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My passion for trees goes back a long way and I have been climbing, drawing and photographing them for many years. Over time, I have come to appreciate how varied their many shapes are. From slender and delicate birch through to sturdy and gnarled oaks, each species has its own personality traits and it is these that I try to record. Trees have figured greatly in my images as I find their forms so intrinsically photogenic. Be it bare branches in winter, papery spring-green leaves or the saturated colours of autumn, they provide interest throughout the seasons. Having a good understanding of trees and the habitats in which they are found has helped me enormously, ensuring that I am in the right place at the right time.

# Photographing Trees

by Fran Halsall

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## SECTION 1 Preparation

It is well worth investing in a pocket-sized tree guide so that you know what to look out for. They contain plenty of useful information, such as what month trees typically come into leaf, when they fruit and flower, and what colour the foliage turns in autumn. Bear in mind that northern England and Scotland are up to a couple of weeks behind the warmer south, so make adjustments for local temperature as necessary.



### Pick a season

Season has a huge impact on trees but there is an important distinction between broadleaf (deciduous) and evergreen conifers, as the former lose their leaves while the latter keep their needles. Consequently, it is

usually broadleaf trees that have the most to offer as they look different throughout the year and provide multiple photographic opportunities. Having said this, midsummer is perhaps the least interesting period for documenting trees (unless they are in flower) as the foliage is at its least eye-catching. In late summer as the berries arrive, my attentions shift to planning for autumn. However, not every autumn is consistent and colour intensity is very much determined by the weather, with the best displays resulting from a combination of dry, sunny days and clear, cold nights.

Broadleaf and conifer woodlands are totally different

**Insider pro tip** Use a sunrise/sunset calculator to accurately predict the sun's position at varying times of the year; then you can work out lighting directions in advance and determine when to photograph a particular subject.

environments. Because conifers are often planted as part of a managed woodland they are densely packed and little light permeates the canopy, meaning that plants struggle to gain a foothold in their shadow. Whereas broadleaf woodlands spend a few months of the year without any foliage, allowing a rich mixture of plants to become established. Broadleaf woodlands that have been left undisturbed for many decades are excellent places to find that most celebrated of British flowers, the bluebell. When judging the best month in which to take the shot

I will also take account of the surrounding vegetation, i.e. April/May for bluebells, the summer months for field crops and August onwards for having heather backdrops on the moors.

### Map it out

Having found the ideal specimen in a good location, it gets marked down on my map or a reference is taken so that it is easy to find again. At this point I will check the sun's position in relation to the subject, work out the best time of day/year to take the photograph, and add this to my location notes.

*Undisturbed broadleaf woodlands are excellent places to find the much celebrated bluebell*

Wasdale, in Cumbria, is home to many fine old trees; including this bottom heavy common oak (*Quercus robur*). Canon EOS 5D with EF17-40mm 1/4 lens at 20mm, ISO 100, 1/5sec at f/16

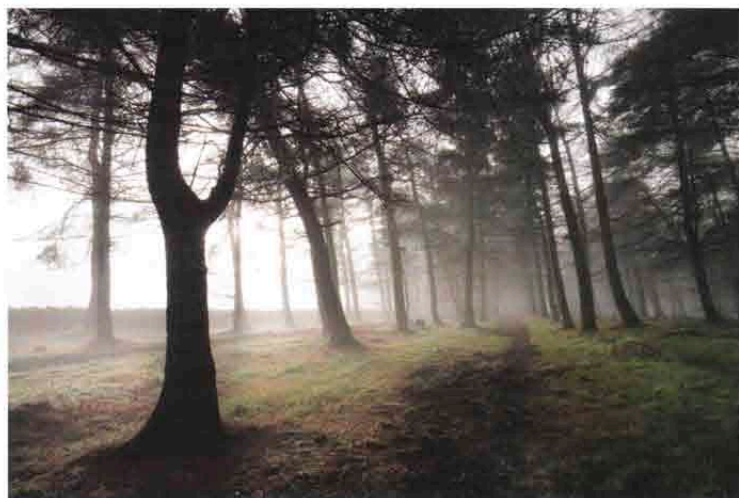




## SECTION 2 Weather

On really foggy days when you might think there are no photographs to be made, I like to head off into the woodlands, as wisps of low cloud hanging between trees generates huge amounts of atmosphere. Mist has a unique property in that

it creates an optical fade, as nearer trunks are more apparent than those that are fading into the obscure distance. This quality separates the trees, making them easier to photograph, and it enhances the sense of spatial depth in the resulting image.



## Lenses These optics are great for capturing trees

**1 Wide (16–40mm)** A handy focal range that is especially good for portraits where either all or most of the tree is to be included in the frame, as it allows close proximity to the subject. Wider lenses increase perspective and exaggerate the spacing between objects, which is helpful in a densely packed woodland environment where it is desirable to see the gaps between trunks.

A wideangle is also useful for photographing woodland floor details, but when working close to the subject the depth of field (DOF) is reduced, so to achieve sharpness throughout the image very small apertures are needed. To ensure that DOF is consistent, the subject needs to be arranged in parallel to the camera's plane of focus. If it is at an angle then some parts of the image risk being

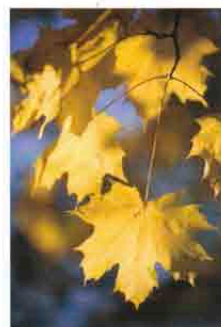


**Above** In late summer, the common heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) on Eyam Moor in Derbyshire contrasts a rowan tree (*Sorbus aucuparia*). Canon EOS 5D with EF17-40mm f/4 lens at 35mm, ISO 200, 0.4sec at f/22

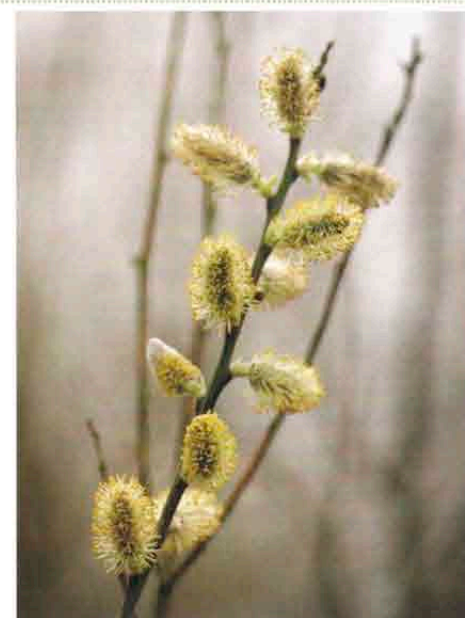
**2 Long (70mm+)** Ideal for picking out details of nearby trees or for zooming in on those some distance away. As the focal length increases, the DOF becomes shallower and this can be turned to great advantage when photographing details, where a 'clean' or out of focus background is usually preferred. However, the degree of blurring entirely depends on the distance between the focal point and the next object behind it. In my experience, it can take quite a while to discover the right combination of focal length, aperture, subject and backdrop.

Longer focal lengths reduce perspective,

appearing to compress the distance between objects, and can be used to bring separate elements together. This can be done over small distances, such as between two unconnected branches on the same tree, or over greater distances where the horizon is included.

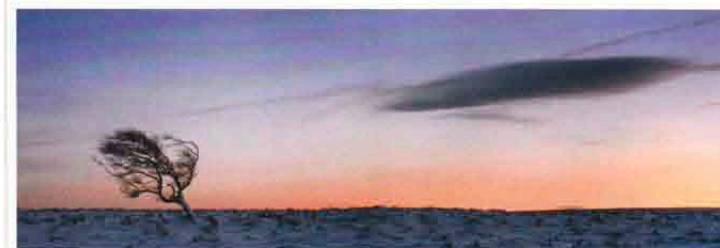


**Above** The luminous yellow leaves of the Norway maple (*Acer plantanoides*). Canon EOS 5D with EF70-200mm f/4 lens at 168mm, ISO 200, 1/250sec at f/4



**3 Macro lenses** are great for really small details such as emerging buds and diminutive flowers. This type of lens is designed for working close-up and as a result has a seriously limiting effect on DOF, making it easy to produce really out of focus backgrounds but hard to record sharpness over a distance of more than a few centimetres.

**Above** Showy yellow flowers appear in early spring on the goat or pussy willow (*Salix caprea*). Canon EOS 10D with 100mm f/2.8 lens, ISO 100, 1/180sec at f/2.8



**Insider pro tip** The wind also works in subtle ways, shaping the direction and height of trees in exposed locations; some of the best examples of which are to be found on cliff tops, high ridges and open moorland.

**Above** On Burbage Moor a single Downy Birch (*Betula pubescens*) tree battles for existence. Birch will tolerate the harsh weather at higher altitude and survive in soil that is poor in nutrients.

### Windy issues

The biggest hindrance to the aspiring tree photographer is too much wind and low light levels, as longer shutter speeds lead to blurry branches. While this can be used creatively to some extent it stops any attempt at taking detail shots, where a still subject is required. When trees are part of a bigger vista it matters far less if they are buffeted by the wind, as it will have minimal impact on the

overall image. Wind also causes problems come autumn when quick reactions are required to capture the leaves before they are all blown from their branches.

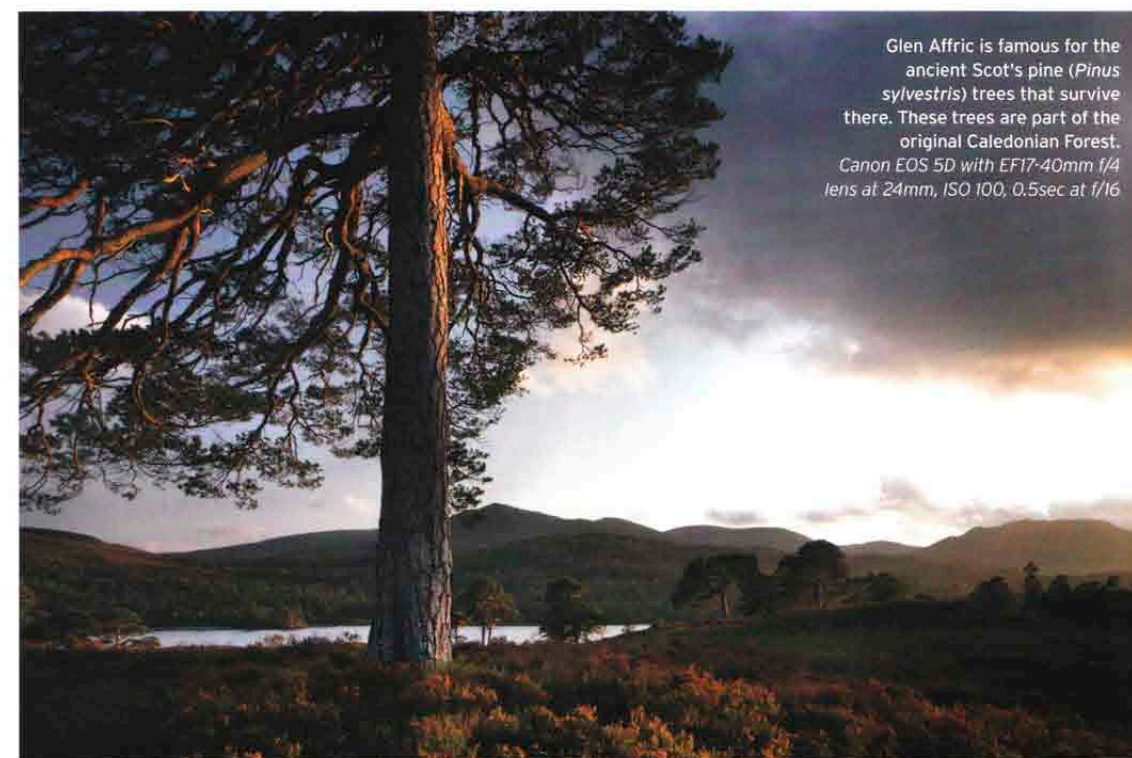
**Left** Shillito wood is sandwiched between Leash Fen and Ramsley Moor, in northeast Derbyshire. Sunlight shines through fine mist suspended among the trees, creating an enchanted atmosphere. Canon EOS 5D with EF17-40mm f/4 lens at 17mm, ISO 100, 1.3sec at f/22

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## SECTION 3 Lighting

### Sidelighting

Sidelighting is the ideal option for revealing a subject's shape. When one side is illuminated and the other falls into shadow, the dimensions are revealed. This is helpful when you are trying to make a tree stand out of a busy woodland background; working particularly well if the latter area is comparatively dark. Leaves that are sidelit can appear silvery, as light is reflected from their surface, and the stronger the sunshine the more noticeable the effect. A polarising filter can be used to remove some of the sheen and make the tree foliage appear to be more colourful and saturated.



Glen Affric is famous for the ancient Scot's pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) trees that survive there. These trees are part of the original Caledonian Forest. Canon EOS 5D with EF17-40mm f/4 lens at 24mm, ISO 100, 0.5sec at f/16



Translucent leaves make a good subject for backlighting. When light passes through them their colours glow vividly, and, when seen from close-up, every last detail is rendered clearly. Composing this style of shot against a dark or neutral background creates maximum impact.

The pinnate leaves of the mountain ash or rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia*) are feather-like in their arrangement. Canon EOS 5D with EF70-200mm f/4 lens at 168mm, ISO 200, 1/640sec at f/5

### Silhouettes

Trees make shapely silhouettes against interesting and colourful skies. When shooting into the sun, hide the sun behind the trunk or branches to help control the contrast and prevent flare. The easiest time to create silhouettes is when the sun is only just below the horizon and the sky is bright and vivid, then dark branches will stand out in sharp relief.



### Time of day

Stronger light around the middle of the day is best avoided as it strips the colour from a scene and creates crisp dark shadows, which are especially problematic in woodlands, as it makes an already complicated looking scene even busier. If it is bright and sunny but there happens to be some clouds around, then you can try taking a shot as they pass in front of the sun, as the light will be significantly softer. However, it is better to wait for the sun to dip lower in the sky, as then the shadows become longer and less stark. Early morning and late afternoon light is both the right intensity and colour to produce vibrant images.

### Diffused light

Diffuse light on a cloudy day is useful for recording subtle images of colourful leaves and flowers, as it illuminates them evenly without causing too much contrast.

Shooting details is arguably the best use for a dull day. As washed out overcast skies do little to enhance a photograph, I make great efforts to exclude them as much as possible.







## TOP UK TREES

**1 Common ash** is typically found in woodlands, particularly on limestone, and single mature trees are often seen in farmland. It has unusual flowers that appear before the foliage, which follows in May, and its leaves are vivid in autumn.

**2 Common beech** is found in woodlands and parkland throughout the UK, but is mainly a species of central and southern Britain. One of our most elegant trees, it is vibrant in spring and has long lasting colourful leaves in autumn.

**3 Silver birch** is established in many areas but is commonly associated with moorlands and uplands. Leaves appearing from late March-April are a striking green when they emerge, and turn an excellent gold colour in autumn.

**4 Wild cherry** is often planted as an ornamental although it's still found in the wild. It has unmistakable large white or pink blossoms that appear on stark branches in early April. Look for the 'wild' form with single rather than double flowers.

**5 Sweet chestnut** is a large impressive tree with long serrated leaves, and is often found in parkland. They produce huge creamy flowers up to 15cm long in midsummer.

**6 Wych elm** is the most widely seen of the elms; they frequently grow in wet woodlands and riverside, primarily in the north of Britain. It has interesting shaped leaves that make good subjects in both spring and autumn. Papery seedpods appear in midsummer.

**Left** Sunlight filters through the leaves of a common beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) next to Burbage Brook, as it runs through Padley Gorge, in Yarncliffe Wood, Derbyshire  
Canon EOS 5D with EF17-40mm f/4 lens at 17mm, ISO 250, 0.6sec at f/22

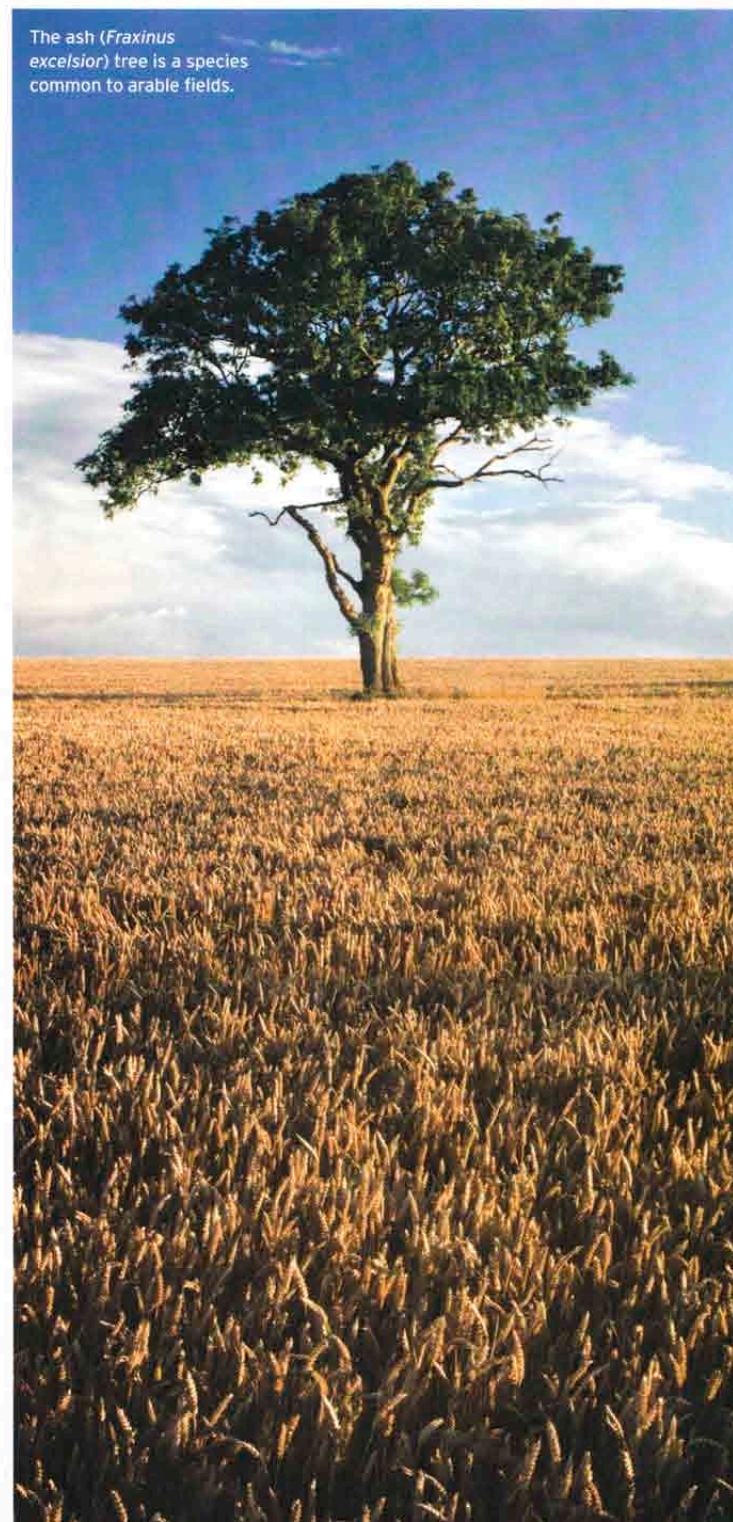
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## SECTION 4 Form

Some trees make for better photographs than others and this is down to not only size and situation, but also shape and colour. Especially strong examples make excellent material for solitary portraits. This is an idea I have explored many times during my career, partly as a result of wandering

the moors near my home, where lonely trees are often the only upright line in a flat expanse, making them useful devices to connect land and sky. However, for this to work they need to have a real presence offset by some interesting lighting or weather to help hold the image together. Patience is always a virtue!

The ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) tree is a species common to arable fields.



**Above** A mature sweet chestnut (*Castanea sativa*) tree growing at the side of the path approaching Cadair Idris, in Snowdonia National Park.  
Canon EOS 5D with EF17-40mm f/4 lens at 17mm, ISO 100, 0.4sec at f/16

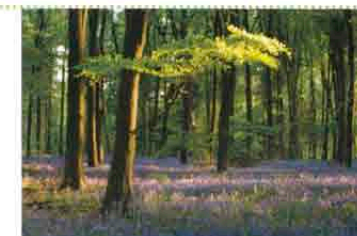
### Lean and shape

When composing the shot, be sympathetic to the direction in which the tree grows or leans. Look for branches that can be used to lead the eye inwards and ensure that key shapes, such as leaves, do not end up squashed into the side of the frame. With a pattern as complicated as branches, always double check

what is right on the edges of the frame. Likewise, study the backdrop behind the subject and reframe if there is anything distracting to the eye. When creating silhouettes it is ever so easy to accidentally cut the tree in two with the dark horizon. To avoid this happening choose a low viewing angle to help with the image framing.

### Careful framing

The very richness of broadleaf woodlands is what makes them difficult to photograph, as it is hard to distil into one meaningful image. Choose a small area of just a few trees, with some nearby leading to others further back, and find a position where you see spaces between them. Ensuring the nearest and most significant trees do not overlap others gives some sense of order. ■



**Above** Micheldever Wood features a wonderful display of common bluebells (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*) every spring. Common beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) dominates this part of the wood, and the yellow-green leaves compliment the blue flowers. Canon EOS 5D with EF70-200mm f/4 lens at 73mm, ISO 200, 0.8sec at f/16



Scot's pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) trees surrounded by masses of bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*), at the edges of Torridon Forest in Scotland. Canon EOS 5D with EF17-40mm f/4 lens at 23mm, ISO 200, 1/8sec at f/18

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