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Improve your chances of obtaining good photographs of birds

By Steven W. Evans, October 2008

Introduction

I have seen photos taken by people with literally the best equipment money can buy, but because they do not have the time - wealthy busy businesspeople - their photographs are not that good.

I have seen some really good photographs taken by people with inexpensive (with full manual override) digital cameras (8 mega-pixels or more) without the option of being able to change lenses (avoid using the digital zoom). These people purchased what they could afford and know their cameras, birds and sites intimately. Having good equipment does make a difference but it is not essential to getting a good photograph.

I have found that the following points very useful:

1. Get to know the habits of the species you want to photograph.

Observe them in the field, read, speak to experts.... When starting out practice on common species, both getting to know their behaviour and habits and photographing them. As an example go out with the intention of taking the best ever photograph of a Red-knobed Coot and not simply another portrait or reflection of one in the water!

2. Get to know the areas where you intend photographing the species.

Where should you set-up, do you need a hide, where will the sun (light) be at different times of the day and will its position be suited to obtaining the photographs you want.

3. Know your camera equipment very well.

You must be able to rapidly change camera and lens settings as conditions change. Take photographs often and get used to using your equipment. I can get pin-sharp images with my 500mm f4.5 lens and camera on a tripod at 1/60th of a second, depending on the movement of my subject. When I first obtained my equipment I battled to get sharp photo's at 1/500th of a second. Know what the ISO settings (sensor sensitivity to light), aperture (depth of field & image sharpness) and shutter-speed (controlling subject motion, overriding camera shake from you, the shutter wind...) of your camera controls and especially how they relate to each other. If you change one setting what is the resultant change of the others and what are the benefits and trade-offs. Each set-up, combination of camera-lens-support-accessories (e.g. cable-release) will work optimally at certain settings, under certain conditions and taking cognisance of the subject being photographed. As examples I always stop my 500 mm lens down a minimum of 2 f stops to ensure pin-sharp photo's. Lenses of poorer quality may require stopping down further, however this has other consequences - trade-offs, limitations. My 75 -300mm lens produces the sharpest images at f22 -

not always feasible to use it at f 22. My 20D has an amazingly noise free sensor and I often get away with using it set at ISO 400, very occasionally 800. I use NeatImage to get rid of unwanted noise in a photo during post processing. Even a slightly soft image (note I am not referring to out of focus images, delete these) may create problems during post-processing. Get the photo correctly exposed and composed in the field do not get into the habit of thinking that this is less important and you will fix all later in Photoshop.

4. Patience and putting in the time.

Be willing to spend the time that will probably be needed to get the type of photographs and quality of photographs you want. I sometimes spend hours not getting a single usable photograph. Other times there is so much going on I do not know what to focus on first.

5. Value and go photographing at your 'local patch or patches'.

Investigate and get to know existing and new areas near to where you live - local patches. Depending on the species you want to photograph, it is not necessary to travel great distances in order to get good photographs, good photographs will be easier to get at places you can easily and regularly visit and thereby spend much time at. Use your local patch to implement the aspects outlined in the points outlined above. You will be amazed at what you learn visiting and photographing at your local patches. Much of what you learn will improve your ability to evaluate the photography potential at new sites you get the opportunity to visit - on holiday etc. -, greatly improving your chances of getting good photo's in the short period of available time.

In the beginning the tendency is to go out with the intention of photographing everything, photographers can't wait to hear the noise of a shutter going off and using all the lenses in their bag. This approach can often be distracting. Take a deep breath and set some targets regarding what you want to photograph before setting out. These are flexible and can be changed, especially if unexpected opportunities arise. Setting targets does help focus your mind and what you should do to get the quality of photographs you want.

6. As a photographer, what are you actually working with?

Contrary to what much might think, when photographing you are not working with birds, wildlife or camera equipment the most important resource you are working with is LIGHT (a rough guideline is to photograph from just before sunrise to 10:00 in the morning and again from 16:00 until sunset). If the light is not correct no matter how good or expensive your equipment, no matter how close you can get to a bird or how good your knowledge is you will simply not be able to get good photographs. A few days ago I staked out a new spot and had an African Finfoot within 6 meters of where I was positioned. Unfortunately the sun was going down directly behind the bird and I was unable to get a single even remotely usable photo, besides silhouettes. I had staked out the spot to photograph with the sun going down behind me, unfortunately I had neglected to inform the Finfoot of this. Although I did not try, using a flash would probably have scared the bird off immediately, I will be returning to this spot in the morning and afternoon (fortunately local and close to where I live) from now on and will eventually get the sun (light), African Finfoot, other bird species I want to photograph (Half-collared Kingfisher) and myself properly aligned to get the good photos I know are waiting there for me.

To me LIGHT is the most important - low angled, yellow to orange in colour, no harsh shadows and no bright white-blue light as at midday and reduced contrast in comparison to midday.