200mm. It is this combination that has created the blur in the foreground and background.



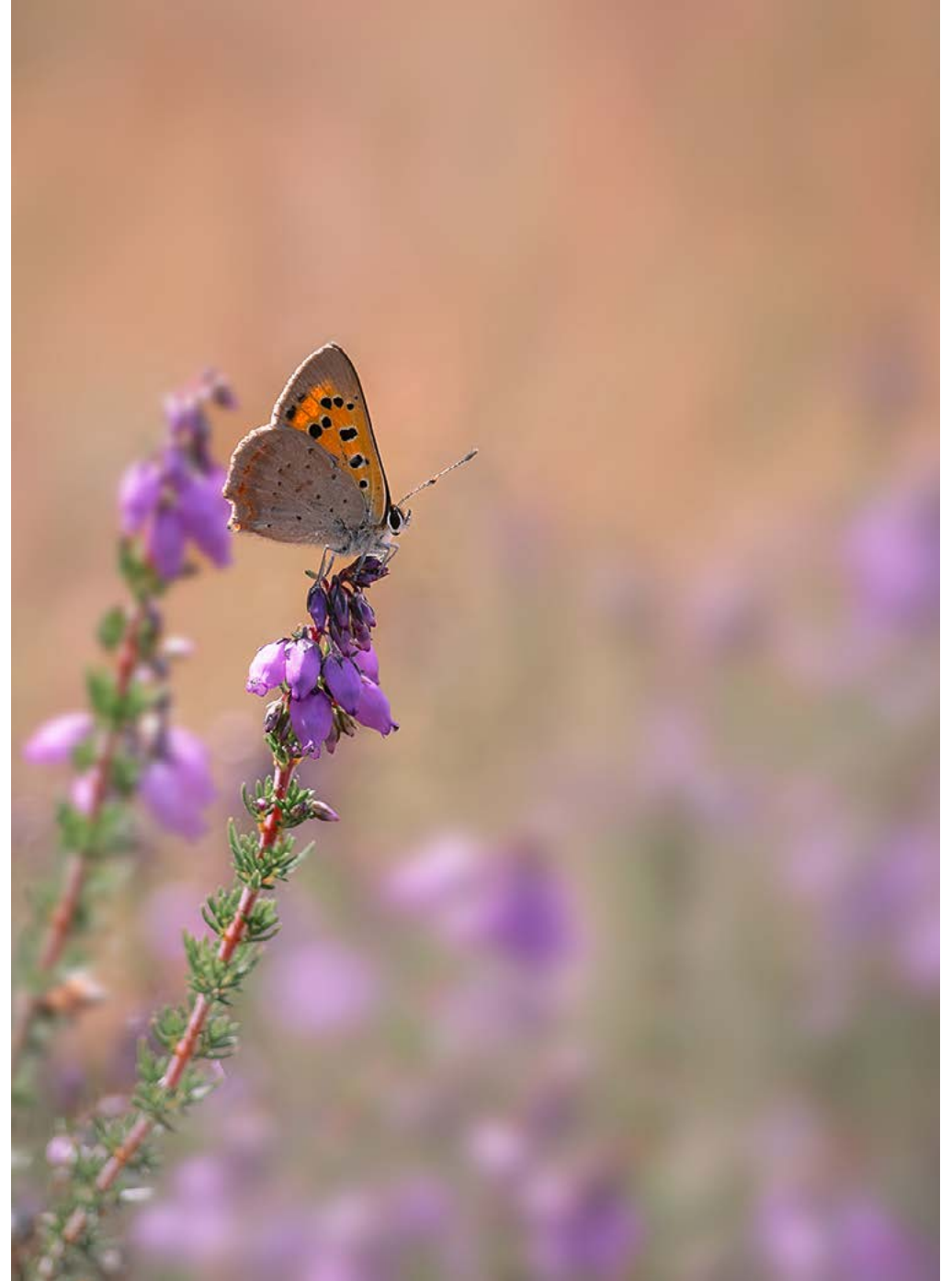
In recent years I have started to enjoy the more intimate world of close up photography, particularly flowers and plants. To take these shots I use a combination of my 70-200mm lens and my 105mm macro.

Most of the time I am trying to do more than capture a literal documentary image, I am trying to create a mood and convey an emotion. For this I need to be aware of all the little details around me as well as the direction and the quality of the light.

I often experiment with viewpoints and will generally get down low on the ground and close to my subject.

The image above was taken at F6.3 using a focal length of 200mm. I used the fluffy grasses to form a veil in front of the lens so adding an element of blur to the foreground of the image.

The image on the right was taken at F5.6 using a 200mm focal length with a 70-200mm lens.



Shooting through foliage

When I am photographing plants I like to employ a technique called 'shooting through'. This is where I use surrounding foliage close up to the lens to create an extra area of blur.

The image on the right shows some rosebay willow herb. It grows around the edges of the heath and forms clumps of tall waving flower spikes.

To create this image I identified the flower spike that I wanted to photograph. I decided to shoot towards the light as this gave me the most pleasing background colours. The soft yellow in the background is formed by the sun shining on the grassland.

Having identified my flower spike I searched for some purple flowers in the foreground that I could place directly in front of my lens. I am using a lens hood and work by placing this directly onto the flowers. This creates a really blurred and abstract foreground with clumps of mauve that form a frame around my chosen flower.

There were bees buzzing around all the flowers so it was just a matter of waiting for the right moment to capture one.

This image was shot at F5.6 at 1/2500 second at ISO 250 with a focal length of 200mm.

This image has had no creative effects applied in photoshop - it is completely crafted in camera, although I have made some exposure adjustments in post processing.



Creative Post Processing

Sometimes I decide that I want to create something different and then I will have a play around with layers in Photoshop. I have included an example below.



This is an image I took of a harebell in amongst the heather. I quite like the simplicity of the image but I felt the colours were too dark and the background was too busy and it didn't really fullfill the dreamy effect I was after.



Whilst I was out shooting my harebell images I also took some shots of out of focus highlights with a view of combining them with flower images during post processing.

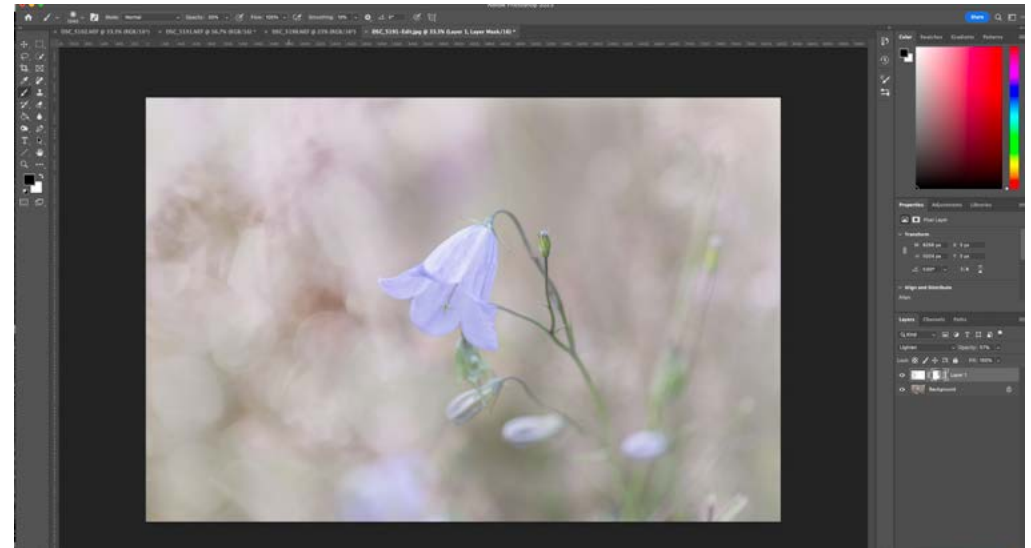
This bokeh image was created by shooting through some pine branches at the sky whilst defocusing the lens.



In photoshop I changed the colours of this image using selective colour adjustments which can be found using the little circle symbol at the bottom of the screen on the right.

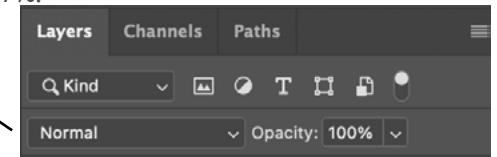


Selective colour accessed here



To make my combined image I have opened both the harebell shot and the bokeh shot as layers in Photoshop. I have then combined these layers using one of the blend modes. In this instance I used lighten with an opacity of 57%.

The blend modes can be found here



To achieve the full result I have added a white layer mask (layer > layer mask > reveal all) which reveals all the changed image. I have then painted back in my hairbell from the original layer using a brush with a reduced opacity of 33%.

You can see the finished image on the following page.

This is not a technique I usually employ but sometimes it is good to try something different. I wouldn't pass this off as an accurate representation but I do quite like the effect.

