

THOUGHTS ON BIRDOGRAPHY

GENERAL

These notes have been compiled from the benefit of my experience with birdography over the past 18 months or so. Consequently, these are not definitive conclusions - merely my thoughts on appropriate guidelines generally.

Any lags at all. whether in a digital viewfinder refresh rate, shutter delay, focus acquisition or mere sighting of the bird in the viewfinder all accumulate and mitigate against obtaining any picture, let alone a sharp one.

So, be prepared! Be ready! Know your equipment and its characteristics.

IMAGINATION

I have found that imagination (pre-visualisation) can be helpful.

Imagination of a scenario such as a certain species of bird upon a particular flower may make for a photogenic arrangement. Think of a scenario, then seek it!

SUN - Behind you? Against the light? Muted light? Consider your camera settings.

Seek a high light in the bird's eye (s).

WIND

Affects birds' feathers; watch for unusual effects. Wind direction may affect direction of take-off and perching.

BACKGROUND - Clear? Colourful? Too busy?

BIRD ACTIVITY

Landing or take-off shows bird's flight stance as wings are usually extended: watch for feet leaving or arriving on perch/water. Watch for impact on other nearby birds: they like their personal space. Squabbling birds make for interesting viewing.

Birds will fight for territory, whether a perching spot, because they may be ornery (eg the purple swamp hen) or because a raptor or rival is unwanted.

Mating birds can make an interesting photo.

Reflections - bird and vegetation or sky.

Preening, scratching, stretching legs and wings or merely changing to another perch can be interesting activity. The bird scratching, etc, then looking around, may indicate imminent take-off.

The bird will often poop before take-off.

Sudden eruption of general bird activity may indicate the presence of a raptor.

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Birds otherwise occupied, eg with feeding, are more approachable. I've approached a Silver Eye to within 300mm whilst it was feeding on wattle pollen. (too close for a photo!)

APPROACHING THE BIRD:

I've found it good insurance to begin photographing interesting subjects upon first sight, then follow up with cautious, quiet, short steps, preferably when the bird is otherwise engaged with eating, etc. Keep photographing all the while.

Should the bird turn its head to look at you, then stop until the bird settles down.

SAFETY

The Jerrabomberra Wetlands is infested with snakes: Canberra is a haven for brown snakes.

The bike track at Jerra. can be dangerous, especially on the steel bridge.

Driving and simultaneous bird spotting is especially dangerous.

Photographing from cliff tops or river banks - ditto.

Don't leave valuables in vehicles! Thieves know the areas where people leave their vehicles unattended for some time.

Wear protective clothing for sun, glare, wind, cold weather. A hat tends to hide one's eyes and that may facilitate approaching a perched or feeding bird.

CAMERA SETTINGS

I've yet to arrive at my best personal settings. Generally, I have found the following:

1/1600th + shutter speed to freeze motion of wings, etc.

Focus wide open, subject to the sharpness characteristics of any particular lens.

Use a floating iso on the premise that a noisy photo is better than no photo or one which is blurred. As always, there are exceptions to this or any other approach.

Use the smallest regular-sized focus point, with or without several " helper " points.

For small birds in flight, I tend to use a general block of focus points.

There are other more refined settings such as back button focus and assigning groups of settings dedicated to scenarios such as birds in flight or birds against the sun, etc. to particular camera buttons. Anything to expedite a change in settings to meet particular circumstances is desirable.

EXPOSURE

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Sky shot: Plus up to 2.5 stops of exposure compensation. If necessary, let the sky blow out to white.

White birds - compensate accordingly.

Black birds - ditto.

Black and white birds? Just keep histogram to the right, but be mindful that small areas of white high lights may be blown out and not be readily made known by “blinkies” on the camera’s rear lcd screen.

POLARISER?

I’ve found that speed is of the essence. A PL filter loses about two stops of shutter speed. I prefer to not use such a filter.

TELE-EXTENDERS?

A 1.4 times extender loses one stop of light. Not all camera bodies can focus with an extender in place, let alone retain some measure of speed in acquiring focus. A 2 times extender is usually to be avoided on account of it losing two stops of shutter speed, let alone image quality. The best of professional lenses, however, may sometimes be OK when used with tele. extenders mounted on top line camera bodies.

CAMERA SUPPORT

I hand-hold my equipment for speed, flexibility and convenience. My equipment is hand-holdable for a reasonable amount of time. If focusing on a perched bird whilst expecting some action. a monopod or a tripod with a gimbal head may be of assistance. Concentration is a more important factor, subject to one’s strength and endurance.

I know of at least one photographer with a professional 500mm f4 lens and pro camera and whom trains with weights to handle that equipment - sometimes hand-held.

KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE

Consult better known, authoritative web sites and books.

Practice, practice and practice. Otherwise, just practice.

I have met many like-minded photographers in the field. Almost all are willing to share general aspects of their experience with others, so reciprocity is highly recommended. Moreover, sharing immediate knowledge of bird activity can benefit everyone, but each to his/her own here!

Birdography is challenging! Persistence, observation and foresight pays off.

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