

7 Tips for Songbird Photography

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1. Size matters.

It takes a great big lens to photograph itty bitty birds. Tamron & Sigma both offer 150mm-600mm zooms at a reasonable price if you don't want to plunk down the cash for a Nikon or Canon 600mm prime. A 400mm or even 300mm with a teleconverter will also work.

2. Use a tripod.

Unless your birds are very habituated, the very motion of raising your camera to your face will likely make them scam. Using a tripod allows you to keep your camera up & ready, thereby minimizing movement. Typically, when the focus is on birds-in-flight (*like at Bosque*) I shoot a lot by hand, but with songbirds you're mostly going for perched or landing birds rather than birds-in-flight.

3. Go native.

Use native plants in your yard. Not only do they require less water & upkeep, natives provide favorite foods for your local fliers (*e.g., birds & butterflies*). They also provide appropriate additions to your images. Many commonly sold plants are exotics that provide nothing but structure.

4. Keep that shutter speed up!

Songbirds are quick-moving & rarely stay still. By using a shutter speed of 1/500 second or faster you will prevent most motion blur.

5. Shoot in bursts.

Set your camera to high-speed burst mode. By taking a burst of 3—5 shots, when you press the shutter you increase your chances of capturing a keeper. There is usually one shot in a series that is better than the others. Look for a catchlight in the eye, good head position, etc. to decide on which it is. (*Burst mode also lessens the chance of getting only shots with nictitating membranes in them.*)

6. Shoot wide open.

Use the maximum aperture of your lens. This approach offers a double benefit. By shooting wide open you can maximize the shutter speed for a given level of light. The large aperture also causes the area behind the bird to blur, which minimizes your image's background distractions.

7. Wait for it.

Behavior shots are generally preferable to bird-on-a-stick ones. To get them you have to be patient. Wait for your subject to preen, stretch, sing, etc. But don't get too relaxed while waiting—you need to remain diligent so you're ready when the action begins!

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

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