

# Photographing Birds



Presented by:

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October 12, 2017



# Photographing birds can be a lifelong passion!

I started 50 years ago!

("Pecky" the Parakeet)



# How to get started photographing birds



Equipment and Camera Settings



Photographing in your yard



Attracting birds



Habits



Lighting



Background



Composition



Post-Processing



Practice, Patience, and Perseverance





## Equipment and Camera Settings



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# Equipment

- Camera (or cell phone) – The best camera is the one you have with you!
- Lens – Yes, bigger might be better...
- Tripod – Or sturdy surface like a railing, rock or window sill

Try to keep your camera and all electronics dry!



Sometimes bigger is better, but something is better than nothing!





# Camera Settings

## Fast Shutter Speeds – Freezes motion

- Small birds might get close, but are often fast and erratic.
- Need a very fast shutter speed for birds in flight.



200 mm lens, 1/1000s



Larger birds often have slower and soaring flight,  
but many times are higher up and further away.  
Longer lenses and fast shutters help here.



1/6400s  
*Turkey Vulture*



1/8000s  
*Osprey*



1/6400s  
*Bald Eagle*



1/8000s  
*Bald Eagle*

200 mm lens on all





# Camera Settings

Aperture (Lens Opening) – Affects how much depth is in focus

f/2.8 = Shallow depth. Small number, small amount in focus. Lets in more light.

f/22 = Deep depth. Large number, large amount in focus. Lets in less light.



f/4.0

Shallow Depth of Field:  
Bird is in focus but  
background blurred

*Song Sparrow*

Portrait vs.  
Including Habitat

Sweet Spot for  
image sharpness  
is in between



f/14.0

Deep Depth of Field:  
Bird and the background are  
both more in focus

*White-throated Sparrow*



# Camera Settings

ISO – Sensitivity of the image sensor to light

**Choose lowest possible ISO that still allows a fast enough shutter speed to reduce motion blur.**



1/250s, f/5.6, ISO 3200

*Crimson Rosella Parrot*

Higher ISO: Less light is required so you can use faster shutter speeds, but photo has more noise or grain. Use in darker settings to keep speed up.

Lower ISO: Produces less noise and graininess, but more light is required. Tradeoffs are slower shutter speeds and/or aperture changes.



# Camera Settings

## Continuous, or Burst, Mode

- Takes several photos in quick succession by pressing the shutter button or holding it down.
- Increases the odds one turns out when your opportunity of capturing something is short.



# Camera Settings

## Continuous, or Burst, Mode



*Great Egret* – The one that turned out





# Camera Settings

## Autofocus – Single Area vs. Continuous Tracking



*Female Yellow-Rumped Warbler*

**Main Objective: Focus on the eye and keep it sharp!**

Single Area: Not moving or perched, use One-Shot AF for Canon or AF-S for Nikon.

Continuous Tracking: Moving or in flight, use AI Servo for Canon or AF-C for Nikon. “Sports mode” on some cameras. Tracks motion and predicts where the subject will be, placing the focus at that predicted point.

Consider using AF-On Button if you are switching back and forth.



# A steady camera = sharper photos

- Don't try to take a photo while walking.
- Tuck your elbows in.
- Squeeze shutter release.
- Use something as a brace to keep your camera still. Lean against a tree or set camera on a rock or ledge.



Motion Blur



Steadier Camera

*Red-shouldered Hawk*





- Equipment and Camera Settings
- Photographing in your yard
- Attracting birds
- Habits
- Lighting
- Background
- Composition
- Post-Processing
- Practice, Patience, and Perseverance



# Your own yard – A great place to start

- Convenience
- Control
- Create



# Creating the “Nature” Scene

## “Nature” Category in Photo Competitions



*White-throated Sparrow*

### Not allowed:

- No human elements. Nothing that shows evidence of the “hand of man.” This includes cut grass, fences, stone walls, roads.
- No human hybrid plants, cultivated plants, feral animals, domestic animals or mounted animals.

\*Not a complete list. For more details see:  
Photographic Society of America  
<https://psa-photo.org/index.php?nature-nature-definition>



# “Nature” Photography

## “Nature” Category in Photo Competitions

Not allowed:

- Nothing that shows evidence of the “hand of man.”



*Great Horned Owl*



*House Wren*



*American Robin*



*House Sparrow*





# “Nature” Photography

Allowed:

“Scientific bands, scientific tags or radio collars on wild animals are permissible.”



*White-throated Sparrow*



*Common Loon*

\*Not a complete list. For more details see:

Photographic Society of America <https://psa-photo.org/index.php?nature-nature-definition>



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# How to attract birds into your yard

Food – Birdseed/food or seedbearing plants

Water – For drinking & bathing

Shelter – Nest boxes, trees, shrubs or ground cover



# Warning: Feeding birds may also attract other animals...



*Black-capped Chickadee*



*Female Eastern Gray Squirrel*



# Squirrels will come, but just photograph them too!



*Eastern Gray Squirrel*





# And all their relatives...



*Eastern Gray Squirrels*



But seed is cheap, so let them eat!

Costco: \$12.99 for  
a 40 pound bag



# Small birds and animals may attract bigger birds...



*Juvenile Red-shouldered Hawk*





**That hawk wasn't really posing for a photo.  
He was waiting for his dinner hiding under  
the BBQ...**

Squirrel waited for  
the hawk to leave  
and got away!



*Eastern Gray Squirrel*



**Lure birds with food in the morning. All day or overnight food sources invite raccoons and bears into your yard too!**



*North American Raccoon*



*North American Brown Bear*



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# Know your birds – [www.birds.cornell.edu](http://www.birds.cornell.edu)



**How to Identify Bird Songs**

Bird Academy's latest self-paced course  
jump-starts your birding-by-ear skills

▶ [Learn more](#)

Common Yellowthroat © Linda Petersen

A photograph of a Common Yellowthroat bird perched on a thin branch, facing left with its beak open as if singing. The bird has a bright yellow throat and breast, a black face mask, and olive-green wings and back. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green.



# What are their habits? Do they always land on the same branch?

See if they perch first before going in for the food. If so, try pre-focusing there.



*Black-capped Chickadee*





# Notice which birds perch longer than others making them easier to photograph



*Juvenile Red-shouldered Hawk*



*Male Northern Cardinal, Dark-eyed Junco*





**The closer the birds will get to you the better,  
especially if you don't have a big lens**



70mm lens, Flying about 25 feet overhead 1/1000s

*Snowy Owl*



# Time of year – Are they here for the winter or do they migrate?



*Dark-eyed Juncos*



*Male Northern Cardinal*



# Active in fall preparing for winter



*Female Downy Woodpecker*



# Activity next to nesting sites when feeding young



*Chipping Sparrows*





# Active in spring when mating and nesting

And you might get treated to hearing a beautiful song too!



*American Robin*



# Don't put food by nests as other predators may find them

Note: Do not cause harm to the birds!



Juvenile House Sparrow



# Behaviors a bird often does just before it takes off to fly

- Stands very alert
- Turns its head in all directions
- Turns into the wind

May poop to “lighten the load.”  
Especially larger birds.



*American Crow*



*Western Gull*



# Tips for Photographing Wild Birds

- Wear muted clothing to blend in
- Don't wear reflective jewelry
- Turn off your cell phone ringer
- Don't use a shiny tripod
- Turn off beep sounds on camera
- Don't use flash
- Move slowly in a low, zigzag pattern
- Use a "bird blind" if you have one



*Common Loon*



**Don't scare the birds away!!!**





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# Golden Hours: Morning or late in the day



*Oystercatcher*

The best light is found just after sunrise and just before sunset when the light is warmer and more subdued.

It will bring out the color and texture in the birds' plumage.



# Partly Cloudy Day vs. Harsh, Direct Sun



*Male House Finch*



*Blue Jay*



# Where does the sun fall between you and the birds?

Sun is behind me and slightly to the left.

Note: Catch light in eye.



*Male House Finch*





# Backlighting vs. Sun at Your Back



*Dark-eyed Junco*



*Sulfur-crested Cockatoos*



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**Does the background help tell the story?  
If not, keep it simple and non-distracting.**



*Great Blue Heron*

Background shows some of the surroundings and habitat, but doesn't distract from the bird.



# Background should compliment the bird, not draw attention away from it

Background is subtle  
and keeps the focus  
on the bird.



*Female House Finch*





# The bird should not blend in with the background



*Pacific Black Duck*

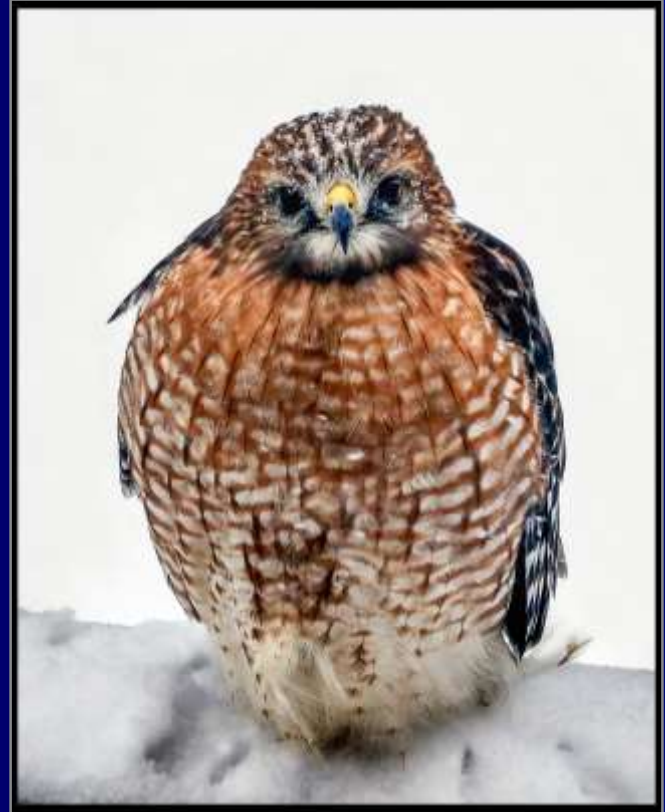
A brown duck in brown water doesn't "pop" out of the photo.



# Choose a background where the bird stands out



*Gouldian Finch*



*Red-shouldered Hawk*



# Have background far away so it will be blurred



300mm f/5.6

*Black-capped Chickadee*



70mm f/14

*Juvenile White-throated Sparrow*



# Trim branches to be minimal Break by hand or no cuts showing



*Black-capped Chickadee*

Caution: Even a “broken” branch can be seen as a distraction.





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# The bird should be the clear subject and focus of the photograph



*White-breasted Nuthatch*

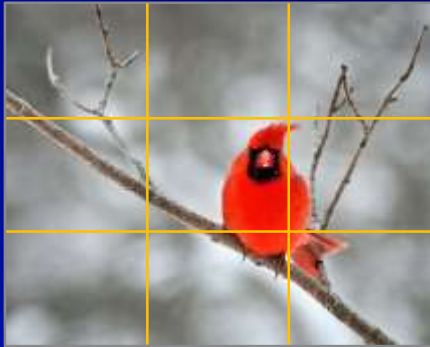
Yes, Nuthatches climb head first down trees!



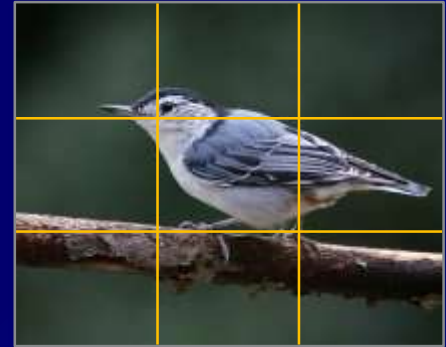
# Rule of Thirds – Divide the photo into 9 parts with an imaginary tic tac toe grid



Put points of interest on lines or intersections.



The eye is a point of interest.



*Male Northern Cardinal*

*White-breasted Nuthatch*



# Get on their level



*Tufted Titmouse*



*Black-capped Chickadee*



*Juvenile Red-shouldered Hawk*



*Purple Swamphen*



*Magpie Lark*



*Herring Gull*



*Galah*





# Give breathing space – Get in close, but leave some room around the bird

More room should be left on the side the bird is heading toward



*White-throated Sparrow*



# Fill the frame – make the subject a significant portion of the photo



Get close! Move in closer or get a bigger lens if possible.



Or, crop in post-processing.

*Female Ruby-throated Hummingbird*



# Eliminate distractions by removing items or changing position



Remove garbage, camera bags, excess branches etc. or reposition so they aren't in the photo.



Or, remove in post-processing.

*Female Ruby-throated Hummingbird*



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# Eliminate distractions with Post-Processing



Original Photo



1<sup>st</sup> Crop with Adjustments



Cropping out distractions



Elements removed with editing

*Female House Finch*



# Content Aware Fill and Clone Stamping can get rid of unwanted items, including garbage, birdseed, etc.



Birdseed on log



Birdseed removed

*Male Northern Cardinal*



# Do just enough post processing to bring back the details and colors without over-sharpening



Realistic

*Male House Finch*



Over-sharpened

*Female Northern Cardinal*





# Don't crop too tight - leave some space to move into



You left some room when you took the photo, so don't spoil it in post-processing!

*Sulfur-crested Cockatoo*





# Or, get creative!



Original Photo



Drybrush Effect and Bricks Added

*Herring Gull*



# Creating a Composite: Starting Elements



Original Photo



Background Photo



Branch Photo

*Barking Owl*



# Creating a Composite: Giving the bird a more “natural setting”



Original Photo



Composite Photo

Barking Owl



# RAW provides more opportunities to bring out detail than JPEG files



JPEG












RAW

*Tufted Titmouse*





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# Practice in your backyard, then go explore the world!



*Female Downy Woodpecker, Dark-eyed Junco, Female House Finch, Male House Sparrow, Male House Finch*



# Consider photographing slower “friendly” birds like ducks, geese and swans



*Female Mallard Duck*



*Black Swan*



*Canada goose*



# Gulls are also friendly and slower in flight making them easier to photograph



*Heermann's Gull*



*Western Gull & Heermann's Gull*





**Find a place with plenty of birds; probably a good feeding ground will be nearby**

Or bring food with you!



*Heermann's Gulls*



# Choose a day and time with good light and a good background



Enjoy the surroundings  
while you're there!

*Western Gull*



**Be patient! Wait for the birds, the light,  
and the background to come together**

Or, find a place where  
backgrounds are always  
beautiful and birds wait in  
trees to be photographed!



*Blue-and-yellow Macaw*



# Persevere! Don't give up! Keep taking those photographs!

## No matter how many times you get knocked down!



*Sulfur-crested Cockatoos*





# Now what?

## Seek out, capture and share the beauty around us!



*Juvenile Eastern Bluebird*



*Senegal Parrot*



# Inspirations



*Female Yellow-rumped Warbler*



*White breasted Nuthatch*



*Black-capped chickadee*



*American Goldfinch*



*Juvenile Red-shouldered Hawk*



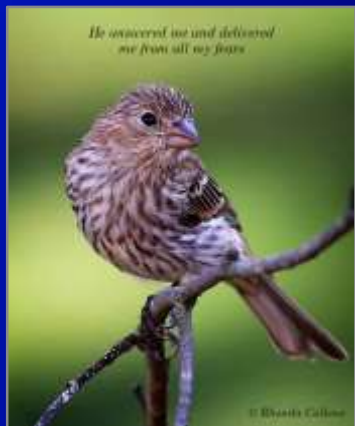
*Female Ruby-throated Hummingbird*



*Male Northern Cardinal*



# Inspirations



*Female House Finch*



*Juvenile Eastern Bluebird*



*Female Cardinal*



*American Robin*



*Herring Gull*



*Juvenile House Sparrow*



*Male House Finch*





# Exhibit: “Pictures and Passages”



[www.CCullens.com/WHCC](http://www.CCullens.com/WHCC)





# Exhibit: “Newtown & Beyond”



[www.FlagpolePhotographers.com](http://www.FlagpolePhotographers.com)



# NECCC Competition



[www.NECCC.com](http://www.NECCC.com)



# Flagpole “Birds” Competition

“Birds” Competition

OCT  
**26**  
Thu

7:15 pm



NEWTOWN SENIOR

The image is a promotional poster for a flagpole competition. It features a central photograph of several birds, likely terns, in flight over a rocky stream. The birds are captured in various stages of flight, with wings spread wide. The background of the photo shows green foliage and the white water of the stream. The poster has a cream-colored background with a blue border. Text elements include the event title, date, time, and location.



# *Thank you!*

Presented by:  
Rhonda Cullens, *MNEC, VP NECCC*



*Created by:*  
Rhonda Cullens  
and Sandy Schill

*Photo Credit:*  
Rhonda Cullens  
and Chane Cullens



*[www.FlagpolePhotographers.com](http://www.FlagpolePhotographers.com)*

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# “Nature” Photography

What qualifies as “Nature” for photo competitions?

Depicts all branches of natural history, except anthropology and archaeology.

Not allowed:

- No techniques that add, relocate, replace, or remove pictorial elements except by cropping.
- No manipulations that alters the truth of the photographic statement.
- No human elements. Nothing that shows evidence of the hand of man. This includes cut grass.
- No human hybrid plants, cultivated plants, feral animals, domestic animals or mounted animals.
- No stitched or infrared images.

Adapted from: Photographic Society of America  
<https://psa-photo.org/index.php?nature-nature-definition>



# “Nature” Photography

## Allowed:

- Enhancing the presentation of the photo without changing the nature story or the pictorial content, or without altering the content of the original scene.
- These enhancements include HDR, focus stacking and dodging/burning.
- Techniques that remove elements added by the camera, such as dust spots, noise, and film scratches.

All enhancements must appear natural.

Adapted from: Photographic Society of America  
<https://psa-photo.org/index.php?nature-nature-definition>

