

Apogee Photo Magazine

FIRST CLASS PHOTOGRAPHY

LESSON #33: “Shooting Birds”

by Willis T Bird



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Shooting birds—no, not that kind of shooting. No guns. We’re talking about photography. However, your experience hunting with a gun the old-fashioned way can help when you’re stalking with a camera. The stealth needed in one translates to the other. Also, camouflage can work with both types of hunting.

Your photographic hunt can be on land, sea, or air, depending on where you are and what type of bird you’re seeking. You may find your “prey” resting in trees in your back yard or even on the ground. You may find

wading or sea birds along the coast. You may need to simply look up to discover subjects flying overhead. (These are usually the most challenging to capture with a camera.)

When you’re hunting small birds in your back yard, there are a number of ways for you to attack the problem. First, you might throw out some bread or feed and wait. Afterward, you can just sit in a chair, and sooner or later, one or more avian subjects will gather the courage to come down to take a bite. That is when you get your shot. But it helps if you pre-focus on the area where you expect the birds to land...like where you put the food! Or you may wish to set out a bird feeder. If you choose to do this, be sure to place it where there are plenty of limbs for the birds to perch on before lighting on the feeder, as that’s where you’ll catch your best, more realistic shots.

If you have no trees in your yard, then you may have to dig a hole and install a post feeder. Attaching a sturdy stick to your post will help to attract birds, since the stick will act as a limb. Birds like perching before or while eating. Position your feeder where you’ll have a clear shot from wherever you want to set up your camera. And be sure to look at the background before you plant the post. You don’t want to have a cluttered or distracting background to contend with, if that’s avoidable. (Bird feed and feeders can be located in feed and seed stores or even in large



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discount stores like Wal-Mart, as well as on the Internet.)

If you're lucky enough to live near the coast, you'll have much larger targets to aim at--such as pelicans, blue herons, and great egrets. I've found that blue herons are far more flighty than the great white egrets. You can approach an egret more closely than you can a blue heron. A heron will assail you with a raucous and cranky sound as he flies away because he believes you're too close--most likely just before you're ready to take the photo. If you're approaching any big wading bird, it helps to do so at an angle and not directly toward him. Stop often and let him get used to you. Of course, as in all wildlife photography, a nice long lens is always a help.

The more you observe birds and their habits, the better you'll become at moving near them for good shots. It really takes experience. Some birds prefer certain trees or types of perches, and you can try to out-guess them. Some become so busy hunting minnows in the shallows that they take little notice of you, but you still have to be careful in your approach. Experience will begin to tell you just how close you can or cannot come before they fly. Frustration is just a part of the game.



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Once I stalked a blue heron and a white egret sharing the same log that was jutting out into a pond. I was very slowly working my way toward them, stopping many times as I inched along. All was going well, until two off-road bicyclists came from out of nowhere. Forty minutes of work was gone in a flash as the two birds hurriedly sought a new place to roost. Another time, I edged my way closer and closer to a great blue heron until his head filled my entire view finder. Then, while I was taking photos, I began to realize something was wrong. I had reached shot

number 42 on a 36-shot roll of 35mm film. In my excitement, I had failed to properly attach the film in the camera, and the film wasn't advancing. As soon as I opened the back of the camera to correct my mistake, the heron flew straight up and away, laughing at me the whole time.

Catching a bird in flight is one of the more difficult shots to make correctly. Back in the 1980s, an agency sold one of my photos of a hawk in flight. It was my first photographic sale. The agent suggested that, with my name *Bird*, perhaps I should make a concentrated effort to photograph birds. I had never thought about doing that, but then, neither did I realize just how difficult bird photography could be. That single shot was pure luck. When I began to center on birds, I found out just how difficult it was.

Shooting flying birds is easier if you have experience panning the camera. A fast shutter will also work to your advantage. With digital cameras, the *shutter lag* can cause all sorts of problems. Birds can fly out of the frame before the shutter clicks. In some cases, I've found that by setting my camera on the *burst* setting (where it will take at least three photos in rapid succession) will help. Sometimes, I actually catch three

different positions of the bird. Sometimes, I get only one good photo in the burst, but the burst does increase my chances of catching the bird in flight.

If you're shooting toward the open sky, overexposure can be a problem. Experiment by setting your exposure control to slightly underexpose the shot and see what the results are. Using a digital camera can be a real help in cases such as this, because you can check the work right there on the spot and make adjustments. Film cameras are more difficult. You may have to try to adjust later using software such as Photoshop.



Shooting photos of birds can be both challenging and rewarding.

Experience is the best teacher of all. But you must be able to remember what you did to correlate that with the results. Some photographers keep notes of their settings from each photo during each trip. I find all that recording to be tedious, so I don't do it. However, the photographers who took the time probably learned more quickly than I did. You must be aware, or you won't learn much. What we've discussed here is only basic information on bird photography. Insert "Bird Photography" in your search engines on your computer browser, and you'll find plenty of additional information. But remember, going out and shooting is the best teacher of all.