Eagle-Eye Tours



10 Tips for Photographing Birds

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When we're not out in nature, many of us are often stuck in front of a screen, at home or at work. A great way to extend those memories from an exciting day outdoors is to bring home some images for viewing pleasure! Bird photography is taking off, so-to-speak, and these days you're almost as likely to see a big lens as a pair of binoculars in the hands of a fellow birder. The following are some helpful tips and tricks to maximize your productivity and enjoyment while photographing birds.

1. Rule Number One: There really are no rules!

This is traditionally the last item on a "how to" list, to drive home an important point after all the technical tips and tricks have been laid out. However, it's so important that it should be first! Photography is an art. By definition, it requires some creativity by you, the artist. Many of us are lured into shooting for the "classic" photo of a bird positioned perfectly on a branch, similar to those with many "likes" online. After a while, however, our creative minds will undoubtedly tire of these textbook frames. Whatever catches your eye in the field will likely do the same for you years down the road, so if you can capture an interesting moment with your camera, ideally in a context that helps bring back that moment to you, it will serve you well as an artist. If this sounds vague, that's the idea! *Your* creativity helps shape *your* style of photography, and the end results will be rewarding even if it's not appealing to a broader audience. It's supposed to be fun, too!



Even a backyard bird like this American Robin can be the centre of an appealing scene. Looking back on this image I remember that the whole area was full of robins, honing in on the mountain ash berries.

2. The Eyes Have it

Autofocus is a bird photographer's most important technical tool. Our subjects, especially the smaller ones, are often on the move and quicker than us. Newer models of camera allow us to track a bird quite easily, but when zoomed in we often find that only the leg or tail is in focus, while the rest of the bird is blurred or out of focus. Getting a sharp image of the bird's eye (or eyes) is the best method of ensuring it's a "keeper" shot. Firing off a few frames at the optimal time will ensure the bird isn't blinking or moving its head too quickly. The newest cameras have the ability to lock onto a bird's eye and follow it while we re-frame the image. This is technology working toward making our lives easier!



An image of a Red Warbler from the Mexican highlands shows how you don't have to have the whole bird in focus, but the eye is important.

3. Know your limits

The closer we can get to a bird the less money we have to spend on a telephoto lens! We have to be careful when approaching a subject, to avoid flushing it. Most species will allow a distance that is close enough for decent photos, and our modern cameras have great resolution for cropping in post-production. As responsible photographers, we should know not to disturb roosting or feeding birds, to "take only pictures and leave only footprints." In general, species inhabiting open habitats like grasslands are more skittish, while those in forested environments are less shy. A good tactic is to walk or creep up in a straight line directly at a bird, stopping early to capture some images to ensure you get something in the bag, then waiting to observe your subject's behaviour and if it permits a closer approach. It is important to pre-establish a limit based upon the bird's behaviour and stick to it. If you flush a bird, you have failed to demonstrate responsible photography! The best photos are the ones you walk away from and the bird is still going about its routine.

4. High overcast at mid-day

Quality images often highlight a bird's spectacular plumage in all its detail and colour. To achieve this, we want enough ambient light so we don't require the use of artificial fill-flash. Soft, low-contrast light from overcast skies (or when the sun is behind the horizon) is best for bird portraits where feather detail is important. The brightest evenly-distributed light is found at high noon on overcast days. This runs contrary to the popular belief that dawn and dusk are the best times for photography! This is not to say the bird action will be at its highest at noon; we're talking about image quality here. A good quantity of available light allows us to achieve fast shutter speeds in order to minimize motion blur and camera shake. Usually, 1/250th of a second is the minimum shutter speed required, but some people aren't happy if shooting slower than 1/1000th of a second. This is one of the reasons why available light is so important, given that shutter speed is dependent on your ISO and aperture, each with its own limitations



Photographing hummingbirds on a perch (in this case, a male Calliope) is best done in nice even light at mid-day to capture all the beauty of the stunning gorget.

5. Minimize depth of field

"Bokeh" is a photography term used to describe the aesthetic quality of the blurred, out-of-focus area of an image. In bird photography this is usually all parts of the image not including the bird but maybe including some leaves, grass or branch. To achieve this, we usually shoot with our lens aperture "wide open," meaning the lowest F-stop available with our lens. High-quality telephoto lenses are also called "fast" lenses, meaning we can "stop down" to F2.8, F4.0 or F5.6, which allows the potential for a better bokeh, not to mention more light and a faster shutter speed. The longer your lens, the more bokeh is provided for a given aperture. The highest quality lenses are designed to be sharpest with a wide-open aperture, whereas mid-range lenses are sharpest at medium apertures. Your subject should be tack-sharp, and after that you can worry about the background as a secondary consideration. Some photographers use post-processing methods such as digitally removing branches, to isolate a subject and create more background blur. A more classic (and purist) approach is to attempt to create decent images in the field. This requires some patience and practice to position oneself in a manner where you can isolate the bird from its background. A fun method is to arrange some foreground foliage, or even the actual ground (get down and dirty!), to create an appealing bokeh around your subject. Ducks and shorebirds, with their watery, low-contrast background, are easy subjects to practice upon. Be aware that sometimes we want to provide some context behind the scene, in which case showing off background details lends a lot to our image.



Getting down and dirty (but not as dirty as this Cinnamon Teal!) helped create foreground bokeh in this image.



Narrowing the aperture and therefore broadening the depth-of-field helps create some context in this image of a pair of Lesser Yellowlegs in British Columbia.

6. Hand held vs. tripod

The use of a tripod provides stability when using a longer lens and therefore helps us to create sharp

images. A tripod also forces us to take time to create a well-composed image. Unfortunately, as birds are usually on the move, often in dense foliage, tripods can be more often a hindrance than a help. They are most useful for roadside photography with big lenses. Modern lens technology is helping to minimize the weight we need to carry around, and most of the time we can get away with holding a lens by hand. If hand-holding your telephoto set-up, try to be as stable as possible by bracing with your elbow against your body or knee, use a vibration-reduction if available, and work with a carrying system that minimizes the strain on your neck and back. If you're getting blurry images then a tripod might be better for you.



Toting around a big lens is helpful by using a tripod, but it comes at a cost. Here, the shooting area is close to the vehicle, in Porvenir, Chile

7. Be ready

The best photographs are the ones you take, not the ones you miss because your camera is inaccessible. If your objective is to photograph birds then choose gear that is easy to carry on a walk. If driving, have your camera ready on the seat beside you (a car makes a great bird blind- just be sure to pull over onto the shoulder!). It's even better if you can convince someone else to drive! Other considerations for being ready are to ensure your memory cards have enough available space on them and your batteries are fully-charged. Veteran photographers understand that the birds aren't going to wait around, and the best photograph from an outing can be the first frame of the day.



This male Common Firecrest was in a dark forest and I was just lucky enough to catch it in mid-hop with its eye in focus.

8. Don’t get lured into tape lures

That image you see of a kinglet perched on a branch with its crest raised is likely the result of the bird being agitated by a playback recording. Using artificial birdsong to trick a male into thinking another male is on its territory is one way to bring a bird in closer for photos. If using this technique, be sure to stay completely still because the bird is looking around for its intruder. The bird’s first response is your best opportunity, so be ready, get the shots then get out of there. Responsible photographers are very judicious when employing this technique and use it sparingly and briefly. Never use tape-lures on an endangered species, which is illegal. It is also illegal to use this method in some national parks and protected areas, so check ahead first. It is more ideal and less intrusive to observe a bird and discover where it may be headed, and to position oneself discreetly in a good location to capture it naturally without resorting to tape lures.

9. Go to the right areas

Building on the last point, try to match your itinerary with that of the bird. Let’s say you want to photograph a kingfisher. If so, then it's a good idea to scout out an area around water that the bird is frequenting, then get set-up at a preferred perch before the bird arrives, making sure you won’t deter the bird from its foraging spot. You can also plan trips at the right time and place. If wandering around Point Pelee in May you’ll notice that nearly half of the birders are actually carrying cameras around their necks. This is because it’s often a great time and place to photograph colourful warblers at eye level (whereas on the breeding grounds these birds are usually at the top of the trees). Some places, like Bosque del Apache in New Mexico, host large congregations of birds. If you want to photograph Sandhill Cranes en masse, this is the place. Simply check the calendars for the best time of year. This is the “be there” part of “F8 and be there,” a popular photographer’s aphorism. The take-home message here planning. Figure out where you want to go, when is the best time and establish a mindset for what type of image you’d like to create. Often, a surprise encounter will occur along the way and you’ll get something unexpected along the way!



Warblers, like this Blue-winged Warbler, are an exciting subject at Point Pelee, Ontario.

10. Don’t blow the moment

Finally, this is supposed to be fun. Sure, some hint of obsession is required in this pastime but don’t let photographing a bird ruin your time in the outdoors. If you chuck your camera off a cliff in a fit of rage then maybe it’s a good idea not to replace it. If you’re unlucky and don’t get the shot, hopefully you were able to at least see the bird. If not, then hopefully you photographed a nice scene, ran into a friend, or walked your dog. Bird photography is a highly technical pursuit of fairly difficult subjects. Take some breaks, tuck your camera away when conditions aren’t ideal, and above all, don’t be too hard on yourself!