

Bird Photography

His first safari in Africa was back in 2008. His first book was about the seabirds of the Farne Islands and a fascination with bird photography finally turned to a full time job. In this article, **Kaleel Zibe** shares some extremely valuable information on bird photography

I used to be a reluctant birder. It took my first safari trip to Africa in 2008 to truly appreciate what birds really look like. I know it sounds absurd, but I had never considered how subtly beautiful they are until, in between the usual big game photography, I started taking pictures of brightly coloured rollers and bee-eaters and actually looked properly at the pictures; I had some superb captures of these amazing creatures. I brought that enthusiasm back home with me and gradually started to understand the fascination of birds and how to photograph them, even if our native avifauna is - at a distance at least - rather more dour.

After this trip, I made the avian realm my main focus as a professional photographer and turned a personal project on the wildlife of the Farne Islands - seabirds and seals - into my first book. The more I researched and the more I photographed, the more enthralled I became.

Birds are so accessible; they are in our own back gardens, fields and ponds. There is something to point a camera at almost everywhere. To illustrate the point, try going out to get a picture of a weasel instead and see how far you get.

I now teach photographic workshops and safaris so I have collected together a few simple, tried and trusted tips and musings that I hope will help you get the best out of your own bird photography. »





Previous Page • Flamingo (captive)

Nikon D3
Nikon 70-200mm f/2.8 @ 200mm
f/5, 1/2500sec, ISO 400

Above • Puffin with food

Farne Islands, Northumberland, England
Nikon D3
Nikon 600mm f/4 + 1.7 TC
f/11, 1/500sec, ISO 200
+1/3 stop exposure compensation
flash with flash extender

Left • Young red kite before its release

Nikon D3
Nikon 24-70mm @ 70mm
f/2.8, 1/100, ISO 200

» Exposure and Compensation

This is so fundamental that it is worth spending a bit of time on. Cameras are not clever compared with humans. In general, a camera's light metering system will look at the world and assume that what it is pointing at is middle toned. This could be mid green, mid grey, red; anything really. It will then make an exposure decision based on this information. The problem with this view of the world is that it is not always correct and often needs to be compensated for. Have you ever pointed your camera at a snow scene, clicked the button and achieved a picture of grey snow? If so, that is because the camera has absolutely no idea what it is looking at and assumes the 'snow' is too bright. It then drags the exposure down accordingly. Similarly, if you are lucky enough to get close to a black grouse, there is a good chance you will end up with a middle grey grouse, which I believe may be a new species.

Furthermore, a classic problem with bird pictures is back-lighting: the pristine white underside of a lesser

black-backed gull is rendered grey, because the camera's metering system sees the bright sky behind the bird and brings the exposure down to a level it assumes is correct.

Just to add some confusion into the mix with this middle toned world view, many cameras are cleverer than this. In fact, so clever that they can refer the scene in front of them to thousands of pre-recorded reference images, which gives them a higher degree of exposure intelligence, all in a blink of pressing the shutter. So, there are no hard and fast rules across all cameras and situations.

The answer to this potential mess is the exposure compensation control. This allows you to correct for the shortcomings of the metering system by manually adding or subtracting exposure. Usually this is a dedicated button or dial that you can use to adjust exposure very easily without removing your eye from the viewfinder. If you are unlucky, it might be buried in a menu somewhere and you will have to search for it. Wherever the exposure compensation control is hiding, seek it out and make it

your friend. Some say digital photography makes us all lazy because we can see the results immediately on the back of our cameras. I say that it raises the bar on quality, and, therefore, it is unforgivable to produce poorly exposed images these days; and yet, it happens all the time. I judge various photography competitions and it simply astonishes me how many images are well composed, sharp and interesting, but fundamentally underexposed, leaving them looking lifeless and dull. If only the photographer had taken a bit more care with the exposure, the pictures really would have shone.

Use your camera's exposure compensation control to adjust the exposure to what you expect, as long as you avoid clipping the highlights in the image. This is where the exposure is too high and the image loses all detail in the brightest areas. This is a particularly key point with white birds because, if the exposure on the feathers is pushed too far, you will not be able to recover the detail in post-processing.

Two things can help avoid this: the histogram and the flashing highlight warning. If neither of these things is switched on, it is well worth having a look through the camera's menu to locate them. The histogram will show you the distribution of tones throughout the image; you should check that you have a good spread across the graph without a spike at the right hand end. The flashing highlight warning will give you immediate feedback after you take the picture and will show any parts of it that have burnt out; if this happens, dial in a bit of negative exposure compensation.

Exposure can occupy, and indeed has occupied, entire photography tomes; I know because I own at least two of them. I recommend you use matrix/evaluative metering most of the time so that the camera gets a chance to refer to its database of images if it has this capability. On the whole, this metering mode will be right for most situations. »



» The Eyes Have It

As with human portraiture, if you want to make an engaging photograph of a bird, the eyes need to be in focus. Eyes have a particular significance: if a person gazes directly at you, you have their direct attention and there is a tangible connection. Similarly, if a bird is looking directly at you with its eyes sharply in focus, this will make a strong image. Focus on the bill instead and the impact is lost. It is important also to get onto the same level as the bird if possible. Above or below will make a big difference to the psychological feel and will accentuate or diminish the relationship of dominance between the viewer and the bird. If this means getting your knees dirty, then so be it.

Simplicity

Clutter is the enemy of so many photographs. Sometimes it is desirable to portray a busy scene with much going on, and that is fine if it is your intention. However, for example, unless you are photographing a whole colony of guillemots or a murmuration of starlings, you will probably want to try to isolate a single bird or two from the crowd. Try to leave some clean space around so that your subject really stands out. If there are multiple elements in a scene, the eye of the viewer gets pulled around from distraction to distraction and does not know what to focus on. This weakens the image and makes it less pleasing

to look at. If you have part of an image that you want to make a feature of, like the head of a single bird, for example, try setting the lens aperture as wide as it will go: a number like f/5.6 or f/4. Doing this reduces the depth of field to the zone immediately around the bird's head and blurs out areas that are behind and in front of the subject. Combine this technique with an uncluttered background and the subject will pop out from the background.

Get Flashy

Many people recoil or look at me blankly when I suggest using flash for wildlife. Sometimes it is because they do not believe in artificial light for natural imagery and at other times it is because they have no idea how to use it or have not considered it even. I do not have a problem with flash, as long as it is not disturbing the subject. You can tell if you are spooking an animal and you should stop immediately if that is the case.

As for having no idea how to use it, I was very much in that camp until I started messing around with flash. It will be the subject of a separate article to explore all the ins and outs of artificial light, but just go out and try it. It really is not as hard as you might think. None of the birds in the Farne Islands book project batted an eyelid when I used flash, so I learned a lot about creating more balanced and »

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Above left • Lilac-breasted roller
Masai Mara, Kenya
Nikon D4, Nikkor 200-400mm f/4 @ 380mm
f/11, 1/1600 sec, ISO 1600
+1/3 stop exposure compensation

Above • Arctic tern
Farne Islands, Northumberland, England
Nikon D3, Nikkor 24-70mm f/2.8 @ 32mm
f/13, 1/1000 sec, ISO 400
Flash filled in the underside of the bird
Right • Lesser black-backed gull
Farne Islands, Northumberland, England
Nikon D3, Nikkor 70-200mm f/2.8 @ 200mm
f/3.2, 1/1600 sec, ISO 200
+1/3 stop exposure compensation



Flash is fantastic for balancing up the exposure in a photograph where the foreground, often the underside of a back-lit bird, is too dark

» punchy images just by giving it a go.

Also, flash can pick out lovely catch-lights in the eyes, which means you get a tiny point of white light reflecting on the surface of the eye, adding some sparkle. I often demonstrate to people on workshops the difference catch-lights make: I first show them a picture of an owl with lovely catch-lights. Then I show them the same image with the catch-lights removed in Photoshop. The second picture looks as though the owl has been stuffed.

Flash is fantastic for balancing up the exposure in a photograph where the foreground, often the underside of a back-lit bird, is too dark. DSLR sensors are magical things, but they still do not come close to having the dynamic range of the human eye. That is to say, they cannot record the

same wide range of tones from pure black to pure white and all the shades in between. The available tones in a scene have to be squashed into a narrower range than the eye sees and flash can compensate for this by lifting darker areas so that the sensor can record what looks like a full range of tones. Many cameras have pop-up flashes which are ideal for close range fill and catch-lights, so do not assume you need to spend large amounts of money on off-camera flash.

In truth, I am still not a birder; I do not do lists or twitches or ID drawings, but I have a profound love of anything that is beautiful in nature, and birds definitely fit the bill. Pun intended. ✦



Kaleel Zibe

Kaleel has been a professional photographer, getting muddy and wet waiting for wildlife at dawn, since 2008. He has written the book 'Wildlife of the Farne Islands' and runs wildlife photography workshops with Alan Hewitt at Hawk's Head Photography.

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