



PHOTOGRAPHY MASTERCLASS

Professional wildlife photographer MICHAEL SNEDIC explains the nitty gritty of how to get that perfect shot.

Photographing birds in low light conditions can be quite difficult, but by following some simple techniques, great results can be achieved.

During a guided tour on a recent trip to Lord Howe Island, I hauled my camera and lens up the 875 metre climb to Mount Gower. My aim: to photograph a Lord Howe Woodhen in the section of lush rainforest towards the summit known to be a haven for this species. Being quite dark under the rainforest canopy, however, did pose some challenges for photography.

Approaching the rainforest area where woodhens are usually found, I could hear the birds, but not see them. I had been told that this species is quite inquisitive when it hears foreign sounds, so one of the other guests rattled her bracelets. Sure enough, this tactic had the desired effect and a pair of woodhens slowly walked out—just three metres in front of us.

As the birds were in a dark area, I used a wide aperture of $f4$ on my camera to let in more light, as well as a higher ISO (light sensitivity) setting of 2,500. This had the desired effect of raising the camera's shutter speed. This was necessary given that I hadn't lugged my tripod up the challenging climb—a shutter speed that is too low will cause a blurry shot when hand-holding the camera and lens.

Each different camera model has a sensor that reacts differently to raising ISO settings. By doing some tests on your own camera at different ISO settings, you will get to know how high you can go before 'noise' starts creeping into your photos (the digital equivalent of grainy photos in old film cameras).

As luck would have it, one of the birds walked over to a shaft of light that was shining through the canopy and stopped to stretch its wings. This added light raised the shutter speed even more, which helped freeze the movement made by the woodhen. Sometimes things fall into place like this, but being well prepared means you are more likely to be able to make the most of such opportunities.

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