

“Bird Photography from a Blind”

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Bird Photography is very challenging. Wild birds are difficult to approach and they never stay in one place very long. Some are very small and moving about constantly so photographing them with continued success requires some preplanning. Our main focus (no pun intended) will be on photography from a created blind. My blind is in my garage. I use a door and a window. There are different ways to do all types of photography. This program is my way and “How I Have Taken Some Photos’ With Satisfactory Results,” remember my way is not the only way. I have found this way to be the most simple and semi-controlled way to get pleasing results. I say semi-controlled because we partially control where birds land. We can’t control them. We make the suggestion by creating landing areas. We can’t control the weather or the outside temperature but we can stay in where it’s dry and in some cases warm.

Blind Location . . . First you need to decide where to put your blind, which window, door or do you cut a hole in siding. Do you want to stand or sit (being comfortable is important for extended time in blind)? Do you want to photograph birds that eat from feeders or ground? Keep in mind location of sun, watch for extreme dark or light background, watch for and exclude any man made objects. You could even create your own background (pine trees, shrubs etc.) If you are going to photograph nature “keep it pure and natural,” again, no man made objects. Place landing area in a location where birds won’t be spooked every time you enter or exit the blind. **IF YOU HAVE A CAT KEEP IT AWAY FROM FEEDER!** Good luck on this one.

Building a Blind . . . Measure opening and make a blind to fit. When I built mine, I used 10” shelf boards for a frame (top, bottom and sides). I used some scrap siding or thin plywood for back / inside. This will allow 9.5 inches from front of the frame to plywood and serves as a shield from rain, snow or sunlight. This recesses also blocks light and after painting it flat black with black material the birds can’t see movement as easy. I cut two or three holes in plywood. One for a window to view birds, next opening was larger about 10 inches square, for this opening I purchased enough black material that I could pleat several places on top/bottom and sides as I stapled in place, then cut two slits in the center of material one horizontal and one vertical so you can put the lens barrel with some rubber bands on it thru opening. With your lens in position stretch bands and put edge of material under them. The pleats in material allow for some side to side or up/down movement without moving the tripod. The third opening is for flash. I cut opening up high and to side if possible. If you have a double-hung window put blind in bottom of window and flash above blind at top of the window, you can either drop top window to accept flash or put flash flush against the window. Note . . . keep flash flat against window or make a shield that fits over flash and goes flush against the window, this directs all light to subject and keeps light from bouncing off window glass. Keeping flash higher and to one side make better-looking images, especially if you have low light. This keeps light from being too flat on subject. Another type of blind can be as simple as a piece of cardboard with holes cut in it. A refrigerator box with holes cut in it, a window screen covered so birds can’t see you, cut a hole in screen and cover. The latter three are not very durable but will work.

Creating Landing Areas / Perches . . . Stop . . . Think . . . Look . . . Again, look for things you don’t want in your photo! Where is sun? You may want to setup your equipment and look thru it at selected focus distance before continuing. Again, look at the lens you are going to use. If it is a telephoto, what is the minimum focus? My 400mm lens will focus down to 10.5 feet, I set landing area at 12 feet because I could not get all of a Blue Jay in the frame at a closer range. With my 100 to 300- the minimum focus is 8 feet but I still get a good size image at 12 feet. Now back to landing areas, you can do several different things, one is as simple as attaching a limb to your feeder with screws or a clamp, you put a larger limb in ground or a 2x4 with holes drilled at an angle to insert small limbs or tree branches, remember, most branches grow out or slightly up. So if you cut a branch from a tree take notice how it’s growing and try to mimic that. Another thing to remember is the fewer perches you have at one time the better your chances of predicting where birds will land; too many areas will require constant movement of your camera. You can use the above ideas for landing areas and the possibilities are endless.

Setting Up Feeders . . . I set up feeders either slightly left, right or between landing area and camera. Birds will move in close survey area, move in closer survey area and then on to the feeder. I use Black Oil Sunflower seed, Bird mix, Suit, Peanut Butter, Thistle seed and Blue Bird Nuggets (spring only). After putting seed in your feeder it will take a while for birds to find it.

Equipment . . . I use SAR Cameras, my preference is my D70 Nikon Digital, if I use film I prefer my Nikon FM because the flash sync is 1/250th of a second. Lenses, Sigma APO 400 mm and Sigma APO 100 to 300 mm zoom. You will have to use the lens you have, but a 300 or 400 is ideal for this type photography. With a close focus and fairly strong focal length lens your background will go out of focus creating a pleasing backdrop for your images that is unless your background has bright areas such as whites or hot spots of sun. Again make some test shots and then you may want to make some changes. Flashes Nikon SB 800 and Vivitar 5600, I also have studio lights but thru testing this I find the flash duration is too slow and more often than not my main subject is slightly blurred because the bird jumps a little when flash is triggered. A tripod is a must. Cable Release / Electronic Release suggested.

If you have a point and shoot camera, you may have to use the automatic setting. I have never used one for birds so I can't tell you much about them. If you have a strong enough lens, give it a try. If you use flash you will have to have a larger opening so flash and lens can see birds.

Exposure . . . If I use slide film, I prefer to shoot manually. I use ISO 200 Fuji Chrome and set my exposure at 1 / 250 of a second aperture at F-16 with my Vivitar Flash set at F-8 of this gives me a two stop under exposure for fill in bright sunlight. When ambient light changes (slight overcast) I change my shutter speed to 1/125 second, this gives me one stop underexposure for fill. Then if extremely cloudy I reduce shutter speed to 1/60 second, at this time my flash is the main light source unless I change the aperture. You need to do some experimenting by testing and see if exposure is acceptable. When testing exposure, I recommend you record (write it down) all exposures with frame number shutter speed, aperture, sunny/cloudy, flash setting and if you have a zoom record focal length. This is a must so you can compare different image exposures. When I use Digital, I still do all of my blind pictures on manual, including exposure, flash and focus. Another thing to watch for is snow will cause overexposure of images. When you have a snow-covered yard and shrubs and you use a digital check exposure with histogram, if using slide film and are not sure of exposure I would suggest you bracket on the overexposure side of meter reading, Again, I can't emphasize how important it for you to test your exposure.

Most of what I discussed is about using your yard as a studio for bird photography. Again this is a semi-controlled, semi-comfortable way to get some amazing bird photos. Remember, just because you get 5 or 6 images of one species don't quit, you can always improve. Another suggestion is to continue to take pictures into the spring, colors are more brilliant for example the male American Gold Finch is drab green until spring then during molting season gold / yellow starts to replace the green and eventually to all gold / yellow and black and stays this color till fall. The summer gives you an opportunity to get some images of immature birds with mom and dad feeding young, especially woodpeckers. Just a word of warning . . . This can become addictive, when I first started I was so excited about this type of photography that I practically lived in blinds of one kind or another (out of a house door, window, storage building, plain piece of cardboard, built blind about 25 feet in air then, finally to my garage.) I never had a digital and you talk about expensive, I took so many pictures that Fuji and Kodak's stock soared . . . Guess what? After all this if I got 2 or 3 good images out of a roll of 36 I was pleased.

If you take bird pictures away from this type of set up photos' becomes more challenging. When I go to a sanctuary, aviary, or out in the wild I use AUTO everything with camera on aperture preferred setting (watching you don't over or underexpose.) My flash setting usually set at minus one to one and a half stop. If you have a digital and have time check your exposure with histogram and make necessary adjustments, especially if you have extremes of lighter or darker areas in background.

I will take advantage of any opportunity to get a photo without harming the subject. I said that to say this . . . I have some Rapture photo's, most but not all taken at reserves, I have some feeder bird photo's, most but all were taken at created landing area, I have some water birds, I've taken at the river, the ocean and at Cabellas. A very high percentage of birds' photo's you see in magazines were taken in reserves, sanctuaries, aviaries or at feeders. So, if done properly no one will ever be able to tell where they were taken. Good Luck, enjoy and protect nature.