

BIRD PHOTOGRAPHY- JUST ENJOY IT!

By David Winnard

Ian has kindly allowed for me to do some articles on bird photography for the website, but when it has come to writing the first one I don't know where to start, its such a huge area to cover. Do I cover the technical side and discuss the latest canon and Nikon cameras and the latest sensor technology? Or do I discuss where to go to photograph X, Y and Z?

For my first article I will do neither. Instead I want to talk about bird photography from my point of view. For those of you who do not know me I am usually out and about with one of those big lenses you see and those cameras that fire a million frames a second (a Canon 7D on a 500mm f4). I studied for 3 years at Blackpool & Fylde College where I got a 1st Class honors degree in Wildlife Photography. Now I supply various agencies with images and the requirements for this has changed the way I photograph. Firstly, the agencies I am with want 30MB files that have not been interpolated (increased in size). This means that how much you can crop an image is reduced. When I did it for fun I was able to crop images to bring the bird full in the frame, and as I was only using them for web this was not an issue. Now I have to get close to my subjects, and whilst the lens may look big, the magnification is not as much as you would think.

This is really as technical as I want to get for the 1st article, bird photography shouldn't be about what exposures to use, what ISO to shoot on, at the end of the day photography is an art form and like all art there are no right or wrong answers. Some of my best pictures have used very weird exposures or silly compositions but they work. All bird photography should be about is capturing something memorable about the bird, the day whatever it is. The image below was purposely well over exposed, then the blacks were tightened in levels to get this image, still one of my favourite images I have taken, but hardly conventional.



Anyway, over the last few months I wanted to work on one of my favourite subjects...the Magpie. I can already hear a few moans at the mention of them, but to me they are fascinating to watch and a stunning bird, they are also a pain to expose for! I set up a feeding site specifically for them near to my house and within minutes I had around 10 magpies coming to it and they were not at all fussed by my presence. A few days later and the snow had arrived, just what I had been hoping for, Magpies in the snow, black and white birds on white, which I hoped would give a nicely balanced colour palette to the image. After a couple of days of working with them and processing images I came across the images below, at first I couldn't make up my mind...was it any good? But the more I looked the more I thought that yes, this is the image that to me sums up magpies. Regal, brave and in your face!



I have also tried to get some shots of some more members of the crow family. Again trying to capture something about them that appealed to me. Whilst I was up in Scotland I found Crows taking cockles of the beach and dropping them on the road to crack them open – I find this amazing! It was an overcast day and the white clouds were reflecting in the standing water on the beach, again I thought a black bird on white could be interesting. As the bird went down to pick up another cockle I loved the shape it made and with the cockle in its mouth I was more than pleased with this shot!



Again in Scotland I was able to get up close to some Rook, always walking around looking for food. I was able to get the shot I wanted, with the bird crouching down foraging for food. I thought I had some other nice shots but it wasn't until I looked back on the camera that I one of the birds had a deformed bill!



More recently I have visited my magpie feed site again, this time with no snow, and was lucky enough to capture this Jay. At this site they are relatively tame and so are easy to work with, I hope in the autumn this year I can really get my teeth into getting some good shots of jays. The image below shows the potential of what may be possible at this site.



A couple of images from the same trip to Scotland I was able to get a few shots of birds that are not in the crow family. The Herring Gull below was perched on a lamppost next to a harbour, and as I walked under him I noticed how his plumaged merged into the white clouds in the background, again I over exposed it to make the bird fade into the background. It goes to show that even a common bird in the most unlikely of places can offer a chance to get something completely different. As for the Rock Pipit image...well it gave me the run around all morning and I was just happy to get something!



So I hope this has been of some use, basically I wanted to try and get the message across that bird (wildlife) photography should not be about worrying about equipment and technique, but just get out there with what you have and practice and get to know the style that works for you. More importantly, try to capture an image that will remind you of that day, or to capture the essence of that subject to you.

Also, do not forget whilst you are out and about looking for an unusual bird that at this time of year signs of spring are all around us....and may just be worth a snap!





David Winnard, March 2010