

Bird Photography Basics

This is not an exhaustive discussion of bird photography, but we do hope this overview gives beginning photographers something to think about and a few techniques to try.

Basic Elements

Beyond the mechanical aspects of picture-taking, which nearly anyone can learn, there is an indefinable “something” that transforms an image into a work of art. People with this ability have an “eye” for composition, color, and shape. What they come by naturally, the rest of us can learn with practice, book-learning, and by studying the work of photographers we admire. With that in mind, consider the following crucial elements in any outstanding image:

Lighting

“The angle, intensity, and hue of your light source can make or break a picture,” says photographer Tim Gallagher. He feels the best times to shoot are morning and late afternoon when the light is angled, warmer, and more subdued. “It brings out all the color and texture of your subject's plumage,” Tim says.

It's harder to take a good picture in the middle of a bright, clear day because images end up with too much contrast, washed-out light-colored areas, and inky black shadows. Having the source of light behind and slightly to one side of you creates a more three-dimensional subject. Having your subject backlit rarely works well unless you're deliberately going after a silhouette.

Framing

Professionals usually avoid placing any subject in the exact center of a photograph. It is much more visually stimulating to see the bird off to one side, facing inward. Our own eyes naturally follow the same trajectory. Likewise, avoid placing the horizon line in the middle of a picture which cuts it in half and usually looks bad. It's better to frame the horizon in the top or bottom third of your photograph.

In the case of a flying bird, leave space in front of it, so it appears that the bird has somewhere to go. “It's not necessary to have an expensive camera and lens to get quality bird-in-flight photos,” says

professional photographer Steve Wolfe. “All you need is a decent camera with auto-focusing capabilities, a red-dot sight to track the bird’s flight—plus patience, perseverance, and practice!”

Composition

Non-bird elements in your picture can add or detract from a pleasing composition. Branches, shrubbery, rocks, and flowers can be a distraction—or they can be used artfully to frame the bird within the picture.

Wildlife photographer Marie Read points out, “Birds don’t live in a vacuum. Showing the bird-habitat relationship is a compelling way to help others understand and appreciate the fascinating complexity of the natural world—and to tell a story.”

Although you want to avoid having a branch right behind the bird, looking like it’s growing out of its head, incorporating some part of the bird’s habitat into the shot usually makes it better. If the background is too busy, try opening the aperture more to blur the background and make your subject stand out.

Angle

You can shoot from a position that is higher than your subject, lower, at eye-level, or somewhere in-between. One position may be preferable over another depending on the terrain and what species of bird (or group of birds) you’re trying to photograph. But it’s important to consider this ahead of time.

“Shooting from bird’s-eye level results in dramatic photos with an intimate feeling to them that you don’t get when the bird is viewed from above,” says Marie Read. To get closer to wary birds, Marie suggests wearing muted clothing, hiding behind vegetation, and moving slowly in a zigzag pattern low to the ground. Bird blinds also work very well.

Knowledge

To be the best bird photographer you can be you really have to know birds. Then you know where you're likely to find them and what they might do next. For example, berry bushes attract Cedar Waxwings; herons haunt the edges of marshes and ponds; waterfowl often rest and preen in the same spot every day.

"You'll develop an almost intuitive sense of when a bird is going to fly," says wildlife photographer Bobby Harrison. "Before a bird takes flight, it often stands very alert, turning its head in all directions. It also turns into the wind."

Parting Shots

All the professionals quoted in this overview agree that the key to improving your bird photography is to spend a lot of time in the field and don't be afraid to experiment!