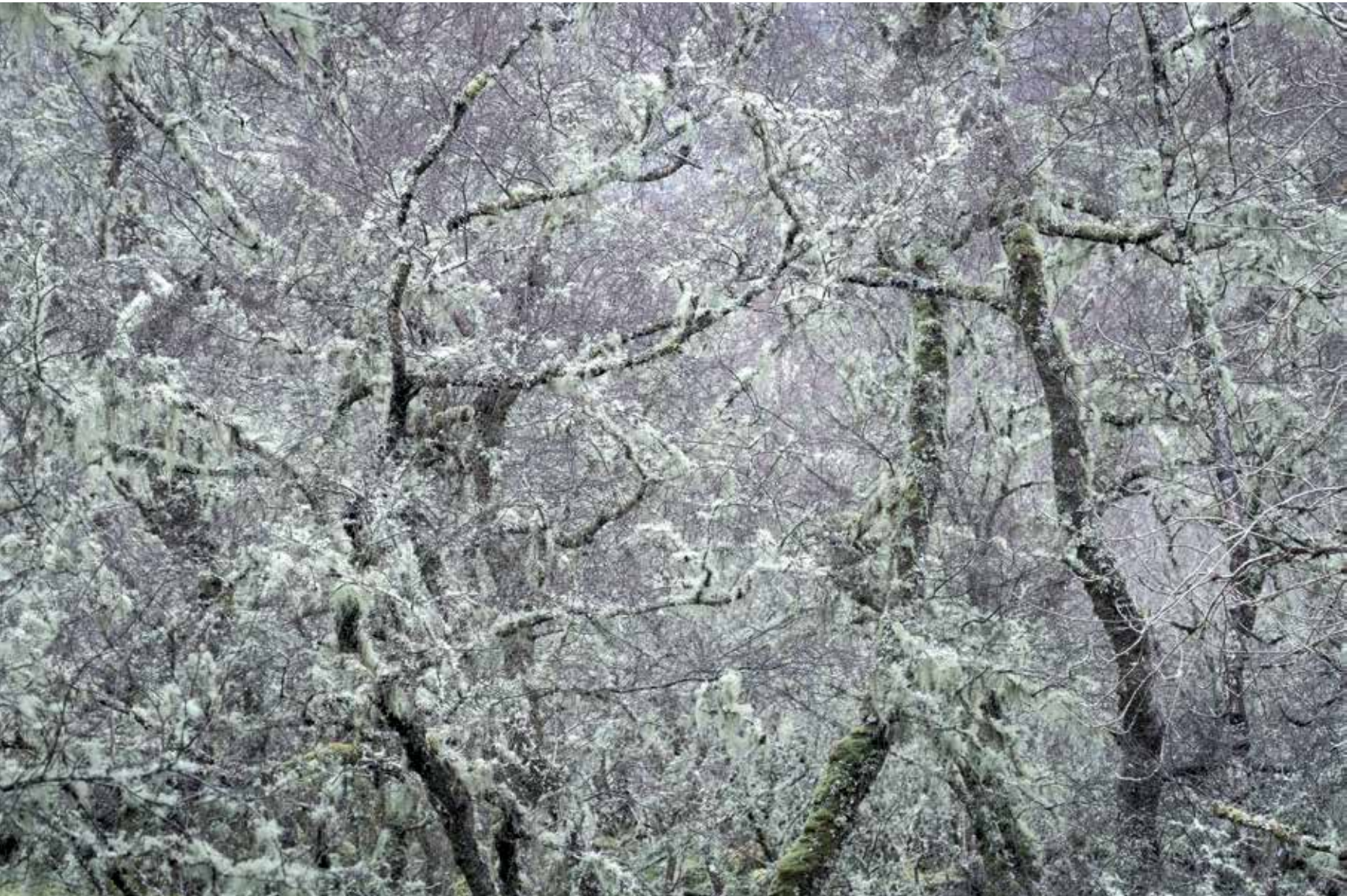


# Changing landscapes: Fantastic forests

In his new four-part series, Ted Leeming shares some of his recent wanderings and offers ideas on how we can become more environmentally conscious photographers. Here, he reveals how the discovery of a local rainforest led him to see the landscape with fresh eyes



For most, the words temperate rainforest probably conjure thoughts of ancient trees dripping with lichens in remote corners of the world such as Chilean Patagonia, British Columbia and New Zealand; impenetrable jungles that require long-haul flights to reach and offer adventure, mystery and crazy treks through infinite beauty. But what if you could find equally rare gems steeped in mythology within a few hours of home; places you could visit time and again and get to know intimately? I speak not of fantasy but reality, for across the UK's western reaches there remain pockets of the extraordinary, exceedingly rare and barely known great Atlantic rainforest.

Also known as Celtic rainforest, this rare

habitat accounts for less than 1% of the UK's woodland. And with no definitive map showing locations, discovering them is part of the enjoyment. Few had even heard of this rare habitat until journalist George Monbiot brought it to wider attention in his 2013 book, *Feral*. Thanks to him and the dedication of a small group of passionate enthusiasts, including Guy Shrubsole (author of 2022's *The Lost Rainforests of Britain*), I recently had the delight of identifying indicator species for my first candidate rainforest, just a mile from home.

My own realisation of how special 'local' can be deepened immeasurably during the Covid lockdowns. Instead of instinctively following the forest tracks during our normal

## Bearded Whisperers

Pockets of the incredibly rare and varied Atlantic rainforest, bursting with biodiversity, mystic cultural associations and tranquillity, exist throughout the western regions of the UK. Where might your nearest be?

dog walk, one day I simply stepped off the well-trodden path, through the back of the wardrobe and into an unknown world that lay right there on my doorstep. I found myself engulfed in a moss-blanketed fantasy that had been staring me in the face for years, had I but opened my eyes. Once discovered, I returned repeatedly for months on end to wander these natural cathedrals, with no direction or goal, responding to the landscape and slowly

## The Tree Farm

All trees are magical, but not all treescapes are the same. Single species, extractive monocultures can sequester carbon and produce timber, but they bear little resemblance to ancient native woodland.

appreciating the little things one only sees when the mind is quiet. With my curiosity piqued, I craved more and started researching different treescapes, both online and through books, disappearing down endless rabbit holes of cultural anecdotes, scientific snippets and unfathomable Latin terminology.

What I have discovered is that while all trees are magical, not all treescapes are. In some, you are the privileged witness to

rare glimpses of a post-glacial world; in others, medieval subsistence tenure and the developing relationship of humans with their environment. Elsewhere, there is the spectre of immense tree farms, where the landscape is exploited for returns on a spreadsheet at the expense of biodiversity and community. Perhaps you too have been in a ghost wood, where indicator species such as bluebells are the only reminder of its past – or perhaps indicators of a possible future if nature is given the opportunity to regenerate.

We can all make long-term connections with a place, be it through a special subject, project or location, urban or rural. Stepping away from the familiar, or regularly visiting somewhere close to home that inspires, and

meandering slowly, without destination, is incredibly rewarding. Soon, opportunities present themselves and you will find yourself within and part of the environment, rather than merely observing and passing through. The more time I spend in such places gathering clues, the more intrigued I become. In the words of the great wanderer of the Cairngorms, Nan Shepherd, 'I knew when I looked for a very long time, I had hardly begun to see'.

*For further information, ideas and learnings, including links and a bibliography to accompany this article, visit Ted's Blog, 'Wanderings of a Photographic Duo', at leemingpaterson.com, the website he shares with his wife Morag, who has her own approach to exploring local environments.*