CAMERA NOT INCLUDED

The Photography Zine by Ewen Bell



Edition #6
May 2026

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BHUTAN

HIMALAYAS





THE COVER

Winter light in the land of the Thunder Dragon

These imags from Bhutan are from a decade ago. They're from the central region of the country, where families make a living growing potatoes and buckwheat. Bhuddist temples and daily prayer are still the norm in Bhutan. Traditions in this part of the world have remained at the center of Bhutanese culture, even as the country opens up to global influences. Bhutan is changing, but not all of it.

I started travelling to Bhutan over 15 years ago and have seen this corner of the Himalayas in Summer, Winter, Spring and Autumn. Winter remains my favourite time to visit, because the light is so crisp. Wood fires are still popular to keep houses and hotels toasty warm. I do love a log fire to warm my hands after a long day of photography.

[Images captured on the 12mm F1.4 Leica DG Summilux + Lumix GH5]





THIS EDITION

Nostlagia

High Light

Flutter Byes

May 2026

There was a time when Bhutan for me felt like a distant dream.

I had heard stories about this kingdom hidden in the steepest valleys of the Himalayas. Back then Bhutan was hard to get to. Not just because of the tall mountains surrounding this kingdom, but because travellers were still unfamiliar with it. That sense of mystery has clung to Bhutan despite the pervasive reach of an all-knowing internet.

There are still mysteries in here, and not everything has been documented by influencers and the camera.

As a photographer I often worry that my captures are making the world feel smaller, but not in a good way. I try to share what makes this world beautiful to me, but sometimes in the process we take something exotic and special and turn it into something common and familiar.

Bhutan does not feel common to me however, not even after 15 years of visiting here. Every time it shows me something new. Every time it reminds me of things I already understood, but had forgotten. Sharing a moment with butterflies or with monks, we are always on a journey of mindfulness in Bhutan.

A quick word of thanks to the sponsors who make this publication possible.

I need to say thankyou for ongoing support from my sponsors. They help to make my life on the road a little easier, and help to keep my photography viable.

I don't want to fill the pages with too many adverts, so please allow me this little reminder that the folks at Peak Design and Angelbird have been generous in their support for my work.

As a former ambassador for Lumix you will also notice a lot of their cameras and lenses appearing in these pages. I still have a soft spot for the Lumix S9 and the L-mount lenses.








BUMTHANG
Central Bhutan

NOSTALGIA

Bhumthang, Central Bhutan

There is a version of Bhutan that I try to hold onto through my photos.

When I first came to this part of the Himalayas I was a younger man, still feeling my way in the world of photography. I was looking for what exists beyond the world of commercial shoots and tourist boards. I was looking for something solid beneath the clouds.

In the Himalayas I feel grounded. I feel connected to the forests and the valleys and the rivers and the birds. When I visit a temple in Bhutan I feel the footprints of those who have come before me, who have devoted their lives to lighting candles and chanting parables. What I see through the lens are echos of what was here before me.

And with camera in hand I try to capture those distant voices, because even after hundreds of years they still speak to me.

[Images captured on Sony ZVE1 with the
Tamron 35-150mm + Sigma 20mm F2]



There's something exceptionally beautiful about people who take pleaasure from sharing a cup of tea with their extended family, with their neighbours and with their local monks.

Every time I visit this part of Bhutan I am invited to join the festivities. I am offered rice wine, butter tea, rice flakes and buckwheat pancakes. Every few years I come back to the same festival, and I get to bring back their photos from my previous visit.


FANTA





I like being reminded that I am small, as if maybe I am still a child and the world around me is nothing more than a playground for discovery and wonder. When I hold a camera I the world around me really is full of discovery and wonder. It's full of things I have not yet learned.

Nothing is more rewarding that taking a photo that I did not know existed.



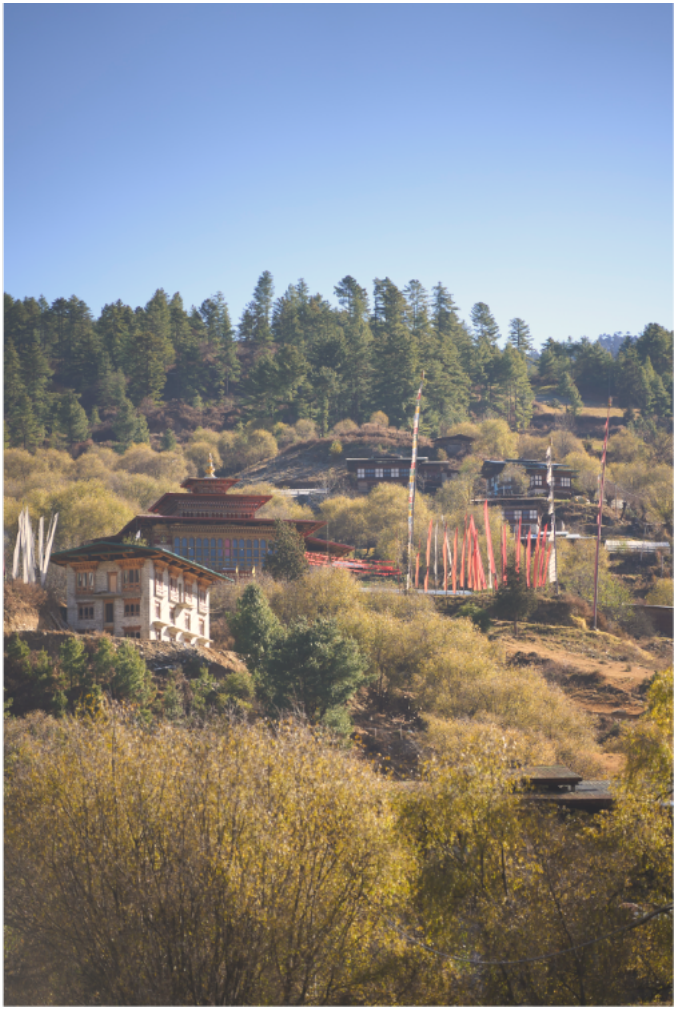












Everyone who comes to Bhutan with me in the winter is amazed at how warm and sunny it is. They're expecting the Himalayas to be blizzards and snow, but at the mid-level elevations we are treated with loads of sunshine.

Once the sun goes behind the hills, it does cool down. We're always grateful to be staying in fancy hotels with electric heaters and the occasional wood fire.





Novice Monks are still little boys deep down. They are studying a pholisophy, and maybe one day they will live a life dedicated to that philosophy. Maybe.

But in the meantime they are boys. They are children. They are enthralled by the pantomime of a festival, and the power of putting on the masks.





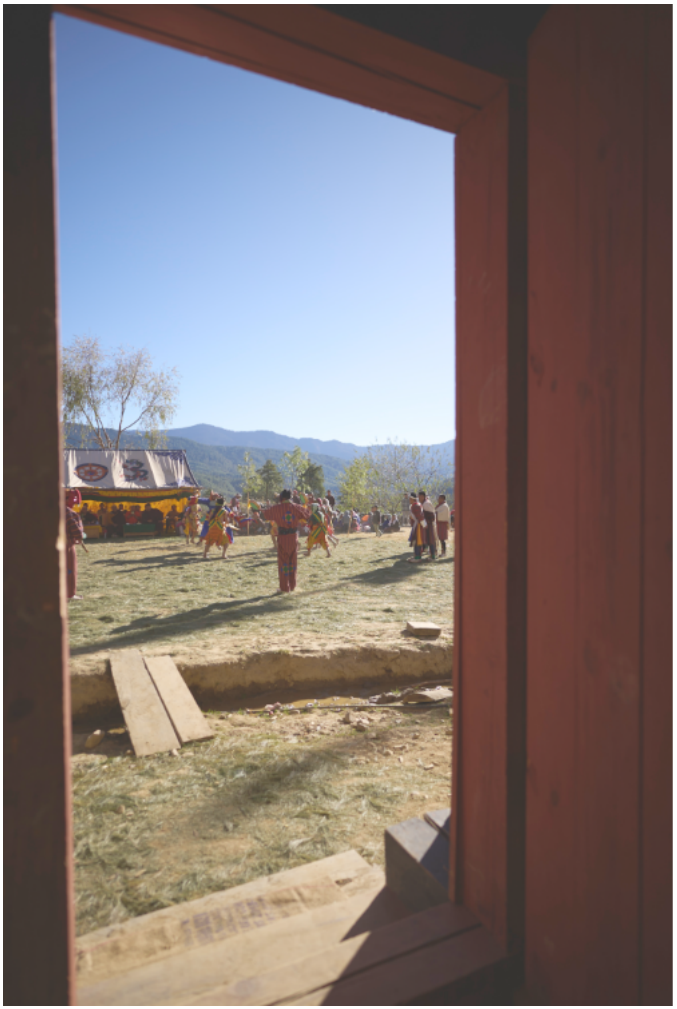








This is one of those places where tourism has a significant and positive impact on the local community. A chunk of the money we spend to be in Bhutan goes diretly to the govt to fund schools and education. The jobs in tourism here are very good jobs, that pay properly. Guides and drivers make a living wage, just by sharing their culture and time with foreign travellers.





I made a decision over a decade ago that I didn't need to see EVERY country in the world. I didn't need to tick places off my list. Instead, I wanted to spend more time in the places that I knew would feed my soul.

That's why I keep coming back to Bhutan.









HIGH LIGHT

Thin air in the world's highest mountains

The light is different in the Himalayas. It's not just that the sun is passing through less atmosphere, but in the early and late hours of the day that sunlight is frequently behind a mountain. No matter where you are, there is usually an even higher mountain next to you. Sunrise is not really sunrise.

This is one reason I love the winter light so much, because you can enjoy a little mood and angle from the sun long after sunrise. This series of images were taken in late November 2025. The elevations we travel are very very rarely effected by snow, because winter is the dry season anyway. It's my favourite time of year to be in Butan.

[Images captured on the Lumix S9 + TT Artisan 40mm F2 + Lumix S 18mm F1.8]





Most of us are taught to keep the sun off our lens. But I love that play of light with the character of glass. Every lens is different. Little tweaks to the angle change the flare.

I mostly shoot at F2 anyway, so flare typically turns into a soft haze with the aperture wide open. This brings another layer of softness to my backgrounds. Soft light, even when shooting directly into it.



In a future edition of this zine I'll talk more about ICM (Intentional Camera Movement), but today I just want to include this image in these pages. It was captured at Punakha Dzong, as you enter the main courtyard. It's a beautiful fresco with modern styling, and a touch of geometry that reminds me of studying Chemistry in High School.

The technique is simple enough. I pop an ND filter onto the lens to slow down the light, and aim for an exposure of somewhere between 2-4 seconds. And then I move the camera while the exposure is captured. It takes practice to find your intention with this technique, and not just end up with movement for the sake of movement. I have to be in the right frame of mind anyway.

[I also have two videos on my YouTube channel that delve into ICM, captured in Bhutan and Nepal. If this interests you, please dig them out!]







Even when the light is very very gentle, there is often nuance. Mostly what I look for is an angle with the light. Which means I have to position myself to find an angle on the light.

Our eyes will always land where the light is telling us to look.





We see things differently
when we see the light.

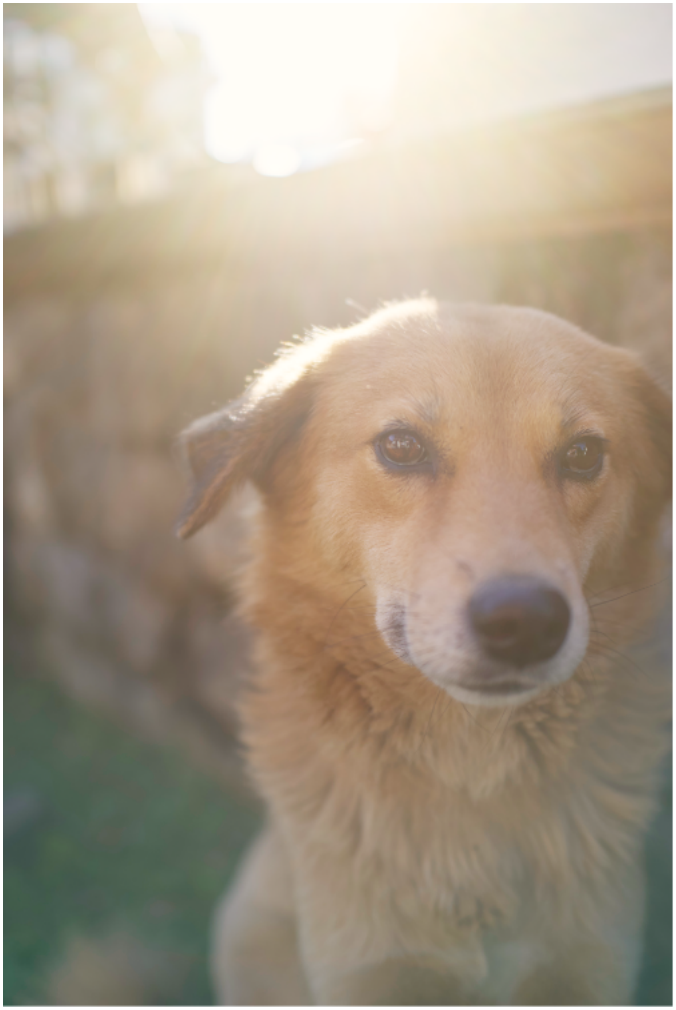
















THIS PAGE IS SPONSORED

Thankyou Angelbird

Angelbird make a bunch of high performance memory cards, and some excellent tether cables. My journey with this brand began in 2020 when we started making recipe videos at home. Shellie did the recipe development and styling, and I did the video and editing. We quickly realised that “sustained data rate” was way more important than any maximum speed a card might claim to offer.

Those max speeds you see on the labels tend to drop off after a minute of shunting data onto the laptop.

Back then I scored a killer deal on some 256gb Micro-SD cards by Angelbird, and I've been buying their stuff ever since. My minimum spec for SD cards now is V60, which means 60MBytes/sec (480mbps). This gives me enough grunt for shooting 6K 10bit video, or for high speed continuous burst when shooting birds or festivals.

The best part is they are super fast to download at the end of the day. I can clear my cards and start a backup of the day, and be ready for dinner ten minutes later. I'm super happy to have them as a sponsor of this publication, and for their support in sponsoring my documentary project in Nepal.


AV PRO SE
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INPUT 1
INPUT 2

EWEN'S WORKSHOPS

Intimate photographic experiences with Ewen Bell

Every year I run a handful of workshops and photo tours in various parts of the world. I have been doing this for twenty years now, and every year I try to find ways to make each experience more rewarding. It's never the same workshop twice.

I run my tours in places I know very very well. I don't outsource my expertise. I care about these places and believe they offer something special to my companions. We learn about the cultures and landscapes, as much as we do photography.

Visit the website for more details.

ewenbell.com/tours

ANCIENT ANNAPURNAS

PHOTOGRAPHY TOUR
EWEN BELL

One of the most adventurous photography tours we've ever planned in the Himalayas. Follow the jeep trail deep into the Annapurnas to the ancient village of Manang, photograph some of the highest peaks in the world, and finish with a helicopter landing at Lake Tilicho.

Highlights include stunning waterfalls, glacial rivers plus herds of goats and yaks.

November 2024
13 days from US$11,880



BHUTAN

PHOTOGRAPHY TOUR
EWEN BELL

Dancing Monks and winter light in the kingdom where happiness meets wisdom.

Softly softly in the land of the Thunder Dragon. A journey from festivals to farmers with intimate moments and fabulous photography. Come and find out why we regard Bhutan as such a treasured experience, and why the people of Bhutan are the happiest on earth.

2025 November 13 - 27
15 days from US$10,888



BHUTAN

in summer





Flutter Byes

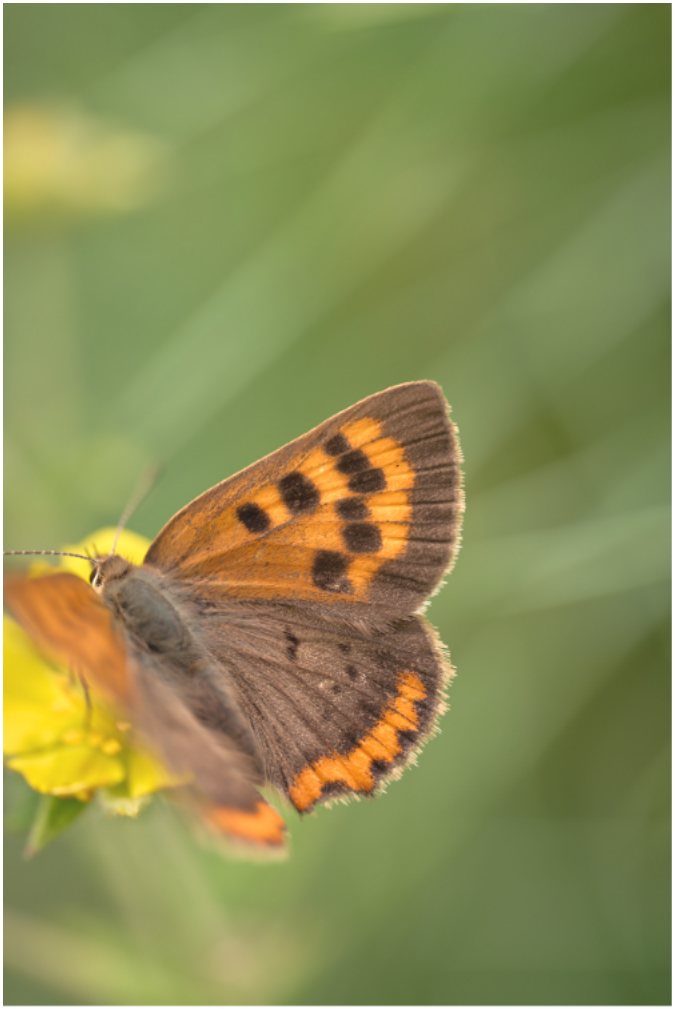
Summer in Bhutan

One year I ran a couple of tours in Bhutan during the middle of summer. This is a terrible time for me to be in the Himalayas because summer is steamy and humid.. . and my body prefers to be cool and dry! But we got lucky, and dodged most of the big rains before heading home. Even better though, I got a chance to experience the joy of watching late spring unfold into blossoms and butterflies.

I had just bought a macro lens about six months before, and I was enthralled with the tiny world that suddenly opened up before my eyes.

[Images captured on the Sigma 105mm F2.8 + Lumix S5II]



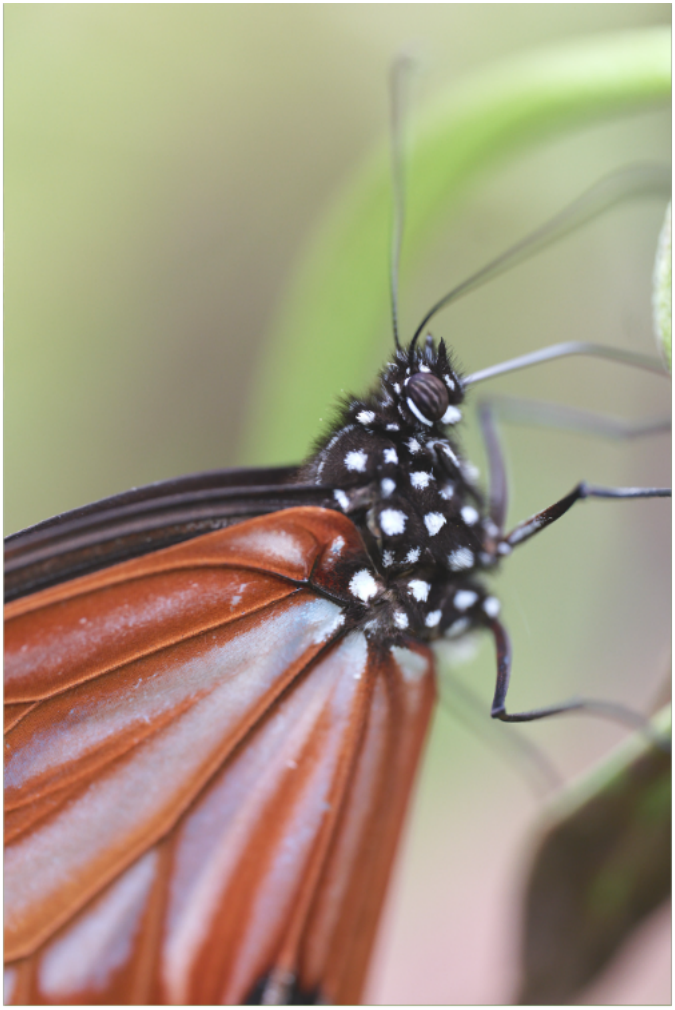




Butterflies are ephemeral. They live short lives, filled with colour and lightness. They are a beautiful symbol of how all things in life are impermanent.

Even these photos you see now are impermanent. My entire collection of Bhutanese butterfly photos was lost when my NAS failed, and now all I have left are low-resolution copies that happened to be copied to my phone.

Those hires and RAW files are no longer with me. I normally use hires images for this photo zine... but have made an exception for the butterflies you see here.





The butterfly is called "Talbot's Chestnut Tiger".

I don't actually learn most of the names. I'm lucky to get down to a genus most of the time. Naming them removes a little of the joy for me, as though it makes the encounter less special. I don't want to collect every species in the Himalayas, I just want to spend time with them and capture some of their beauty.

That close up of the wing reveals a little detail of the scales. The scientific name for butterflies and moths translates to "scaly wing". Indeed those pretty colours are nothing more than very small scales, like you might see on a fish. The other fascinating thing about butteflies is they have hairs that extend out of their eyeballs. Freaky, but also practical to keep dirt and things off the eyes.

I never knew any of this before I bought a macro lens.





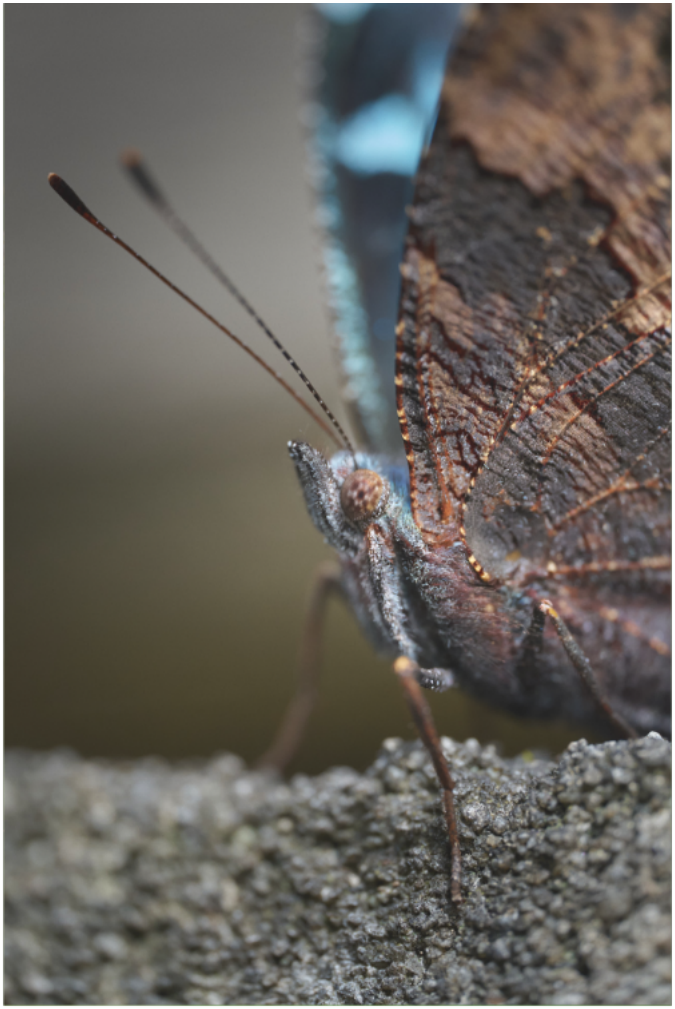


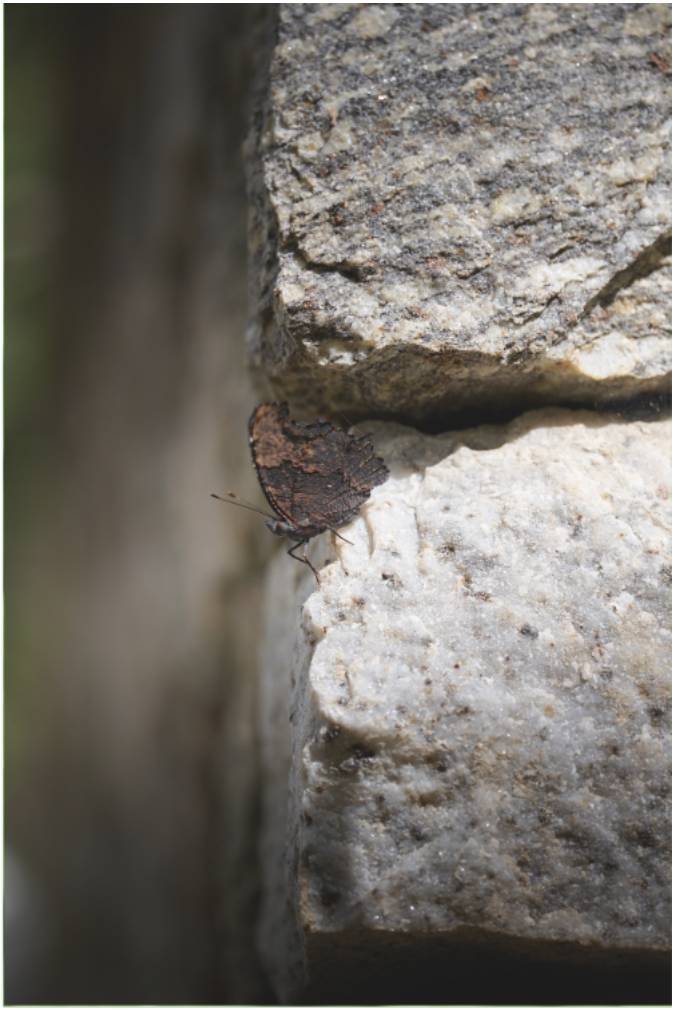






I love the way the upper and lower wings reveal such different designs. They can disappear against a rock by folding it's wings, but when seeking a mate they flatten out to display their rich colours.





Diversity is the joy for me.

I love seeing something new. I don't need to tick off a list, but I revel in finding something I had not seen before, or seeing a familiar butterfly in a new light.

Having a few moments each day to watch the grass, and the flowers, and the rocks and look at what the butterflies are doing was one of my favourite experiences in Bhutan. Every day is unique with the butterflies, ev ery day is a chance to see a different expression of nature around us.

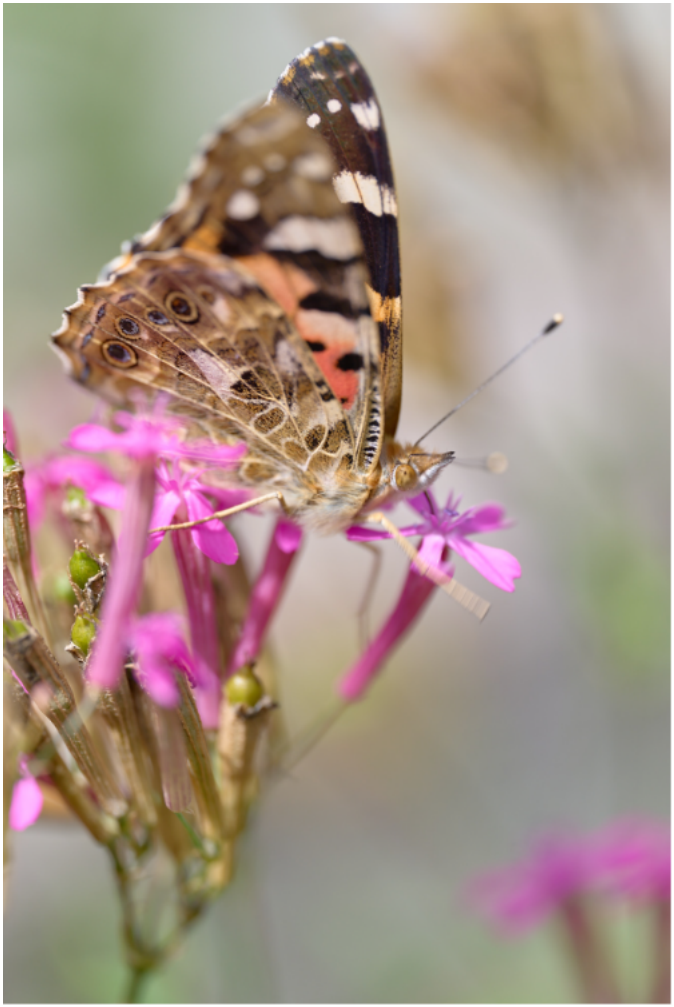


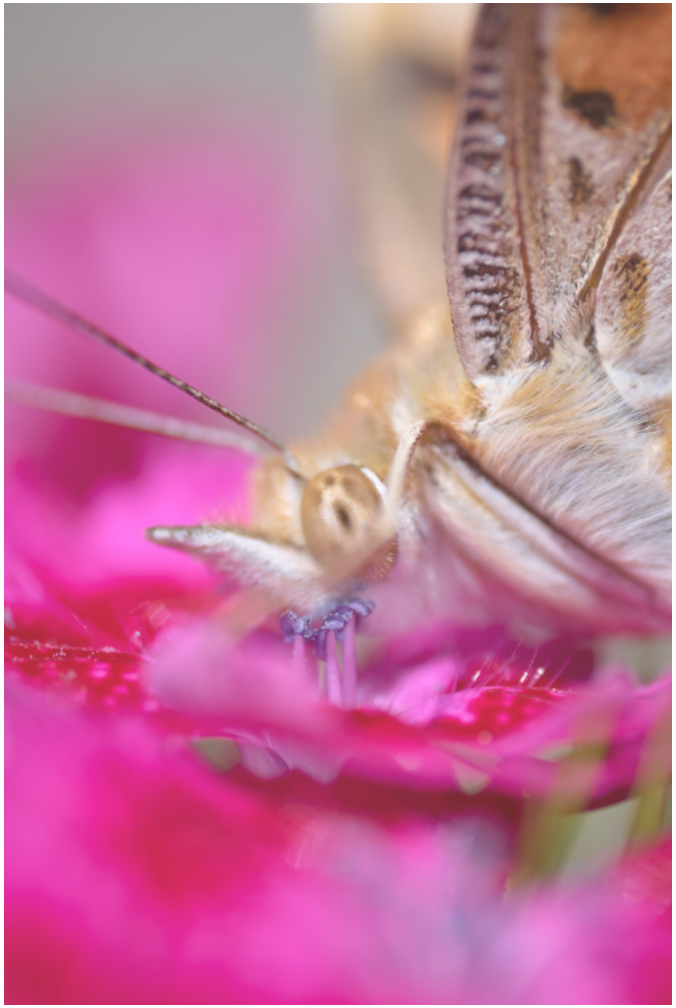


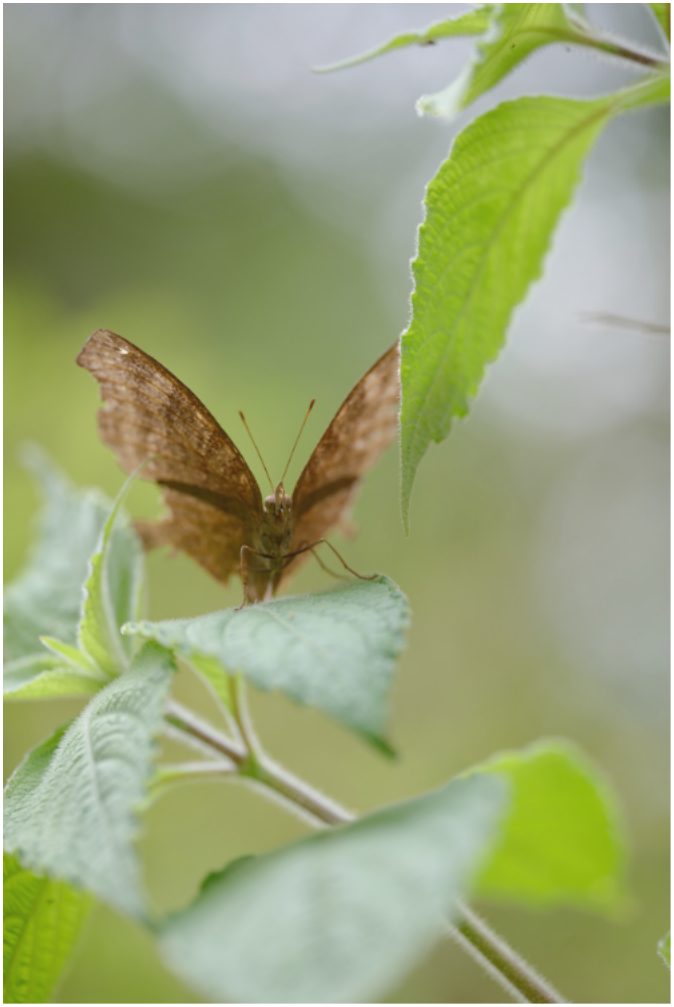




Even the most common of species are a
delight to observe.









I have a friend who is a bug expert and she finds my photography of butterflies to be intensely frustrating. She wants to see all the details that might identify one species from another. But I'm shooting everything at F2.8 and maximising my bokeh instead.

The challenge for me is light. How to find an angle on the light that is interesting, in addition to seeing enough of the detail at a very fine depth-of-field. I take a lot of photos. LOTS of photos. I keep the continuous burst rolling and have the shutter speed at 1/500th of a second or higher. I keep very little, and only show you the best ones :)





















These little Azures are a special favourite of mine. How something so intensely coloured and beautiful can hide in plain sight remains a source of wonder for me. When those deleicate scales of metallic blue catch the sun, they shine like a neon light.

The moment they close up their wings, we are treated with vivid yellow tones instead, mimicking nearby flowers.



Part of me really wants to return to Bhutan for a summer and chase more butterflies. It's a folly. I have loads of other work to focus on, and I my body doesn't cope with summer the way I love winter... and yet the very thought of those butteflies continues to distract me. I imagine them in the corner of my eye, flittering past as if to demand that I leave my desk and head for the grassy meadows.

I love the experience of discovering them.

Finding a patch of flowers, or a salty rock by the side of the road. They are so unexpected, and so shy. They must be dreadfully confused when I step into their world, shoving a big lens at their face.









It still amazes me that we have the ability to look into the world of creatures that are so small.

When we can get close enough, when we are patient enough and careful enough to get a macro lens up close to the butterflies, what we find is truly astonishing. I never get tired of seeing a little of the world in their scale.







WHO MADE THIS?

Meet The Author

My name is Ewen Bell and I'm a photographer based in Melbourne, Australia. I've been very lucky in life to had the opportunity to make a career from photography.

For over two decades I've been travelling and shooting, which is why I have this photo of me in Bhutan when I was MUCH younger and better looking than I am now :) You can tell it's an old photo because I'm holding a DSLR camera.

Photography has changed my world, so I want to help others find their voice with the camera as well. I love sharing my photos, but also love sharing my knowledge about taking photos. That's why I'm making a zine, in addition to my blog and my YouTube channel.

ewenbell.com

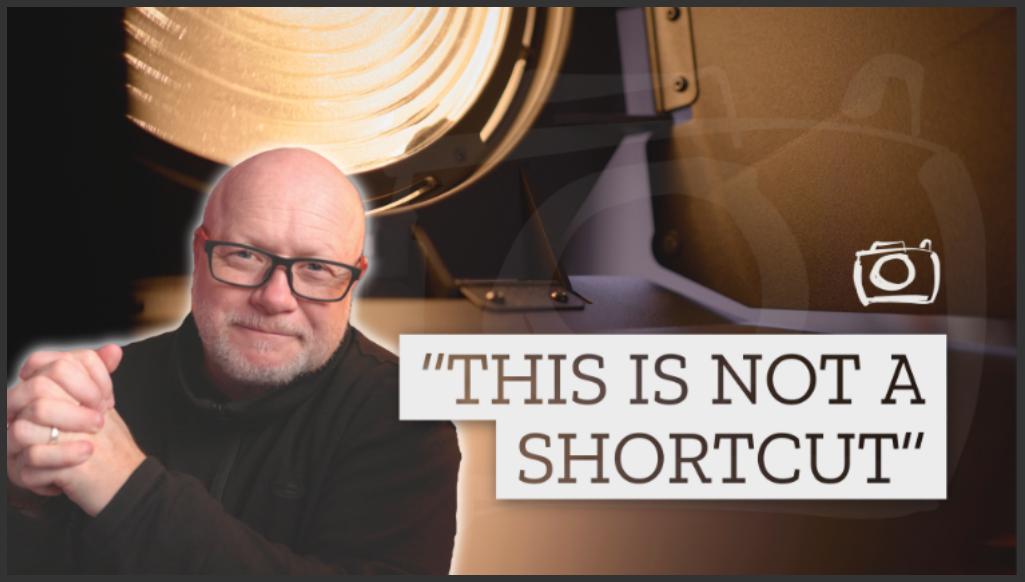


#EWENTUBE

I share a bunch of photos and ideas on my YouTube channel. You can also watch them on the Fediverse via PeerTube for those who prefer ad-free viewing

ewenbell.com/ewentube


"SLOWER
THAN SLOW"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