

AWPF: My Journey to a Successful Panel - Jan Wilson-Chalon

I love a good project, and this one was especially fulfilling. I set out with the idea of creating a 12-image panel for the AWPf distinction, which required that each image work individually but also harmonize as a collective whole. Fortunately, I was able to secure a spot at an AWPf workshop. If you ever have the chance to attend one, I can't recommend it highly enough—the wealth of experience and the openness to share support and constructive advice is truly invaluable.

My original concept was to focus on backlighting wildlife, a style that plays with light and shadows in unique ways. I arrived with a series of images and a hanging plan for different approaches, and the room was split in opinion! The feedback, though, was extremely helpful. It pushed me to refine my vision and concentrate on one specific aspect. My subjects included a small variety of birds, as well as an otter and a deer. If you attend a workshop, I highly recommend bringing your ideas and printed materials—there's no substitute for hands-on discussion. It was a mixed bag of responses; some said the idea was “risky” or a bit “marmite,” while others encouraged me to see it through.

On the drive home, I found myself reflecting on the day. Part of me still wanted to go forward with the original idea, but I also thought about presenting a “safer” panel to increase my chances of passing. In the end, I knew I'd regret it if I didn't put forth my backlighting concept, so I emailed to ask if I could submit two panels—one original, one as a backup.

I was lucky enough to be paired with a mentor—many thanks to Dave—who guided me through the refinement process. Accepting the support of a mentor can be incredibly helpful, but at the end of the day, it's still your panel, and it's important to make decisions that align with your own vision.

Panel One: Backlighting of Wildlife



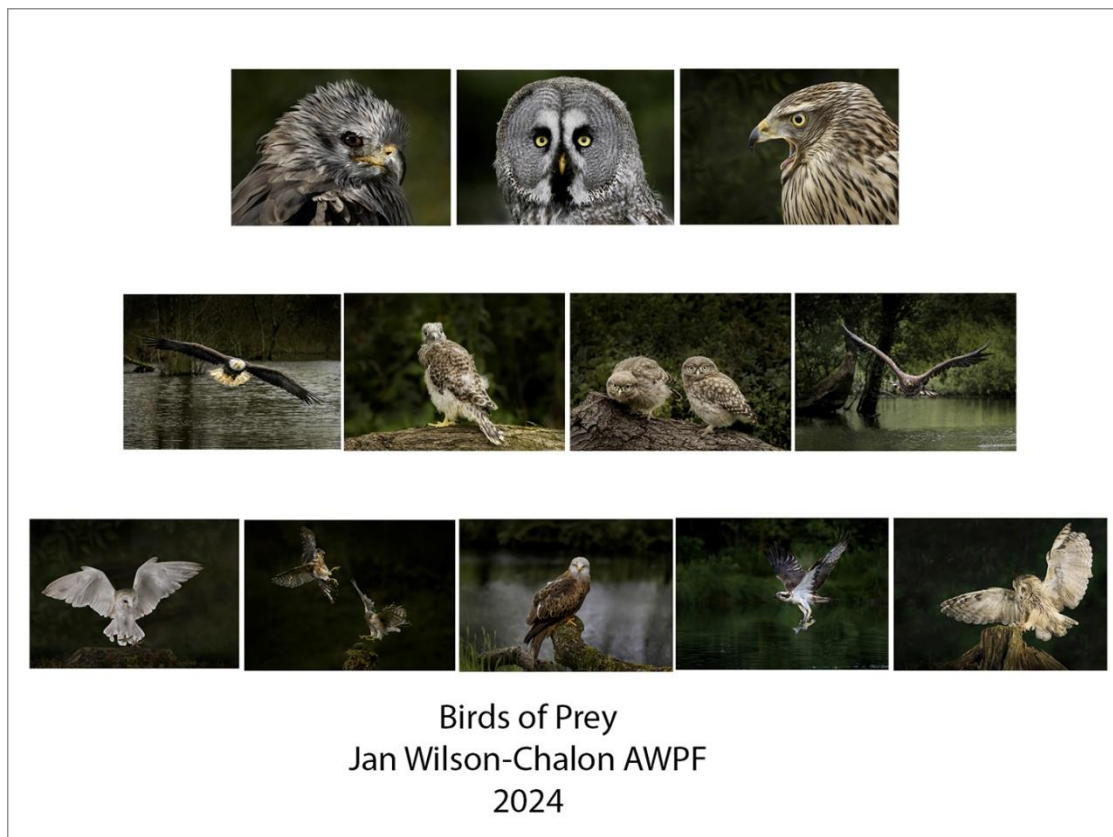
This was the “riskier” panel, captured across three countries: Hungary, England, and Wales. Since some original images were taken in Hungary, I couldn’t go back to reshoot, so I improvised. I set up lighting in my garden and nearby fields, spending many nights trying to match the original lighting. After hours of patience (and hoping a fox would appear in the right spot!), I managed to capture a similar look.

Once I felt the light was a good match, I looked for other wildlife to round out the panel. The cormorant and heron images from Hungary added depth, while I completed the series with owls, a stork, and a kestrel from Cheshire. Printing was no easy task either—my images ate up photo black ink, and I had to keep refilling it to maintain a consistent tone across the panel.

On assessment day, the nerves hit hard. Watching the assessors discuss your work is both thrilling and nerve-wracking. But I was lucky to have two close friends with me, both of whom have supported my photography journey from the beginning, about eight or nine years ago. If you can bring a support system, I highly recommend it.

After much anticipation, *Backlighting of Wildlife* passed. I felt an odd irony at the idea that my “backup” panel, *Birds of Prey*, might not make it.

Panel Two: Birds of Prey



This panel featured a range of adult birds and chicks, shown in both close-up and full-portrait formats. I aimed for cohesion despite the fact that these images had been taken over several years. One highlight was a kestrel chick, which won over the judges. They commented on its charm as it waited to grow into its feathers.

To my delight, *Birds of Prey* passed as well.

Reflecting on the Process

Creating a cohesive panel is a unique challenge, particularly when some favourite images don't make the cut because they stand out too much. The goal is to marry images in tone, colour, and composition for a harmonious feel. It's an incredibly rewarding process, and I'm thrilled to have earned my AWPf.

If you have an idea for a panel and enjoy a challenge, I encourage you to give it a go!

Jan Wilson-Chalon AWPf