

Bird Photography – *The Basics*

KK Hui FRPS

Introduction

Birds are often difficult to approach and fearful of humans. Photographing birds is a great challenge as it requires the skill, hardship as well as the patience on the part of the photographer to capture the decisive moment. They rarely stay still for long period of time. Photographing birds can become an all-consuming passion and the rewards, to my mind, far out weigh the effort. I see photography as an art. Combining the two is even more challenging and rewarding.

Climate plays a fundamental part in determining the movements of shorebirds. Almost all the shorebirds we see in Hong Kong are migratory birds. They pass through many Asian countries, including the Mai Po Nature Reserve with its surrounding Inner Deep Bay, between August and November each year to spend the cold northern winter in milder climates on the tropical and warm temperate wetlands of south eastern Asia. This can be as far south as Australia and New Zealand. Spring migration starts between the months of March and May. This is when the birds are heading north returning to their breeding grounds. It's an exciting time to see them in their gorgeous breeding plumage.

In this article I won't be covering woodland birds and it would be another separate topic on its own.

Why Photographing Birds?

There are many of reasons for photographing birds as there are photographers. They include those such as for record of rarities, research studies, educational purposes and creation of artistic images for display and publications.

For me, it is meant to show how I as a photographer see birds and capture their fascination and graceful expression. It is my intent to use these photos as persuasion to bring people's awareness of what beautiful birds we have here in the door step of a busy city like Hong Kong and hence the importance of conservation and the need to preserve our natural heritage.

What Makes A Great Photo?

A good bird photo is one that meets the needs of the photographer. But basically there are number of things that leads up to a great photograph. Shooting technique and composition consideration are high on the list however. Composition is a way to allow photographer to convey their thoughts on the subject making it aesthetic for viewers.

Composition

When we talk about composition the *Rule of Thirds* springs to mind and I'm sure most of you are familiar with it already. It's like dividing the rectangular frame of your scene into nine smaller rectangles. By placing your subject at any of the four points where the lines cross would give a great deal of dramatic interest to the viewers. It also gives additional visual interest because the subject is now placed off-center [*Photo #1*].



Photo #1 – Tufted Duck

Strive to lead the eye along an interesting path through the photo [*Photo #2*], with the use of strong lines, patterns and perspective. Taking care to ensure horizon is level and keep the extra elements there are of no interest to viewers out of the frame leaving just the main subject(s).



Photo #2 – Great Cormorant

Lighting Choice

Actually we have little choice when shooting outdoor. We're governed by the sunlight direction. So by scouting beforehand the locations where you want to shoot would help a lot in producing the desired result you envisage. For shooting birds it's generally best to have the sun and wind right behind you unless you want to create a silhouette effect. Side lighting and backlighting on the other hand can add drama but you need to deal with the extra contrasts as a result [*Photo #3*]. Furthermore, indirect lighting such as under an overcast sky can be put to use to make your subject soft and more pleasing. This is particularly true with a high contrast subject like a bird with black and white plumage. Keeping the sky out of the shot if it's overcast to avoid both muted tones in your subject and washed-out skies.



Photo #3 – Imperial Eagle

Exposure

Satisfactory exposure is an essential part of making a good photograph. There are many in-camera metering patterns to choose from. Center-weighted Average, Spot and Program/Evaluative (Canon) or Matrix (Nikon) are commonly used. In Automatic Exposure program modes the aperture priority (Av) and the shutter priority (Tv) are most popular choices for obvious reasons. In bird photography however Av is preferred. You control the aperture value while the camera sets the shutter speed accordingly. You then have the control over the Depth-of-Field for the shooting subject.

There is a simple rule of thumb for taking photo without a light meter. It's the Sunny Sixteen Rule that I'm sure all of you know. The rule simply states that if you're taking a photo in bright daylight then set the aperture to $f/16$ and set the shutter speed to be as near as possible to the same number as one over the film speed. For example, using ISO 100 film you set the aperture to $f/16$ and the shutter speed to $1/90$ s since 90 is the closest shutter speed value to 100 on a typical camera. A note of caution is that the rule would only works when the subject is mid-tone and front lit.

For me I've come to use shooting in Manual mode almost always. This gives me the most consistent exposure I ever want exposing the subject for its tonality and lighting conditions. The beauty of choosing this mode is that the varying background is taken out of the equation and you can concentrate on the composition of the image you're making. This of course assumes the light condition is constant. Find that correct exposure, lock it in manually, and shoot away without worry. With AV mode your camera meter is constantly re-adjusting itself based on the background, the position, the tonality and the size of subject in the frame, as well as other factors

Having said that I switch to AV and dial in the appropriate exposure compensation when the light is constantly changing eg. sun is going in and out of a cloud, making M mode shooting frustrating. Spot metering your subject is also an option in this situation.

Equipment Choice

Unlike other branches of photography, shooting birds in the wild demands the use of heavy and expensive telephoto lenses to obtain high quality images. Sturdy tripod with proper tripod head are amongst the essential tools that helps toward obtaining pin sharp photos. It is not hard to see why today nature photographers rely on the latest in metering and autofocus (AF) technologies. A state-of-the-art camera body from any of the leading manufacturers such as Canon, Nikon, Minolta etc will incorporate all these wizard-kid features.

What makes a good photo system to buy in depends on the wide range of lenses and accessories available. Equipment quality, reliability and durability are the other key factors in making the final choice. If one takes a look at the market, Canon's superb line of autofocus telephoto lenses appears to be the most comprehensive one. With their introduction of IS (Image Stabilization) into their super telephoto lenses, the advantages is even more evidence. In terms of AF, Canon EOS-1D series bodies take the photographer to a even higher level of accurate focusing and fast shooting capability. Other obvious rivals today include Nikon's D2x and their fast AF-S telephoto lenses.

Lens Choice

The choice of lens for bird photography usually begins with a 400mm f/5.6. This will be portable enough for shooting hand-held of bird in flight. There is no single lens for all situations in bird photography. Down my list will be either a 500mm f/4 or a 600mm f/4 depending on personal choice. Factors to consider here include your budget, physical strength and lens weight, hence mobility. For completeness, I will include the commonly lens accessories such as the 1.4x and 2x teleconverters. This allows the increase in the effective focal length by 40% and 100% respectively. In addition, for shooting smaller woodland birds, an extension tube may come in handy to reduce the minimum focusing distance of a lens. Extension tubes are easily obtainable in the range of 12mm and 25mm; stacking them to enable an even closer approach is possible.

Your package shall including a standard lens (50mm) or a wide- zoom for bird photography will be an added bonus. This is extremely useful for taking scenic shots with birds and to serve as a close-up tool as well.

Technique in Photographing Birds

Apart from selecting the right equipment, other areas of importance in achieving pleasing bird photos are composition, lighting and sharp image. Nevertheless, deliberated creation of blurred image (for example of flying birds), if used properly, can bring about a sense of artistic feel of action captured too.

Tripod

Armed with the knowledge of the type of birds' behavior you will be able to anticipate the action. Birds in flight are more difficult to capture and you require a rigid platform to work on. This brings about tripod and tripod haead choice. I used Gitzo carbon fibre tripod the G1325. This coupled with a gimbal-type Wimberley Head provides a setup that is strong enough for supporting the 6 kg plus 500mm or 600mm super telephoto lenses with a pro camera body. The heavy lens is rendered almost weightless allowing free movements of the setup effortlessly. This is especially useful when taking those flight shots. I use monopod from time to time where space is a premium or restricted too.

Long Lens Techniques

- Use a sturdy tripod whenever possible. Tighten all controls knobs
- Ensure tripod can handle the weight of your camera, lens, tripod head and other accessories with plenty of margin.
- Wimberley Head is preferred to Ball Head
- Use your arms, hands and face as vibration dampening
- Use Image Stabilization (IS) or Vibration Reduction (VR) if available
- Use higher ISO setting if necessary and activate Mirror Lock-up (MLU) + self timer + cable release

- End -

Copyright © KK Hui, a NatureScapes.Net moderator in the BIRDS Forum, is a highly accomplished local bird photographer here in Hong Kong. He is a Fellow of The Royal Photographic Society and earned the highest Distinction in the Nature Category specializing in Avian Photography. For more information please visit his website at www.geocities.com/kkhui_001