

How To Photograph Birds

Experienced bird shooter *Michael Snedic* explains how you can make strong images of these elusive, but colourful creatures.

People choose to enter the world of photography for many reasons. Some use it as a means of expressing their creativity, others as a way of promoting their products or businesses, while some simply use a camera as a means of photographing their children or other family moments. For me, it was a way of capturing the world of nature. I started work as part-time nature-based guide in Queensland's Lamington National Park in 1997 and soon encountered a fabulous array of wildlife, especially birds, on a daily basis. It seemed only natural to try and capture some of these delightful creatures on film. From the moment I took my first shots I was hooked! I spent all of my spare time looking for wildlife, plants, fungi and landscapes to photograph. I read books and magazines on the subject, searched internet sites on improving techniques and basically "lived and breathed" nature and wildlife photography. Before long my images were being published in nature-based calendars, diaries, books, magazines and brochures.

Although I enjoy photographing anything in nature, I do have a particular fondness for birds. They aren't the easiest of subjects to photograph, but they're certainly one of the most rewarding. Australia is fortunate host nearly 800 species of native birds and they come in many shapes, sizes and colours as well as totally different behaviours. When I'm behind the lens of a camera watching the courtship display of a rare bird, a parent feeding its chicks or birds bathing and preening I feel privileged to be able to experience nature at its best. To me, capturing that special moment with a camera is simply a bonus.

Lenses: Zoom or Telephoto?

Certain bits of kit are essential in order to successfully photograph birds. A lens with a long focal length makes it possible to take photos of birds that would normally fly off if you approached too closely. I've used both zoom and fixed-length telephoto lenses and both serve their purpose. The advantage of using a zoom lens is that it's easier to compose and frame your subject without having to physically move whereas a fixed length telephoto lens limits your movement to a certain degree. The advantage of a telephoto lens is that generally you're able to get sharper images than with a zoom, although high-end professional zoom lenses nowadays are extremely sharp. I have used a variety of lenses successfully for bird photography and these have included an 80-200mm f2.8 zoom, a 120-600mm f5.6-6.7 zoom, a 300mm f2.8 telephoto (with 1.4x and 2x converters) and an 800mm f5.6 telephoto. The lens (or lenses) you choose ultimately depends on your budget and personal preference.

A tripod is another essential item needed when using long lenses. Carbon fibre tripods such as those made by Gitzo or Manfrotto, which are strong but lightweight, are extremely popular with professional bird photographers and there are many designs and styles to suit every budget. Apart from stabilising your heavy lens, it also enables photos to be taken even when light conditions are low (within reason), since you can set your shutter speed lower and maintain lens/camera stability.

Black-winged Stilts: I'd arrived at some wetlands in Byron Bay hoping to find some birds to photograph. This pair of Black-winged Stilts caught my eye, as they were feeding in a nearby lagoon. The early morning light was perfect for photography so I set up my tripod, camera and 800mm telephoto lens and waited. The Stilts were continuously moving around in search of food so composition and focus wasn't easy. Eventually they stopped briefly and I was able to take the photo. I chose a portrait format due to the tall shape of the birds, composed the image so as to show their reflection in the water and focused on the front bird. The calm, dull water sets off the contrasting colours of the bird's plumage well. Canon A1, 800mm f5.6 lens, Fuji Sensia 100, tripod.





Alberts' Lyrebird: The Alberts' Lyrebird male has one of the most stunning courtship displays of any Australian bird. Due to its extremely limited distribution and its shy and elusive manner, there have only been three or four people in the world who have professionally photographed this bird. I'd just begun to dabble in the world of nature photography and needed something challenging to photograph. This particular male, in Lamington National Park, had been displaying annually in the same area for many years and favoured certain spots. Due to his shyness and the dark conditions within the rainforest, the only way to photograph this bird was to set up a camouflaged hide with multiple flash units facing one of the bird's display platforms. I expected this project would take some time, but little did I know that it would take me seven laborious weeks to achieve! Each morning in the freezing cold of winter I awoke before sunrise and ventured into the rainforest. I then connected my triple flash units, set up my camera equipment and waited. It was incredibly cold, cramped and at times boring sitting in the tiny hide hour after hour, but the end result was well worth the effort. This photo was my first ever to be selected for publication. At the time the wait seemed an eternity, but in hindsight it taught me great patience and technique in photographing an extremely rare bird. Canon A1, 120-600mm lens, Fuji Sensia 100, three flash units, tripod, bird hide.



Rose-crowned Fruit-Doves: I had spent weeks trying to photograph this pair of Rose-crowned Fruit-Doves in a large walk-through aviary, without much success. I finally succeeded when they landed in a nearby tree and started preening and getting cosy with each other. I used an 80-200mm f2.8 lens with a 2x converter on a tripod, and attached a flash to the hotshoe as fill-flash. Part of the success of bird photography is to know your subjects and their behaviour and subsequently be "one step ahead" of them. The Fruit-Doves had landed in an appropriate spot, but they were facing the wrong direction and moving about. I was poised and ready, looking through the viewfinder and waited for them to turn around. It seemed like an eternity before they turned to face the camera, but as soon they did I took the shot. A split second later they were off into the tree canopy. Nikon F90X, 80-200mm f2.8 lens, 2X converter, Fuji Provia 100F, tripod, fill- flash on camera.

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Film and Memory Cards

If you’re using film I recommend professional print or slide stock. If submitting work for publishing, then using slide film is generally a prerequisite since the quality of the image is much higher. Personally I’m a fan of Fuji slide film and I’ve used Sensia 100, Velvia 100F and Provia 100F. All three produce high-quality images, with Velvia 100F and Provia 100F having finer grain than Sensia 100. Although film is an important part of the equation, it’s important to remember the scanning process is just as important. The better quality the scan, the better the image will be when reproduced. When out in the field always take plenty of film as you never know how many rolls you’ll need. If you’re using a digital SLR then it’s always best to purchase the largest affordable memory card and back this up with a second, spare card. There’s nothing worse than running out of storage space on a memory card when you’re kilometres away from civilisation.

In a Flash!

If the birds you’re trying to photograph are fairly tame and approachable I suggest you also use an external flash as fill-flash. This is where the ambient light is mixed with a small amount of flash in order to freeze any movement, increase light in low-light conditions and reduce shadows on a sunny day. To reduce the full effect of a flash unit, a built-in diffuser can be used if available, or the flash head can be covered with tracing paper. If your subject is stationary, such as parents feeding their chicks at a nest, then multiple flash units can also be used to create natural, three dimensional lighting, even in dark rainforests. These units can be connected via synchronised cords or slave units that trigger off when the main flash fires. If you’re a Nikon digital SLR user, these cameras also have wireless TTL flashes available. When using natural light to photograph birds the best times of the day are during the early morning light or late afternoon. This is when the light is at its softest.

If you’re still a film user I recommend carrying a small notebook around with you when taking photos and writing down the

Tawny Frogmouths: Tawny Frogmouths are known to many people, inhabiting bushland as well as many suburban areas. Their chicks are absolutely adorable balls of fluff so when I was told about a pair feeding two chicks in the Canungra Valley (Qld) I jumped at the opportunity to photograph them. Unfortunately the nest was perched in a tree high on a steep, precarious hill and photography seemed impossible. Because I’d waited years to photograph nesting Tawny Frogmouths I was determined to find a way, no matter how difficult the exercise! I scrambled up the steep hill, my Lowepro backpack brimming with gear. I virtually crawled along and grabbed hold of tree trunks, roots and vines to hold me from tumbling down the hill. Once on eye-level with the nest I tied my backpack to a tree and started to set up my tripod. This was much easier said than done! Due to the steepness of the hill the tripod was impossible to set up so I resorted to tying a long, sturdy stick to one of the legs and fastening it to a nearby branch using an octopus strap. Once the camera and lens were set up on the tripod I realised my light levels were too low and I’d need to use some fill-flash. The problem was that the nest was so far away and the flash unit I had wasn’t very powerful. I ended up tying the flash (with diffuser attached) onto another long stick, connecting it to a 10-metre synchronised cord and facing it over the nest. Can you imagine the sight of a tripod wedged into the soil with one leg tied to a branch, another long branch holding a flash unit and me trying to compose, focus and hang on for dear life! It was one of my most difficult, but funny photographic moments but the end result was well worth the effort. Canon A1, 120-600mm lens, Fuji Sensia 100, tripod, fill-flash.



specifications of each and every shot. If you’re using a digital SLR then all your settings will be automatically recorded in camera. You can then use the settings that work on future shoots. I’ve often heard digital camera users say they don’t need to learn photography techniques since they can take limitless shots and delete the rest. Unfortunately, if you’re using this method you’ll lose many rare opportunities, especially when photographing subjects that are constantly moving, such as birds.

Favourite Sites

There are many natural areas around Australia where it’s possible to photograph a variety of birds. One of my favourite places is Yellow Water in Kakadu National Park, Northern Territory. During the dry season, especially from June to August, birds such



HIDES/BLINDS

One of the best methods for approaching birds without disturbing them is by using a bird hide or “blind” (as they are known overseas). Hides are used as a way of concealing your presence and letting your subject carry on with its usual behaviour. They can be set up near nest sites, at display platforms, or near feeding areas, without the birds seeing you while you change lenses, swap film/memory cards or generally move around. It’s recommended that hides are set up a distance from your subject, then gradually brought in closer. This allows the birds to become accustomed to the sight of the structure, slowly and gradually.

Hides can be purchased commercially from various bird-watching outlets in the UK or USA. They can also be handmade using a number of methods. One of the simplest methods, and one that I’ve used often, is to use chicken wire and camouflaged cloth. The chicken wire is shaped into a cylinder, large enough for you to comfortably sit inside with all your camera gear. A door is then cut into the side and the structure covered by camouflaged material. Another cheap and portable method is to set up your camera on a tripod, sit on a portable stool and cover yourself with a camouflaged poncho. It’s that easy!

Comb-crested Jacana: Photographing this delightful bird, the Comb-crested Jacana, was one of the highlights of my photographic expedition to Yellow Water in Kakadu National Park. Each morning at sunrise I’d check the wetlands in an aluminium dinghy, searching for this tiny bird. Since I was in a boat that was constantly moving, it was difficult to keep my massive 800mm f5.6 lens and tripod still. The solution was to put my large, bulky tripod over the side of the dinghy and stabilise it in the mud. This particular image was taken in the beautiful early morning light, the best time to take any wildlife photographs. Canon A1, 800mm 5.6 lens, extension tube, Fuji Sensia 100, tripod

as Comb-crested Jacanas, Black-necked Storks, White-breasted Sea Eagles and Rainbow Bee-eaters can be found, to name but a few. Another favourite place is Lamington National Park, in south-east Queensland, where Regent and Satin Bowerbirds, Crimson Rosellas and King Parrots are regular inhabitants of the park. Many of the birds found in these national parks are used to large numbers of people and are subsequently tamer, thus making photography a little easier.

Bird photography is a pleasant and rewarding experience. With many of our lives becoming quite hectic it’s great to be able to escape into nature and share your time with our feathered friends. I highly recommend it! *

Michael Snedic has been a passionate nature photographer for just over eight years. His work is widely published and he also tutors at Nature Photography Workshops. He photographs all types of native wildlife, macro and landscapes, but birds are his favourite subjects.