

Photographing Birds by Stephen Lilley

When I was asked to write a piece on bird photography for Lapwing I was a little apprehensive. I am fairly new to birding, despite being at the wrong end of fifty and have only been "in to" photography for a couple of years, I'm sure many of you reading this have vastly more experience than myself in both fields. I hope however that the following ramblings serve to encourage others to have a go.

I bought my first digital SLR, two years ago. I quickly became interested in nature photography, in particular birds. Digital photography, home editing, and the ability to share and research via the internet makes for a fascinating hobby on many different levels. I have spent many hours researching what other people have to say about equipment and techniques, and whenever I'm out in the field and meet anybody with a camera I'm always keen to "pick their brains", generally I find it's a great excuse to strike up a conversation and share ideas and information.

The first thing I noticed, with some alarm, when attempting my first bird pictures was how small they were in the final image. I was using a Nikon D50 with 18-55mm kit lens. I found that most serious bird photographers were advocating 400mm focal length as a minimum, with 500mm plus a 1.4 teleconverter, giving a working focal length of 700mm, as a standard. A quick check on the cost of these 400/500 mm lenses and my new hobby looked as though it was over before it had begun. I could buy a small car for the price of Nikon 500mm AFS. I think most would-be bird photographers would recognise this predicament. I think it is important to decide very early on which camera system you are going to use, for me this would mean Nikon or Canon. I chose Nikon without knowing very much about either. Both systems are excellent, Canon seem to be favourite amongst many birders as many of their lenses have a vibration reduction system (known as image stabilisation, IS, by Canon and vibration reduction VR by Nikon), although Nikon have recently introduced a new range of long lenses with VR. I decided that wherever possible I would use Nikon lenses, as opposed to third party e.g. Sigma, Tokina, etc. I am not knocking these lenses but I believe in this area you get what you pay for.

So like most things in life there had to be a compromise. If I couldn't afford a 500mm lens I would just have to get closer to my subject. After a great deal of research I eventually bought the Nikon 300mm F4 D AFS, which retails in this country for about £800, but can be had for quite a bit less from Hong Kong, via E Bay. I have to say this is a great lens for the price. I use it with 1.4 teleconverter, with no loss of image quality, giving me 420mm at F5.6. The lens is small enough to be used for insect and flower work and not too heavy to carry around. Incidentally I did not consider a zoom lens as I think for birding you are always going to want maximum magnification and I think it's generally accepted that budget zooms are no match optically to prime lenses.

Another important consideration is the maximum aperture your lens. The better birding lenses have a maximum aperture of F4 at 500mm. which means you can still use a 1.4 teleconverter and maintain auto focus. With some of the less expensive means of achieving 500mm you are talking of apertures over F5.6 which usually means no TC, slow shutter speeds and the need for a tripod and/ or VR. As I understand it, even the better cameras will not autofocus at apertures above F5.6.

As my setup does not benefit from VR I have slowly realised the importance of using a tripod whenever possible, sharper images at slower shutter speeds are definitely possible. I had read that if you use the rule of one over the focal length of your lens as a guide to your shutter speed, in my case 420mm equates to approx one 400th of a second then you can hand hold successfully. I have found this works quite well, but I am still convinced that I get sharper pictures using a tripod.

Obviously one of the major drawbacks of having to use shorter focal lengths, is the need for cropping your image during digital processing, to obtain a frame filling picture. I think most of us are guilty of over cropping a lot of the time. This I think is where the sensor size in your camera becomes an issue. For an uncropped image at "normal" printing sizes, i.e. up to say A3, a 6 megapixel camera would be sufficient, but where you are cropping the more megapixels the better. I went from 6.1mp with my D50 to 10.2mp with my D200 and noticed a big difference in resolution. In my opinion the other significant issue with regards to choice of camera is the performance of the autofocus system. Photographing birds is a technically demanding pursuit, the truth is the better your camera, the easier it will be able to lock on, focus and track your bird, especially in low light.

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Cameras become obsolete fairly quickly, models are replaced every 2-3 years. My D200 will not track and autofocus as well as the recently introduced D300, this is just a fact of the digital age.

If I'm honest, I still aspire to a professional birding lens, who wouldn't after looking at Sean Gray's images on the BOG website, but I believe reasonable results and a lot of fun can be had with a more modest setup. Increasingly for me it's about getting out there and learning about birds, so that I can get myself into those situations where I can get those interesting shots.