

Capture The Moment

Renowned landscape photographer Colin Prior returns to his first loves – bird photography and conservation

by FIONA RUSSELL

The magnificent
Karakoram
mountains

the **BIG** interview

Colin Prior



HIS name is synonymous with stunning panoramas of Scotland, but a childhood fascination with ornithology has come full circle for Colin Prior.

This year he is preparing to publish a new book on a more intimate aspect of the natural world.

While internationally acclaimed for his visionary landscape photography, most recently the 62-year-old has been exploring the habitats of wild birds.

His new book, *Fragile*, will reveal just how vulnerable to change the UK's birds really are.

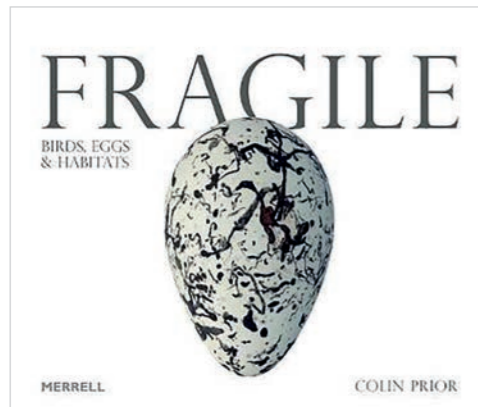
"My first love was birds," Colin says. "From a young age, I had an innate fascination with birdlife, especially in my home country.

"But, over the decades, there has been a huge decline in bird species, including tree sparrow, corn bunting, starling and cuckoo, to name a few.

"Their UK populations have been affected by more efficient farming methodology, habitat loss, the building of houses and retail parks and, increasingly, climate change."

Fragile has seen Colin photographing eggs, all part of a research collection held at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh. Each painstakingly photographed image of an egg is presented with a dramatic image of a wild habitat.

"The book is a culmination of 10 »



Above: Colin's new book

Above Right: Conger eel, Ardgarten, Loch Long

Right: Colin's work is displayed at the National Museum of Scotland



years of work," Colin says. "My aim has also been to reconnect these eggs of wild birds with their natural habitats through imagery. I am looking forward to the public reaction to the book and to increasing awareness of wild bird populations in freefall."

With Colin's lifetime interest in wild birds, you might imagine that he would have chosen to focus on wildlife as a photographer. In fact, it was images of the natural world captured underwater that first gave the Scot the inspiration to make a career of photography.

"I wasn't a natural scholar and I didn't know what I wanted to do when I left school. I started my career working in the same company as my father, Hugh. I was an operations manager at Lincoln Electric UK.

"At the same time I got into scuba diving and I decided to take a camera underwater. My first results were terrible but I learned quickly."

Colin, by then in his early 20s, created a photography portfolio of Scotland's coastline and the Red Sea.

"I entered the photos into a Camera Beneath the Waves competition without any expectation. I was very surprised when I won the Best Newcomer to Underwater Photography award."

The win was the catalyst that changed his life.

After a stint working on a North Sea oil platform as a photo-technician, Colin soon decided to set up his own business as a professional photographer. He spent the next decade concentrating on commercial photography, which he described in that era as "lucrative".

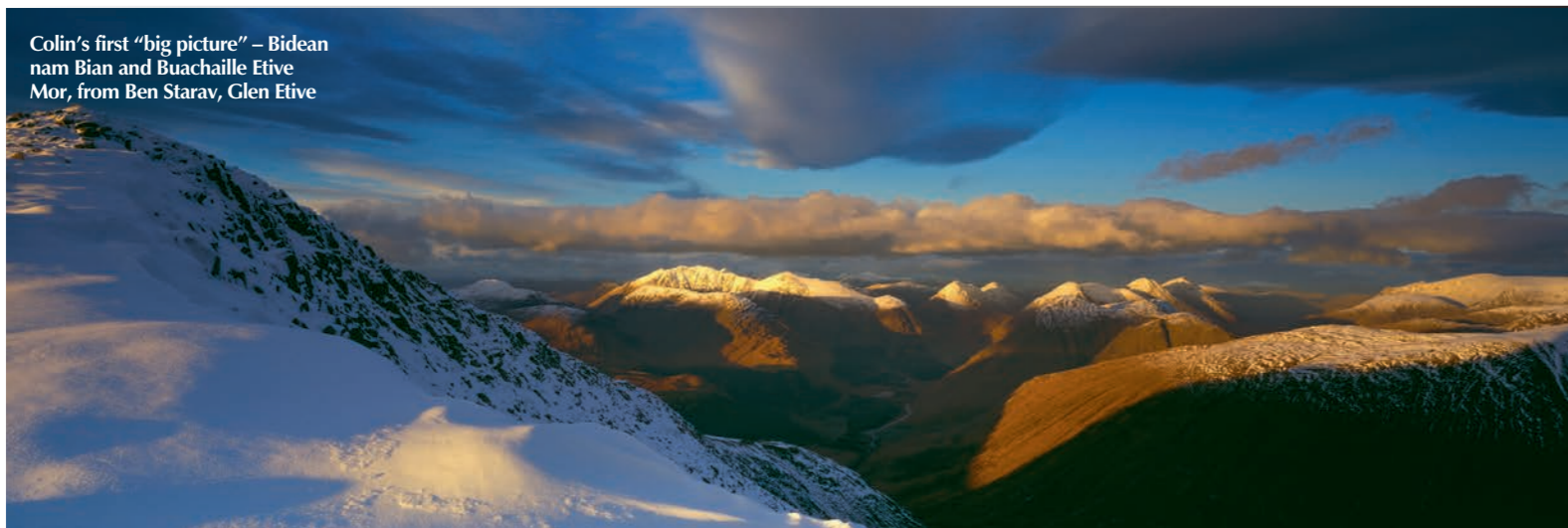
"Commissions came from advertising and design agencies for clients in the travel, lifestyle and leisure sectors," Colin says. "These paid the bills and helped to establish my reputation as a photographer."

"The money also allowed me the freedom to pursue personal projects. I experimented with different genres of photography. While the natural world, especially birds and underwater life, still greatly appealed I found this to be 'hard fought' photography. »

Gorgonia and red grouper, Red Sea



"I got into scuba diving and decided to take a camera underwater – my first results were terrible"



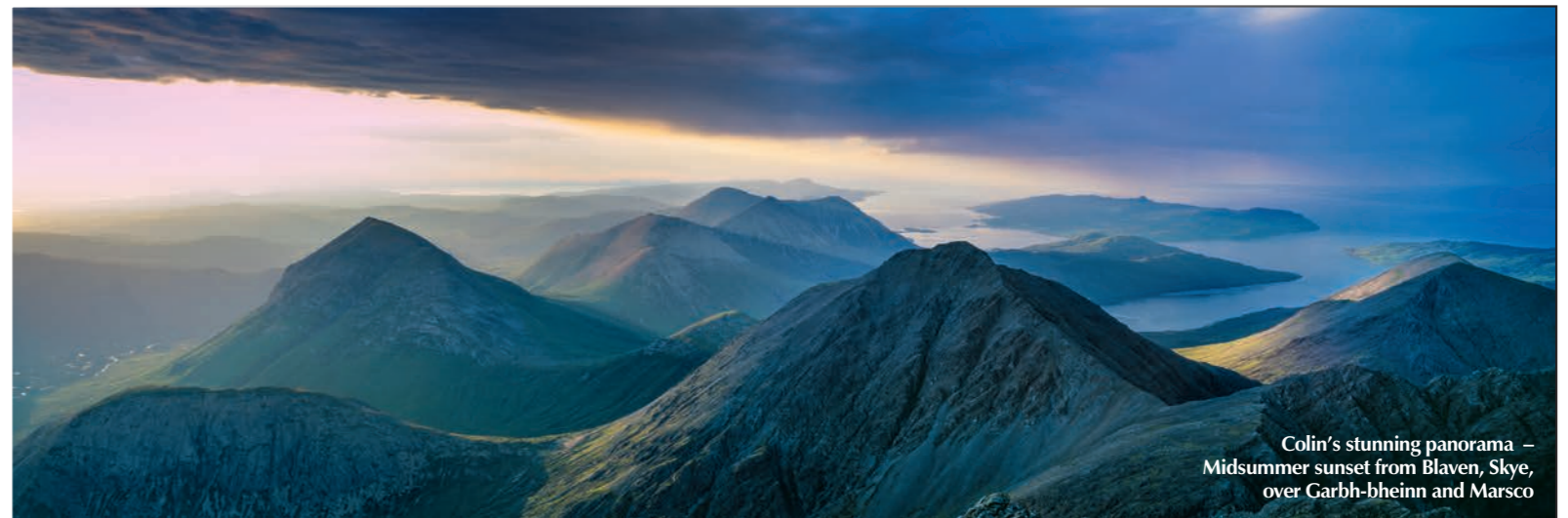
Colin's first "big picture" – Bidean nam Bian and Buachaille Etive Mor, from Ben Starav, Glen Etive



Eilean Molach and Mangestra cliffs, Lewis



Giant Daisies and barley, Aberdeenshire



Colin's stunning panorama – Midsummer sunset from Blaven, Skye, over Garbh-bheinn and Marsco

"I realised I didn't want to be a wildlife photographer where, it felt to me, that so much was out of my control when trying to capture the perfect image.

"Instead, I found I was able to be more 'responsible' for the way I could photograph the landscape, in that I could be more 'in charge' of the creation of a strong composition."

At this time, in the 1980s, Colin first started producing his now famous panoramic images of Scotland's most famous mountains.

"I could see that Scotland's landscapes, in particular the west coast areas of Kintail, Torridon and Skye, were ideally suited to the panoramic format.

"It's the wide view that can be captured on a panoramic camera, rather than the wide angle on other cameras, that I knew would work so well. I felt that this format would be something new and exciting."

Yet there is more to Colin's work than simply finding the right scene.

"When I am taking the perfect photo, I am like a conductor in an orchestra," he says. "I am creating a fusion of unrepeatable light and strong composition."

FASCINATING FACTS

Colin was the most recent recipient of the Scottish Award for Excellence in Mountain Culture 2020.

He has produced seven books, soon to be nine, that include, *The World's Wild Places* and *Living Tribes*.

He was the subject of two BBC documentaries in 2018/19 entitled *Mountain Man*.

"The best photographs do not happen by accident, rather they need to be planned so that images can be captured at exactly the right time.

"I think you need to really know the mountains to understand their rhythms. The whole process demands patience, literally waiting hours for one second, or in my case, years for one second."

The result of his captivating images quickly gained worldwide recognition. His photos were widely published in magazines and also in two of his first books, *Highland Wilderness* and *Scotland – The Wild Places*.

"The magazines loved the photos because they looked great across a two-page spread," Colin says. "The impact is so absorbing and dramatic. When you see a scene in the panoramic format you are instantly there; suddenly amid the landscape. There is no distraction from the foreground."

Appreciation for his work came from an unexpected place, according to Colin, when British Airways then commissioned him over four years to photograph corporate calendars. The briefs took him around the world many times, to some of the most remote corners and to experience many indigenous cultures.

"It was an amazing time in my career and such an incredible opportunity."

During the same decade, Colin met his wife Geraldine. Having grown up the eldest of three children to Hugh, now 88, and mum Olive, who has passed away, in the Glasgow suburb of Bearsden, Colin moved with Geraldine to Pollokshields, on the city's southside, and then to Bothwell, South Lanarkshire.

The couple, who have two children, daughter, Alexandra, 28, and son, Laurence, 25, still live in the same house. >>

Colin on Beinn an Lochain



“I’ve seen birds vanish from local areas and I’m keen to get across a conservation message”

Karakoram mountains



Pictures: ©COLIN PRIOR, ALAMY

“I have run my business from home for a long time and Geraldine is part of that, too, as a director. We have extended family living locally, too, and I like the area very much. I have easy access to the countryside and I enjoy walking nearby.”

Four decades after starting his photography business, Colin is still busy with work.

“When you work for yourself, you have to be banging the drum all the time. I am constantly working or thinking about work. You need to be creative, adapt to the changing world and thinking of new ways to earn a living.

“These days, I am still busy with photography commissions,” Colin says. “I have also been working on another project, photographing the Karakoram mountains of Pakistan. These images will be published in another book out later this year.

“I have a programme of photography workshops, which I mainly run in north-west Scotland, and these have proved popular and very rewarding. I enjoy teaching people about photography as a vision, like the expression of an artist and not purely by technique alone.”

In 2012, Colin finally sold his panoramic cameras and more fully embraced digital technology.

“I had done all I wanted to in the panoramic format and it was becoming a hassle with processing and scanning the photos. It felt like I was in a creative

straitjacket. I decided then to hunt for a new game. I am now finding new challenges with digital cameras. I think it is important to continue challenge myself.

“A good example is the *Fragile* project. I could have photographed wild birds but I wanted to do something different. The process of the work was absorbing and rewarding. It has utilised old skills and new techniques.

“It has felt like a very personal project, too. I have seen birds vanish from local areas I’ve frequented all of my life and I am very keen to get across a conservation message with this latest book of my photography.”



Two books by Colin Prior, *Fragile: Birds, Eggs & Habitats* and *The Karakoram: Ice Mountains of Pakistan*, will be published in September by Merrell Publishers. They are already available for pre-order.

See www.colinprior.co.uk for more information on his books and workshops.