

Shooting frogs in the dead of night

by Mark Kirkland

It's 2am on a chilly Wednesday morning in March. I'm covered head to toe in mud, lying on the edge of a pond in complete darkness. I'm waiting for the perfect moment to press the trigger of my camera which is sitting in a foot of water.

I've been here for over 5 hours, my flask is now only half full of tea and my bones are starting to shiver. It's my fifth consecutive night here and my patience remains intact....just. In a few hours the industrial estate behind me will become a bustle of noise as the working day starts. Above, the stars peek out from behind the clouds and in front of me, the glow of the tower block reflects in the black water.

The water is still, apart from the intermittent movement of life — sometimes a gentle splash then a lengthy silence; sometimes a crescendo of vocal noise culminating in a frenzy of activity before suddenly pausing in unison. The silence returns, sometimes for a minute, sometimes for an hour or more.

I've been a keen scuba diver for nearly 10 years, however, for the last 5 it's become a means to an end — the end being photographing the unseen wildlife of Scottish waters. Once I got my first underwater camera, the combination of creativity, unpredictability and that wee sense of adventure quickly got me hooked.

It's a niche and technically tricky endeavour, with relatively few people in the UK taking on the



© Mark Kirkland

A fisheye lens helps put the main subject into a wider context and was perfect for capturing the urban habitat at night. Olympus OMD EM5 MKii in Olympus PT-ETP13 housing. Two Sea and Sea YS-110a strobes. Panasonic 8mm fisheye.. Triggered with OI Share App. 5sec ISO 16 ISO 1000

challenge. Despite this, there's a small group of accomplished underwater photographers in the UK with who I share ideas and inspiration. I'm always trying to push my photography beyond what I've tried before, creatively and in the subjects that I photograph. It's a combination of both that led me

to this small haven of urban wildlife in the South of Glasgow, (without my dive gear of course).

I first encountered the common frogs of Malls Mire in February 2018. It took some planning and luck to get here. With no knowledge of amphibians or freshwater habitats, I started my research by

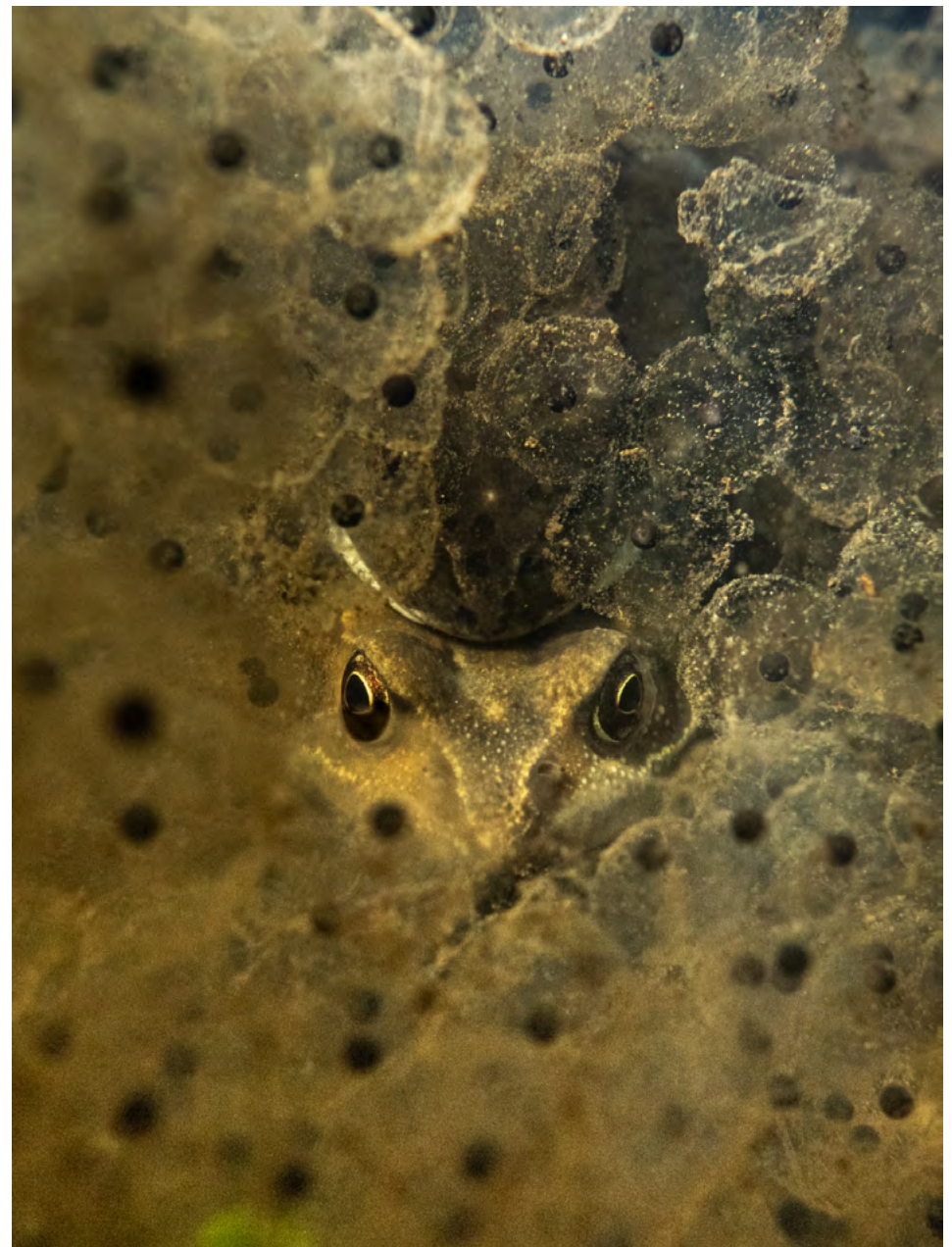


© Mark Kirkland

I might be guilty of anthropomorphising here, but these two look thoroughly unimpressed with my intrusion. Olympus OMD EM5 MKii in Olympus PT-ETP13 housing. Sea and Sea YS-110a Strobe + homemade snoot. Olympus 14-42mm @14mm. . Triggered with OI Share App. 1/8 f3.5 ISO 1250



Issue 115/49



Common Frogs among the frogspawn can make for a more abstract image. Olympus OMD EM5 MKii in Olympus PT-ETP13 housing. Sea and Sea YS-110a Strobe + homemade snoot. TOlympus 14-42mm @14mm. Triggered with OI Share App. 1/50 f4.5 ISO 1250

www.uwpmag.com

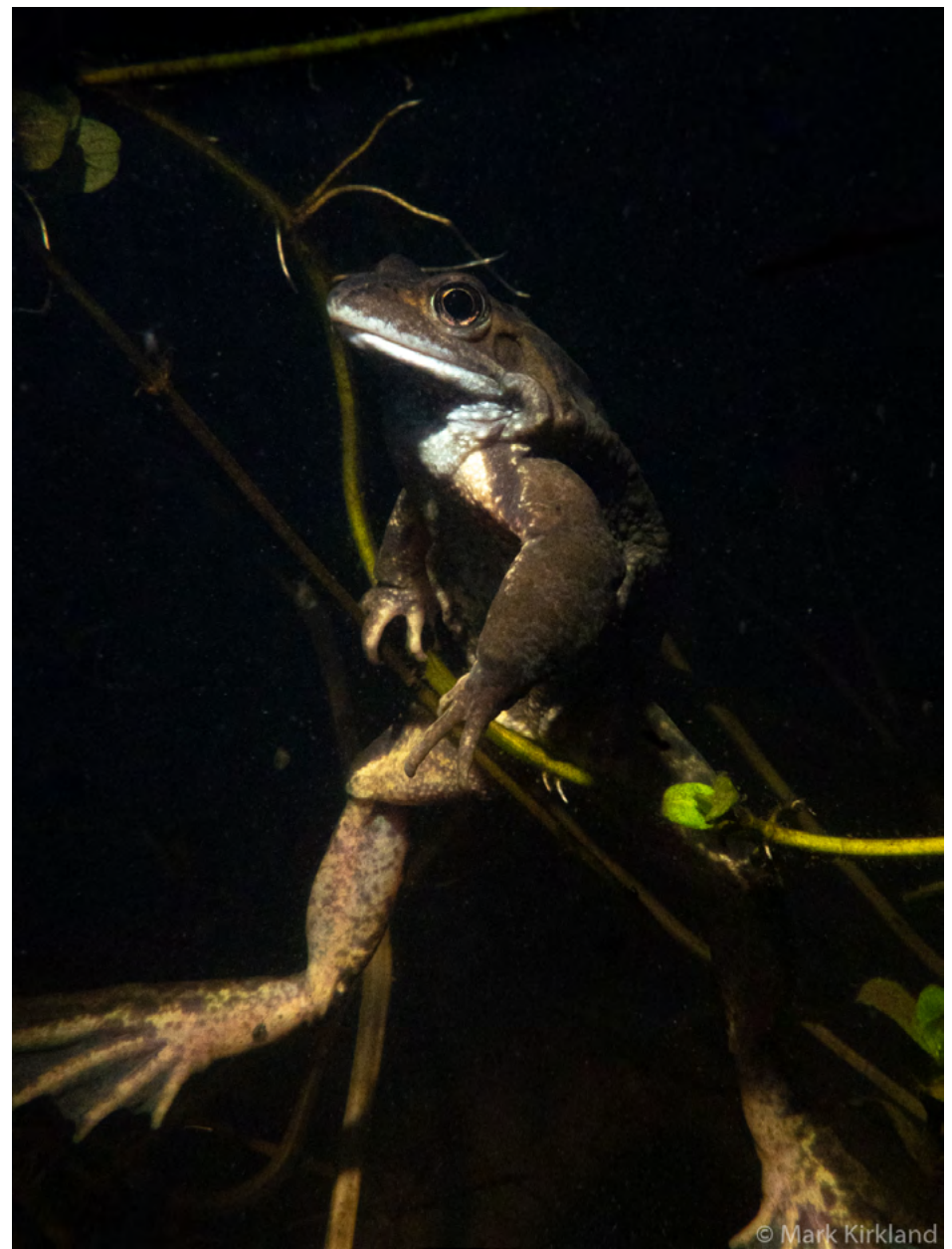


© Mark Kirkland

You don't have to wait long for the character of these animals to come out. You can see why they appear in so many children's books! Olympus OMD EM5 MKii in Olympus PT-ETP13 housing. Sea and Sea YS-110a Strobe+ homemade snoot . Olympus 14-42mm @14mm. . Triggered with OI Share App. 1/4 f4 ISO 1250



Issue 115/50



© Mark Kirkland

This elegant poise shows the frogs powerful hind legs. Olympus OMD EM5 MKii in Olympus PT-ETP13 housing. Sea and Sea YS-110a Strobe + homemade snoot. Olympus 14-42mm @14mm. . Triggered with OI Share App. 1/125 f14 ISO 1250

www.uwpmag.com

(Right) In this shot I've tried to use the line of trees as a textured pattern in the background. I think it works to a degree. I'm trying to introduce more abstract elements into my photography. Olympus OMD EM5 MKii in Olympus PT-ETP13 housing. Sea and Sea YS-110a Strobe. Olympus 14-42mm @14mm 1/80 F14 ISO 200

(Far right) A frog surveys it's surroundings as the setting sun still bursts through the trees. At this point, they were well used to my presence. Olympus OMD EM5 MKii in Olympus PT-ETP13 housing. Sea and Sea YS-110a Strobe. Olympus 14-42mm @14mm 1/100 f18 ISO 500

downloading research papers and contacting local and national wildlife charities and environmental agencies for advice. Despite the great responses, I still needed that bit of luck to find the right location.

Common Frogs spend most of the year in underground burrows, only entering the water for a few days each year to mate. This happens when night-time temperatures rise above about 4°C, however, recent unpredictable weather has made this event hard to track. Over four weeks, I visited different locations every day — some a couple of hours drive away — only to find empty ponds (too early) or ponds already full of frogspawn (too late).

I found the Frogs at Malls Mire towards the end of the spawning season in 2018. It was probably the day I was ready to give up. It's a small area of community-managed mixed woodland and wetland in the South of Glasgow and just twenty minutes away from me. The location near the River Clyde makes it an important green corridor for urban wildlife.

I quickly learned that frog behaviour is as



unpredictable as the weather is these days. Unlike larger toads, frogs are easily spooked and can go into hiding for long periods, so one sudden move was enough to have them scatter out of frame and into the muddy underwater flora. I found that they are also incredibly curious. After a few hours, they grew comfortable with my shadow looming above and they would gather around the water's edge until eventually, I'd have over fifty pairs of eyes staring at me. With gentle movements and patience, I was able to get my camera into the water and start taking photographs.

My head full of ideas and possibilities, since



that first day, I could picture a photograph of the frogs underwater, with the tower blocks in the background. This 'split shot' photography (half underwater, half above water) is a tricky technique, sometimes used by photographers as a great way of putting something underwater into a wider context. It tells a more complete story. In this case, the intersection between hidden wildlife and its urban environment. Like most city wildlife, frogs are most active after dark and I wondered if I could add this extra layer to their story. I was intrigued by the idea of conveying another world on our doorstep that came alive as we slept.



© Mark Kirkland

Again, it's hard not to attribute human characteristics to these little creatures. I titled this image 'Proud Parent' and it came third in the UPY British macro category 2019. Olympus OMD EM5 MKii in Olympus PT-ETP13 housing. Sea and Sea YS-110a Strobe. Olympus 14-42mm @14mm 1/80 F14 ISO 200



Issue 115/52

I visited Malls Mire again in 2019, however nature, at it's predictably unpredictable best, served up a seriously muddy pond for the whole month with absolutely no chance of photography. This year the water was clear but it took four or five visits before the frogs emerged from their nearby burrows.

The shot I was trying to get over the next five nights combined multiple techniques: split photography; backlighting (where a flash is placed behind the subject); close focus wide angle (where you focus closely on a small object using a lens designed to capture wider scenes); and long exposure (usually used to photograph stars, it means the camera shutter stays open for at least a few seconds to get as much light in as possible — however, anything that moves is therefore blurry).

All of this was done using a (completely unreliable) remote trigger, which meant I could take the photo without touching the camera. I hit endless problems such as intermittent drizzly rain constantly ruining the top half of the shot, stirred-up mud, moisture in my underwater housing creating condensation on the lens, trying to focus in darkness (impossible), and trying to focus with torchlight (scares the frogs). The constantly changing weather meant I also had to frequently adjust my

settings while trying not to move around too much.

Eventually, when the frogs, moon and clouds aligned perfectly, my remote trigger would inevitably fail. If it wasn't that, my flash wouldn't fire or my camera battery would die!

Despite more than 25 hours of trying, I didn't get an image that I'm completely happy with. The shots are full of imperfections and there are a lot of 'nearly, but not quite' moments. It's the perfect excuse to try again next year.

Granted, it's not everyone's idea of fun but for me, it was five nights well spent. Aside from the enjoyment I get out of photography, I hope that some of these images help to show an insight into the lives of amazing animals that we share our urban spaces with. You can't treasure what you don't know exists.

Mark Kirkland



www.markkirklandphotography.com
www.instagram.com/markunderwater

www.uwpmag.com

Kit for sale

If you're looking for a specific piece of kit, enter a keyword (e.g. flash, housing, Ikelite, etc.) to show only the adverts you want.

Search UWP adverts



FOR SALE – SET of Sea & Sea YS 250 PRO

SET of Sea & Sea YS 250 PRO, incl.diffusers and TCL ball mounts, 2x batteries, 2x chargers (EU and UK). 5-pin Dual Sync cord-1pc, 5-pin Sync Cord N-2pc, 2sets - Double Ball Arm L and M, YS-TTL Converter, spare ... [More >](#)



FOR SALE – Sea Frogs Panasonic GH5 housing, flat and dome port

Brand new and never taken underwater, 40 metre Sea Frogs (formerly Meikon) housing for the Panasonic GH5. Flat port for macro lenses and dome port for wide angle. No zoom or manual focus controls. Prefer sale in the UK and ... [More >](#)



FOR SALE – Aquatica Macro Port & 2 x Sea & Sea YS -120 Duo Strobes

Aquatica Macro Port (Manual & Autofocus) for any DSLR Aquatica housing with the 4 lugs bayonet fitting. £180. Sea & Sea YS -120 Duo Strobes with instructions & one Diffuser they are in good used condition and in full working ... [More >](#)



FOR SALE – Nauticam Na-d800 Housing for Nikon D800

Nauticam Na-d800 Housing for Nikon D800 Excellent condition. Full overall by Nauticam in December 2017, not in the water since. Vacuum check; electronic monitoring circuit installed, no vacuum system. 2000 euros + shipping ... [More >](#)



FOR SALE – Nauticam flat ports and lenses Sony 28mm and 90mm

Nauticam flat port for Sony 28mm + sony lens 28mm +Nauticam flat port for Sony 90mm + sony lens 90mm+Nauticam trigger flash for sony. SOLD Can be sold separately. Total price 1260€ (does not include insurance and shipping) ... [More >](#)



FOR SALE – SEA & SEA MM2 U/W CAMERA WITH ACCESSORIES

SEA & SEA MM2 U/W CAMERA WITH ACCESSORIES: - Yellow SUB 50 TTL strobe / arm extension - SEA & SEA 16mm Wide angle lens MM-2 - SEA & SEA Macro lens ML-2/3T plus attachments - Removable view finder - ... [More >](#)



FOR SALE – Nikon D500 + Hugaft D500 setup

This one year old set of equipment is in excellent working condition and will serve great to a new owner. The reason for sale is a switch to a new equipment. Nikon D500 (19k clicks). Sigma 10mm F2.8 Fish Eye. 128Gb XQD Lexar ... [More >](#)

Please support our advertisers and help keep UWP free.

Magic Filters

BACKSCATTER
UNDERWATER VIDEO & PHOTO

KELDAN
Advanced Lighting Technology

OCEAN LEISURE CAMERAS

Nauticam
臨天海

ULTRA LIGHT
CONTROL SYSTEMS

Ikelite

XLOK
DIVERS

REEF
PHOTO & VIDEO

WETPIXEL.COM
digital imaging for divers

SEA&SEA
THE UNDERWATER IMAGING COMPANY

DivePhotoGuide

wakatobi

ACQUAPAZZA

UW CAMERA STORE

Nauticam
innovation underwater

Magic Filters

Small Ads

Sell your stuff You'll be amazed at just how quickly your unwanted underwater photography kit could be converted into hard cash with a UWP small ad. You can have your own UWP small ad from just £7.50 and it can have one photo as well as up to 100 words.

Check out small ads here

Buy your small ad here