

7 Tips for Better Bird Photography

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1. Don't put the bird in the center of the frame.

One thing most great bird photographs have in common is that they're interesting. Thus, in the spirit of adding interest, do your best not to place your subject dead center in the frame when composing the shot. Instead, use what pros call the "rule of thirds," a visual trick which breaks the space into, well, you guessed it, thirds. The eye tends to find an object off to one side or the other more pleasing than one sitting smack dab in the middle.

2. Watch that background!

A messy, jumbled background that distracts from the real object of beauty spoils many otherwise fine photographs. Any background elements need to be far enough away to go out of focus. Also, remember, when you're working at a feeder, that perch can be moved!

3. Be aware of the light angle.

Ask pros about the single most important element in photography and most would say, "The right light!" With that in mind, generally speaking, for birds you want front light (*light coming from behind you*). Back light works for nice silhouettes and on wading birds with plumes (...ah, *the elegance this adds to the already-elegant Great Egret!*). Try to avoid side light as it rarely does our winged friends justice.

4. Select a photo-worthy perch.

If you're creating your images at a feeding station, you've got the flexibility of providing your own perch, so get creative! Pick something interesting and make it even more so by adding a little something interesting (*i.e. berries, flowers, lichen, etc.*). But be careful not to add too much or you'll distract from your feathered feature. And keep in mind the size of the perch versus the size of the bird. A dainty Painted Bunting, for example, will look out of place on a big log.

5. Try to capture a moment.

What pros call "bird on a stick" shots refer to the kinds of photos that -- even though they might display birds clearly and follow other tips featured here -- tend to be pretty boring overall. Let's face it - we like seeing animals in action! Capturing a behavior (*even a small one like a Northern Cardinal chomping on a berry*) makes for a much more interesting image while still showing off the beauty of the bird.

6. Go where the birds are.

If Herons act skittish at your local pond, go where they're not so nervous (i.e. fishing docks). Need your spirits to soar with Bald Eagles? Check out the yearly nest near Burnett, Texas. Roaring to ride the wind like a raptor? Glide to El Paso's Hawk Alley, Corpus Christi for its annual Hawk Watch, or Pennsylvania's Hawk Mountain Sanctuary. Seeking the serenade of a Red Crossbill? North Georgia's Cohutta Wildlife Management Area provides homes to these finch-family birds. Crave dramatic Snow Geese and Sandhill Crane sunrise silhouettes? Set up your tripod at New Mexico's Bosque del Apache. Antsy for the antics of Burrowing Owls and the sweet song of Meadowlarks? Run for the Rita Blanca Grasslands. Long for the luck of Bluebirds? Travel to Titus County and explore the Northeast Texas Bluebird Trail. Want wonderful Whooping Cranes? Head to the Texas Gulf and cruise the estuaries near Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. Vociferous Green Jays and Kiskadees? South Texas provides haven for these colorful birds.

7. Find knowledgeable help.

Hiring a guide or taking part in a tour gets you in the right place at the right time. For example, South Texas' photo ranches offer exceptional opportunities for gathering high-quality images of dramatic scenes like Crested Caracaras duking it out with Turkey Vultures, but you need a guide to gain access. And, if it's good photographs -- rather than distant sightings -- of endangered Whooping Cranes you're after, you'll need to join a photo tour or rent a boat piloted by a naturalist. In addition, someone who not only knows local avian species but is also an expert photographer will understand when & where the animals & the lighting suit your lens best.

There's certainly more to learn about each of these topics, but put these tips to work and you'll immediately take better bird photos. And the more often you put these pointers to use the better you'll get.

Just remember: prepare beforehand because one bird in focus is better than two...um...you get the picture!



Award-winning naturalist photographer, Jeff Parker, leads friendly, informative photo tours & workshops focusing on the flora & fauna of North, Central, & South America.

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