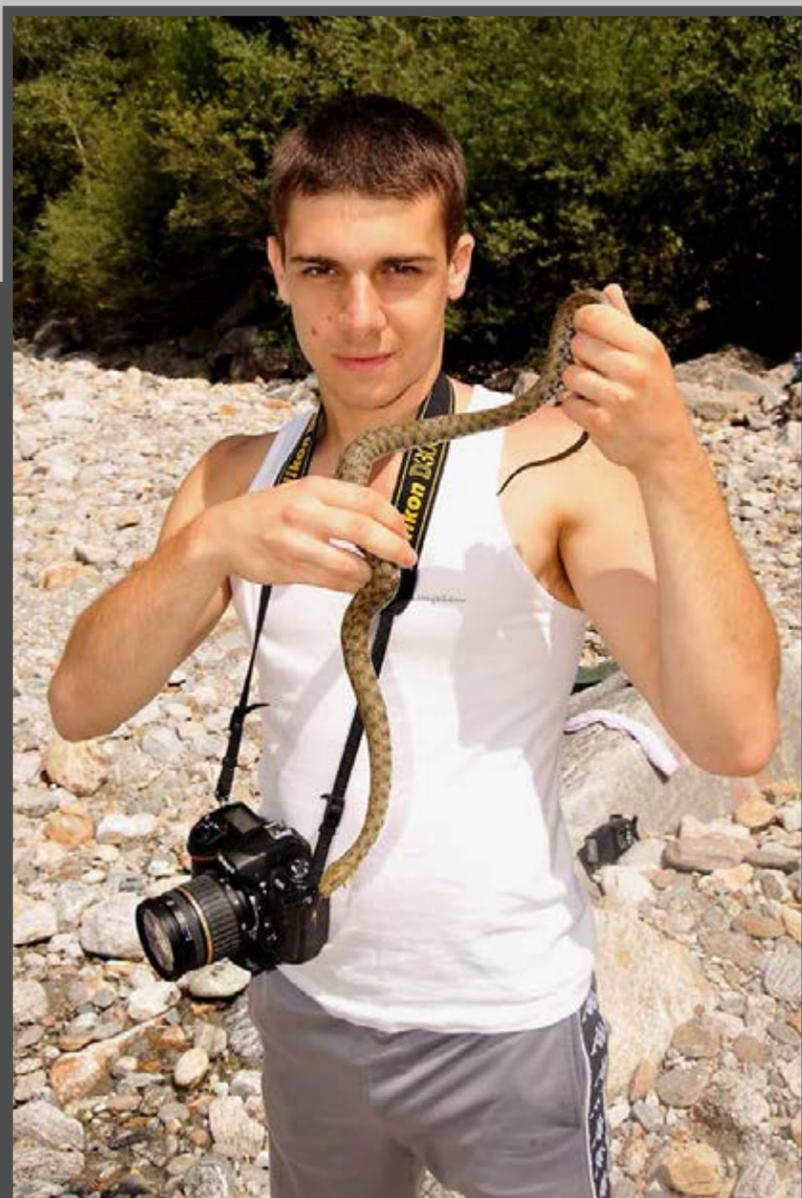


Italian Delights



Heavily industrialized and populated, Italy doesn't readily spring to mind when one thinks about wildlife or untouched nature. And yet there is beauty to be seen for those who know how to look – as our Guest Photographer shows us with his stunning images

Matteo Di Nicola: A Wildlife Photographer in his own words

My name is Matteo Di Nicola. I live in Northern Italy, where I was born in 1986. I have a degree in Natural Sciences and I am still a student in science teaching and divulgation at the State University of Milan. I have chosen this path following my passion for nature and wildlife, being well aware it won't be easy finding a job in this field - at least in the near future. Since when I was still very young, an all-consuming love for any kind of small creature had me taking it home to care for it, and in the process I learned about its morphology, life habits and needs. Growing up, I soon learned animals would rather live free and wild in their own environment: my love for photography stems then from the desire to "collect" and classify the creatures I sighted during my hikes without bringing undue suffering upon them. Taking home a good shot of an animal I had encountered during a walk in the wilderness was like having that same animal with me - forever. This - even today - allows me to take home animals, flowers, trees and even full landscapes! Wishing to share with others what I saw I gradually developed a better technique, trying to obtain images which are not only faithful to real life but are also pleasing to the eye. This is not easy by all means - for the implicit difficulties posed by subjects and situations and by the high costs

of a professional camera equipment. It goes without saying that in getting a good shot the photographer himself is the most important element - but without a good set-up the matter gets even more complicated. I want to stress that I only shoot free specimens, found in the wild after long and occasionally difficult searches, in the total respect of the animal or plant and its environment. Situations and places vary a lot. Italy offers an enormous variety of close-by and easily reachable habitats, from its Mediterranean sea coasts to the alluvial plains and the tall Alpine mountain ranges, but it is densely populated and it is almost impossible finding areas untouched by man's activities. This means that finding and approaching wild animals is exceptionally difficult. In fact, many Italian wildlife photographers have been forced to look for their subjects abroad as wild specimens here are frustratingly wary of man and close to unapproachable. In the future I shall certainly wish to visit other areas of bigger biodiversity where subjects are more easily approached. In the meantime, I'm doing my best to refine my technique and in looking for interesting subjects in Italy, the country I live in and whose wildlife deserves to be known, pictured and protected as much as that of any other place on Earth. ●

**Red Fox**

(*Vulpes vulpes*),
March 2011,
Aosta Valley, Italy.
Nikon D300,
17-50mm f2.8,
24mm 1/640 f11
iso200, handheld,
flash SB600.

One of the beautiful foxes found in the Gran Paradiso National Park. Somewhat used to the presence of trekkers and skiers, this individual – however alert – allowed a closer than usual approach. Given the short distance, I chose to use a wide-angle, with the stunning meteorological conditions of the day providing perfect lighting.



Wasp Spider and sunrise (*Argiope bruennichi*), August 2010, Lombardy, Italy. Nikon D300, 90mm f2.8 macro, 1/250 f4 iso320, flash R1, handheld. A relatively common but truly beautiful spider which I photographed at dawn in the River Ticino Park, with the early morning's sun fiery ball in the background.

Common Adder (*Vipera berus*), September 2010, Lombardy, Italy. Nikon D300, 300mm f4, 1/800 f4 iso500, handheld, no flash. A stunning Common Adder female with an uncommonly contrasted pattern. This beautiful specimen was encountered just before the arrival of autumn in the mountains close to the town of Bergamo.



**European Robin**

(*Erithacus rubecula*),

January 2010,

Lombardy, Italy.

Nikon D300,

300mm f4, 1/500

f4 iso500, tripod,

no flash.

Birds in Italy are invariably and exceptionally wary due to hunting pressure. The only way to get close to them is by using a hide and baiting them for several days - often in freezing cold as in this case. I love the soft lighting of this image, provided by the overcast weather.

**Black-headed Gull**

(*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*), February 2009, Adda river, Lombardy, Italy.

Nikon D300, 300mm f4, 1/1600 f5 iso250, handheld, no flash.

A winter afternoon's encounter along the river Adda, where ducks and gulls are often found, looking for scraps of food on the water surface.

I tried to freeze the action choosing a high shutter speed.

Late Spider-orchid (*Ophrys fuciflora*), May 2010, Lombardy, Italy.

Nikon D300, 300 f4, 1/500 f5.6 iso200, tripod, no flash.

A stunning orchid – to blur the confusing vegetation in the background I used my 300mm on a tripod, filtering sunlight through a small white umbrella.



Grass Snake in the water (*Natrix natrix*), July 2010,

Sesia river, Piedmont, Italy. Nikon D300, 300mm f4, 1/320 f4 iso640, handheld, no flash.

An uncommonly large and truly imposing specimen of this harmless snake, which I gently cornered in a shallow water bend of the river. Here I decided to use the 300mm lens to uniformly blur the background.

Blue Tit

(*Cyanistes caeruleus*), January 2010, Lombardy, Italy.
 Nikon D300, 300mm f4, 1/500 f4 iso640, tripod, no flash.
 Another shot taken in freezing cold and from a hide, baiting birds
 with the food they cannot find in the wild at this time of the year.

**Sticky Primrose and habitat**

(*Primula glutinosa*), July 2010, Aosta Valley, Italy.
 Nikon D300, 17-50mm f2.8, 17mm 1/250 f16 iso200,
 handheld, flash R1.
 A clump of colorful Primroses in the dramatic Aosta Valley
 alpine environment. Some soft strobe lighting
 was used to avoid sharp shadows.

**Common Toad**

(*Bufo bufo*), June 2010, Piedmont, Italy.

Nikon D300, 17-50mm f2.8, 17mm 1/5 f14 iso200, handheld, flash R1.

A large Common Toad female which I found among some dramatic ruins just before sunset. I used Nikon R1 macro strobes to light up the foreground details.

Ceramica pisi

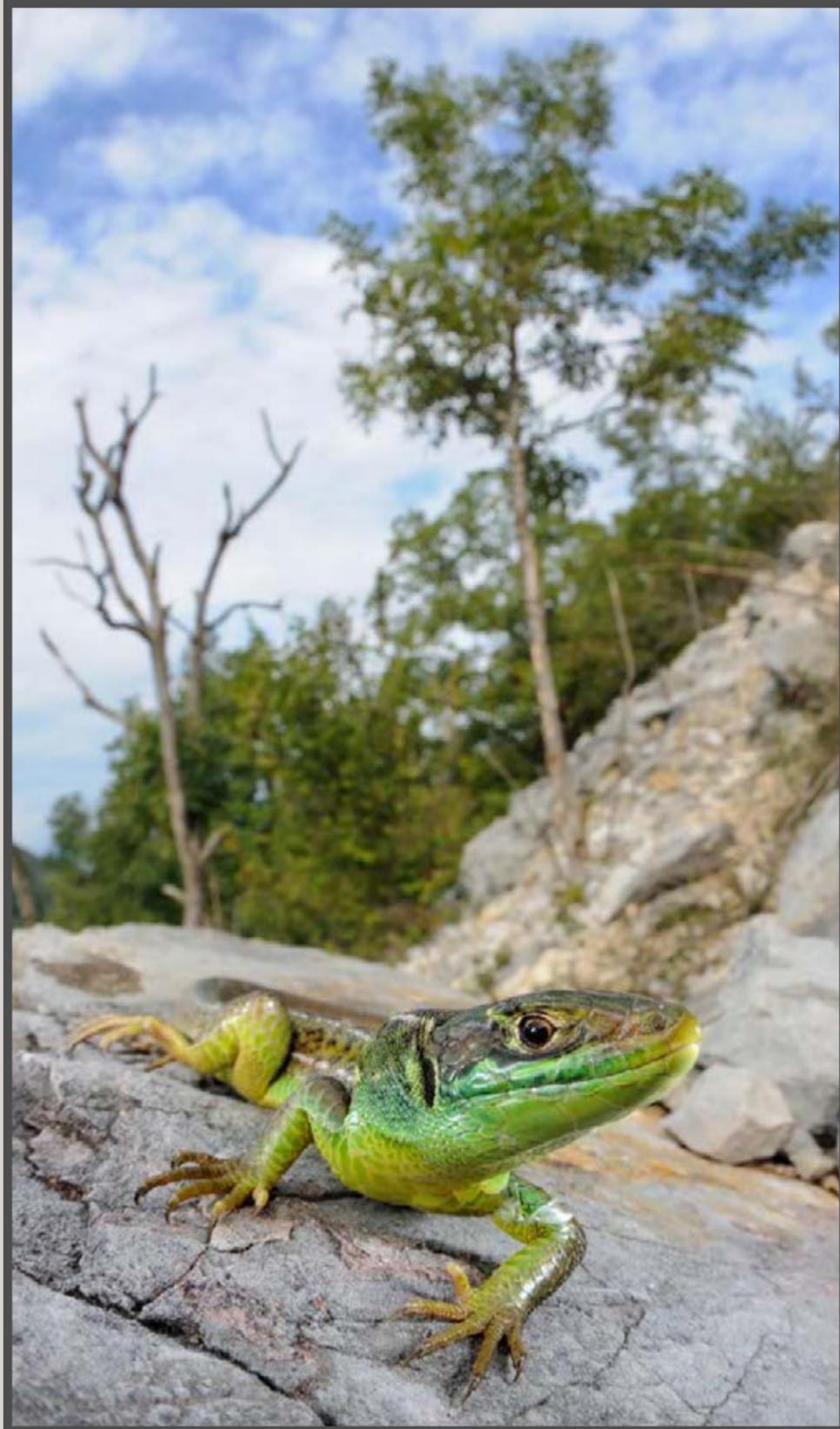
September 2010,
Lombardy, Italy.
Nikon D300,
90mm f2.8 macro,
1/200 f22
iso200, handheld,
flash R1.
A beautifully
colored and
patterned
caterpillar which
I found while
looking for adders
in the mountains
around Bergamo.



Cinquefoils and habitat

(*Potentilla* sp.), July 2010, Aosta Valley, Italy. Nikon D300,
17-50mm f2.8, 17mm 1/160 f14 iso200, handheld, flash R1.
The Aosta Valley is a splendid alpine region of Northern Italy.
Close to Rutor glacier, this clump of Cinquefoils offered
a lovely subject with its scenic mountain lake in the background.





Grey Heron
(*Ardea cinerea*),
April 2009,
Lombardy, Italy.
Nikon D300,
300mm f4 +
converter 1,4X,
1/1600 f5.6 iso500,
handheld, no flash.
April is nesting time
for these birds,
which group in
large rookeries.
This low-flying
individual was
shot in poor light
conditions with my
handheld 300mm
extended to 420mm.



Green Lizard (*Lacerta bilineata*), September 2010,
Lombardy, Italy. Nikon D300, 10-17mm f2.8,
13mm 1/100 f16 iso320, handheld, flash R1.
I love the rocky, almost prehistoric environment
in which I shot this elegant Green Lizard female.

Wall Lizard

(*Podarcis muralis*),
 April 2009,
 Piedmont,
 Italy.
 Nikon D300,
 17-50mm
 f2.8, 17mm
 1/250 f18
 iso320,
 handheld,
 flash SB600.
 A common
 Wall Lizard
 enjoys the
 last minutes
 of warmth
 before hiding
 for the night
 among the
 ruins of an
 ancient fort.



Fagus and stars

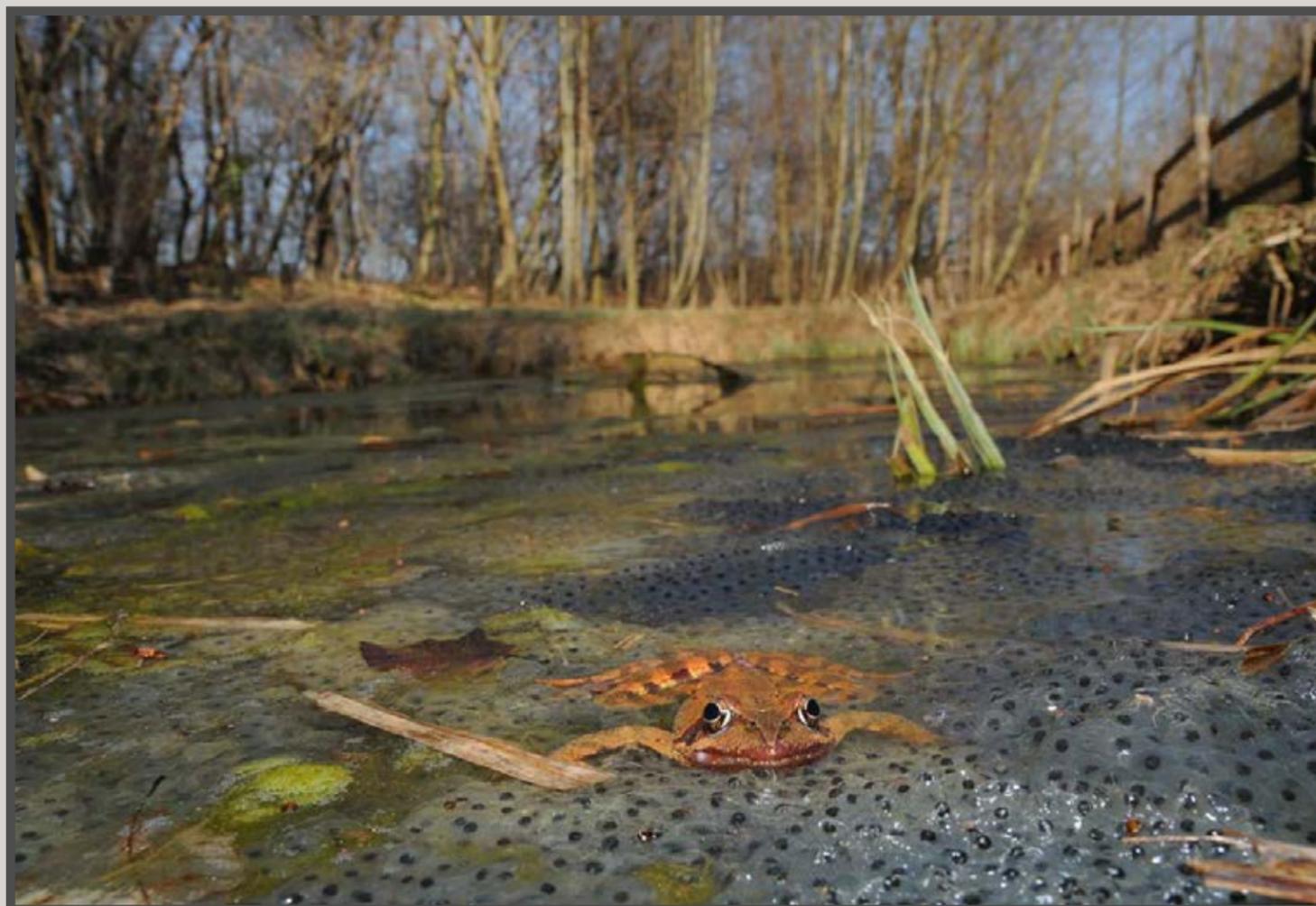
September
 2010,
 Piedmont,
 Italy.
 NikonD300,
 10-17mm
 f2.8, 10mm
 30sec f4
 iso800,
 tripod,
 no flash.
 I opted for
 a very long
 exposure to
 get both the
 stars in the
 winter sky
 and the enor-
 mous, leafless
 Beech rising
 towards
 them.



Slow Worm

(*Anguis fragilis*), September 2010, Lombardy, Italy.

Nikon D300, 10-17mm f2.8, 14mm 1/100 f14 iso200, handheld, flash R1.
Another very difficult species to shoot in macro-wide - as it moves incessantly - the harmless Slow Worm is found in several hill and mountain habitats. This beautiful species is invariably mistaken for a snake (and often killed) while it is in fact a limbless lizard.



European Common Frog

(*Rana temporaria*), March 2009, Lombardy, Italy.

Nikon D300, 17-50mm f2.8, 17mm 1/250 f10 iso200, handheld, flash SB600.
I had no rubber boots or waders with me – so I had to get in the water fully dressed to shoot this European Common Frog among its freshly laid egg clutch.



Swallowtail
(Papilio machaon),
 September
 2010,
 Lombardy, Italy.
 Nikon D300,
 90mm f2.8
 macro, 1/200
 f6.3 iso200,
 tripod, no flash.
 A beautiful
 Swallowtail
 caterpillar just
 before the
 arrival of
 autumn.

Spurge Hawk-moth

(Hyles euphorbiae), September 2010, Lombardy, Italy.
 Nikon D300, 90mm f2.8 macro, 1/125 f6.3 iso200, tripod, no flash.
 I used a tripod to shoot this stunning Spurge Hawk-moth caterpillar.

European Owl

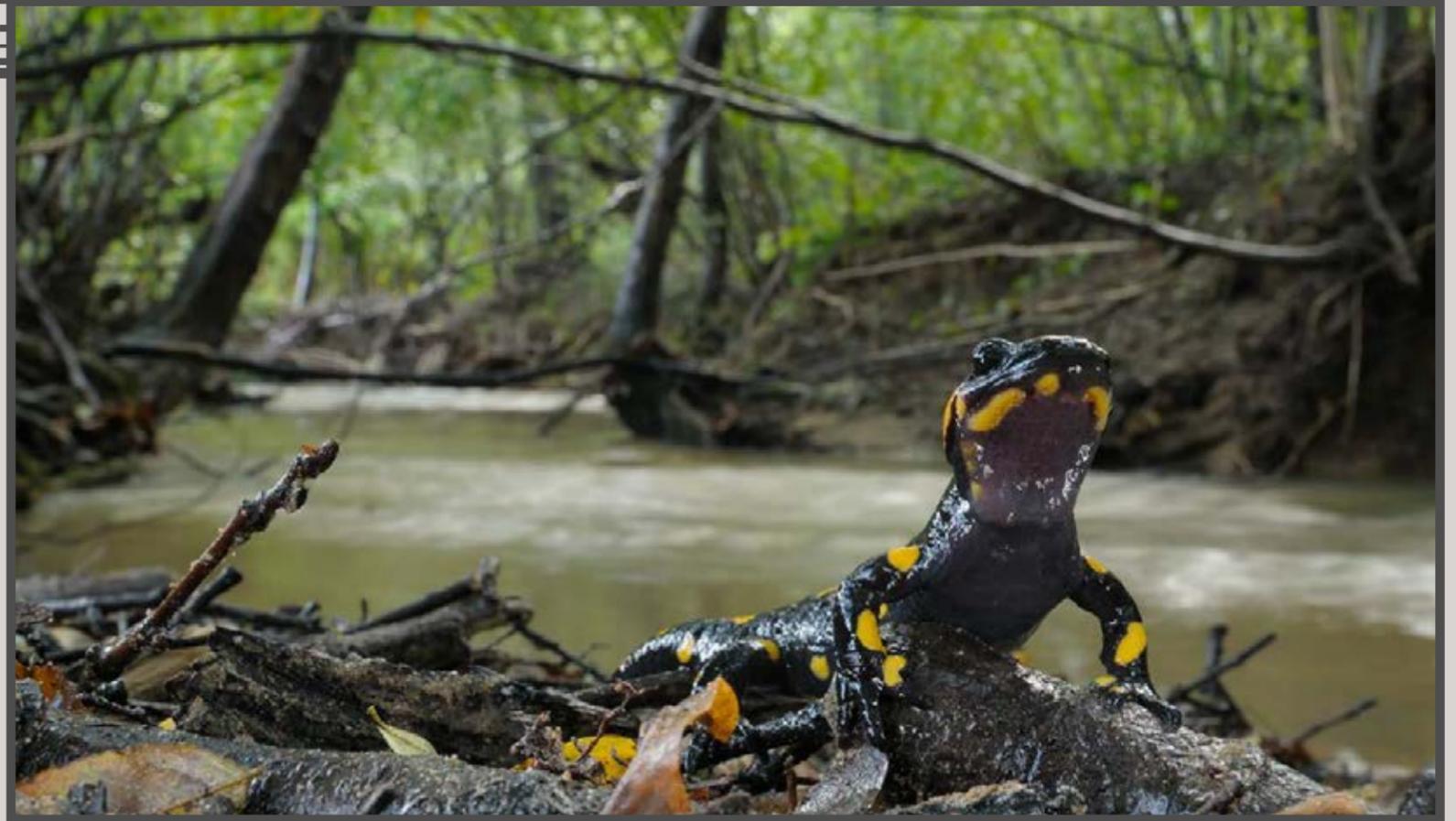
(*Asio otus*),
November 2010,
Lombardy, Italy.
Nikon D300,
300mm f4, 1/320
f4 iso200,
handheld,
flash SB600.

During winter time
European owls
group in roosts
– this was a very
lucky and
extremely
uncommon
encounter.



Common Salamander

(*Salamandra salamandra*), October 2010, Lombardy, Italy.
Nikon D300, 17-50mm f2.8, 24mm 1/200 f14 iso200, handheld,
flash R1. Rainy days offer the best chances
to happen upon these colorful salamanders moving about
among the leaf litter and along woodland streams.

**Common Toad** (*Bufo bufo*), March 2009, Liguria, Italy.

Nikon D300, 17-50mm f2.8, 17mm 1/80 f13
iso500, handheld, flash SB600.

A Common Toad by a stream in a small
wood – alas, light levels were too low for my liking.



Crested Tit

(*Parus cristatus*),
December
2010, Engadin
Valley,
Switzerland.
Nikon D300,
300mm f4,
1/500 f4
iso200,
handheld,
flash SB600.

A truly delightful
Crested Tit
– possibly the
most beautiful
among Tits in
my opinion.



Asp Viper

(*Vipera aspis atra*), September 2010, Canton Ticino, Switzerland.
Nikon D300, 17-50mm f2.8, 24mm 1/100 f16 iso200, handheld, flash R1.

A stunning Asp Viper specimen which I chose
to portray in its exceptionally scenic habitat.



Louisiana Crayfish

(*Procambarus clarkii*), September 2010, Lombardy, Italy.

Nikon D300, 17-50mm f2.8, 24mm 1/100 f14 iso400, handheld, flash R1.

An alien and invasive species but also a very colorful one – this one is adopting its impressive defensive display.

Louisiana Crayfish have adapted very easily to Italy's environment.

European Common Frog (*Rana temporaria*), July 2010, Lombardy, Italy.
Nikon D300, 17-50mm f2.8, 28mm 1/200 f20 iso200, handheld, flash R1.

In Italy, the European Common Frog is only found in hilly and mountain environments, often at high elevations and low temperatures.

Shooting in macro-wide, my favourite technique, requires speedy actions, as one's subjects seldom stay still for more than a few seconds before fleeing.



**Red Squirrel**

(*Sciurus vulgaris*),
March 2009,
Engadin Valley,
Switzerland.

Nikon D300,
300mm f4,
1/200 f5.6
iso200, handheld,
no flash.

I was in snow,
freezing cold and
without a tripod –
but this delightful
Red Squirrel
stopped long
enough
to allow me one
sharp shot.