



*Above:* Colin Prior. *Below:* Liathach (Torrion).

PHOTO: COLIN PRIOR

# The twilight chaser

**Eoin Reilly**

One might wonder if learning underwater photography could adequately prepare you for the wrathful rain of the Scottish Highlands? Colin Prior made that amphibious move twenty-five years ago to go “top-side” and eventually established himself as one of the leading landscape photographers of his generation. His passion for his home country has helped him produce a massive portfolio of definitive images cataloguing the Scottish Highlands.





I recently attended a seminar in Belfast held by Prior, who was a guest of the Northern Ireland Photographic Association. It was a full-day presentation of spectacular panoramic vistas, each of which was threaded together amongst a patchwork of fascinating yarns and insightful advice.

He started to lay out his stall by explaining what makes a good photograph. "My fundamental ethos about taking landscape images is that less is more. The less you can shoot, the better. If you can say something articulately with four words, then don't use twelve to say the same thing. It's often more poignant to get the message over with four carefully chosen words. Try to focus on the actual elements that are important and reduce them to the absolute minimum.

"A landscape image has always got to be a blend of contrasts: you want to have hot and cold; black and white; light and shadow; all of these elements are really important. There's a point at which the light starts to overwhelm the shadow and if you don't let the sun rise enough in the morning or set enough in the evening, you won't get that balance right.

"I'm frequently asked 'How long does it take to get that picture?' It can



Trotternish.

PHOTO: COLIN PRIOR





Above: Laig Bay. Below: An Teallach.

PHOTO: COLIN PRIOR

take three or four years because, if you want to get the definitive image of a mountain, there's usually only a small window in the year that allows you to shoot that picture. There's a calculator you can get which is a sunrise/sunset calculator. They're very good because you can put them onto an OS map and it will show you the position of the sun at sunrise and sunset throughout the year. If you want to shoot a particular area, you can work out what is the optimum time of the year so that the sun is illuminating the landscape and get the timing correct.

"Understanding the sun's position is really second nature to me now. At certain times of the year I'll try to concentrate on certain mountains in certain areas because I know that the sun is going to be in the right spot at sunrise or sunset for that definitive image.

"Many people imagine that I go into the mountains and spend two or three days waiting for the light, but most of the images are the result of careful planning. It's a bit like a military strike; you try to gather as much intelligence as you can about the subject before you commit yourself to going in. Once you've done the reconnaissance work, you're watching the weather so you know there's going to be some stable weather to get the light that you need. It's just a question of setting off and getting yourself into the right location for dusk or for dawn."

When the time is right to head out, Prior is always prepared. "My bags are always packed so that I don't need to think what I've got in them. I would typically have a one-man lightweight tent, a sleeping bag, an inflatable mattress, a small gas stove, cooking utensils and some food. On top of all that, I've got camera equipment plus a carbon-fibre tripod. Everything that's needed is always in the bag, so all I need to do is put it in the car."





Sgurr Nan Gillean.

PHOTO: COLIN PRIOR

With his bags packed and a decent forecast ahead, Prior recounts the story of how he went about getting an image of Torridon that he had thought about for years. "It was winter and it's always a challenge climbing when you've got to carry crampons and an ice-axe. The extra weight is just enough to push your load into the realms of being unbearable. I remember the feeling of elation when I'd cleared the obstacles near the top and I could see the full of Torridon illuminated in the moonlight.

"There's a very narrow ridge path that takes you to this point and I had to pitch a tent on it. Fortunately, I guyed it with rocks fairly competently. It was absolutely freezing; I was colder there than I was up at six thousand metres in Pakistan. I had a four-season sleeping-bag and a down-jacket on inside the bag, and I was still freezing! I found out later that in Glasgow it was minus 6, so I reckon it was probably minus 14 up there. Then the wind really started to come up and I was convinced that in the morning I would be sitting in cloud. I remember unzipping the tent in the morning and looking out and was surprised to see that it was absolutely clear.

"The photograph that I took on Torridon is actually of the earth's shadow being projected onto the atmosphere itself. The colours that are visible took place before the sun had risen. The sun is still under the horizon but is illuminating the upper atmosphere and the purple part is actually the earth's shadow. The band between the pink and the earth's shadow is called the 'anti-twilight

arch.' It's very rare and I call this 'unicorn's blood.' To get that image on that morning was just a real bonus."

After witnessing spectacular moments like this, it's easier to understand the reasons why Prior goes up mountains at unfashionable hours. "We've all sat in the car and looked up at the peaks and seen this magnificent light and the only way you can get at that light is to use a telephoto lens. The reason that you should be at elevation is that this magic light is right at your feet, you can work with what's at your feet and that's what makes the difference."

Having photographed so many sunrises and sunsets across a litany of Scottish peaks, Prior draws a line to the extent of where he intends to cover. "I've no aspirations to become a Munroist. As much as I enjoy being in the mountains, the reason that I'm in these areas is for the opportunities to take photographs. Quite frequently I will climb non-Munros because they give better viewpoints or perspectives of the big mountains that people recognise."

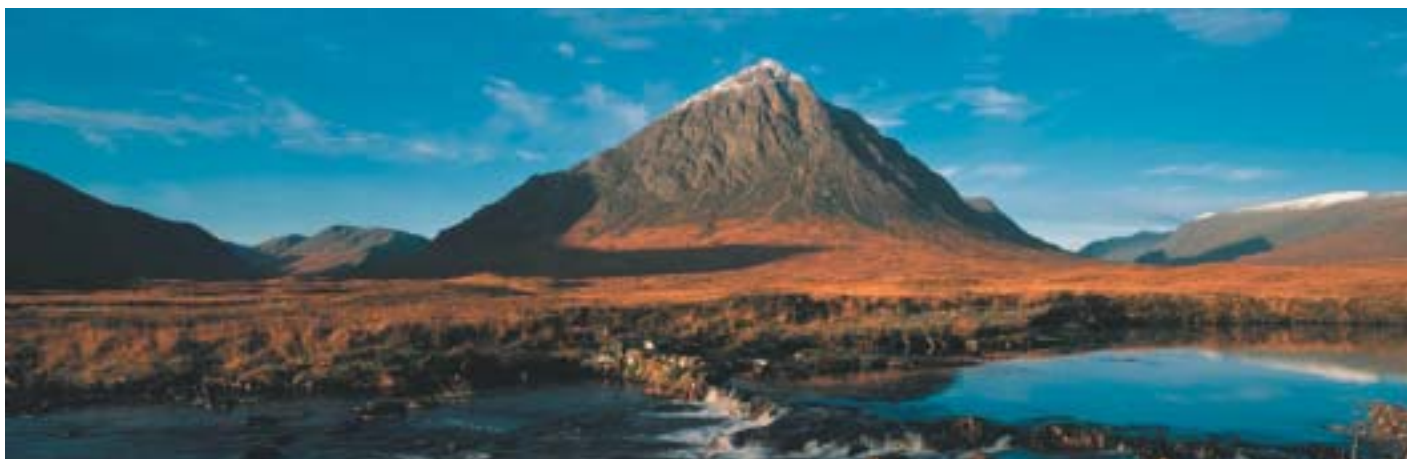
The amount of solitary time spent on location taking photographs of these famous mountaineering landmarks has given space for Prior to become more inquisitive of his surroundings. "I've got a fascination for geology that was borne out of shooting landscape pictures. As you stand there waiting for the light to change, you begin to ask yourself questions: 'How did this landscape form? What were the factors in its creation?' I know now what type of rock there is just by looking at the landscape.

"An Teallach, is one of the kings of the Scottish mountains and known for its quartzite. I remember the first recce I did there around fifteen years ago. We stopped up at Corrag Bhuidhe and I slumped down for a rest. At my feet there was a big boulder and it had a fossil in it, it was like a leaf in this rock. There was no way we could carry this rock down and I couldn't even photograph it because I had a panoramic camera with me.

"I mentioned this fossil in my book, *Scotland: The Wild Places*, and about two years ago I got a letter from a Professor of Geology at Cambridge University: 'I read with interest that you found a fossil up in Corrag Bhuidhe. I don't know how much you know about geology but Corrag Bhuidhe is pre-Cambrian quartzite which is 550 to 585 million years old and pre-dates the fossil record. There are only four sites in the world that people have found fossils in pre-Cambrian quartzite and your fossil is most definitely of international importance.' So, I've been back three times to the summit and concluded that there are quite a lot of rocks on An Teallach!"

To think of the massive indelible body of work that Prior has produced and how he has immortalised Scotland in print for generations to come, it was quite humorous to hear the Master muse "I could have had a fossil named after me!"

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Buachaille.

PHOTO: COLIN PRIOR