

BIRD PHOTOGRAPHY — A NEW ART FOR THE AMATEUR NATURALIST

DENNIS PULESTON, BROOKHAVEN, NEW YORK

Less than one hundred years ago, with wildlife teeming on every hand, the hunting of our wild birds required little justification, other than the need to supplement the family's often scanty larder with fresh meat. But conditions have changed with tragic rapidity. Some of the species which once darkened our skies, such as the Eskimo curlew and Passenger pigeon, have vanished forever, others are dangerously close to extinction, and almost all require rigid protection if they are to survive for many more years. With a few very carefully controlled exceptions, it is doubtful whether the shooting of any of our birdlife should be permitted to continue much longer.

How, then, to meet the hunting urge which lurks deep within almost every amateur naturalist, without harming these precious, dwindling resources? The sighting and identification of birds carries a deep satisfaction, and we all enjoy adding another species to our life lists, but once these lists begin to fill up, this challenge cannot continue indefinitely. Yet we would like to have some permanent trophy to remind us of our field trips, that we can share with others. What better way to gratify this desire than through bird photography?

Here we are offered all the thrills of the stalker and his quarry, the challenges in patience and skill, and the tests of ingenuity and sometimes, in some measure, of daring. All this, moreover, in an activity which is not governed by law-enforced seasons, as in gunning; all the months of the year are open season for the camera. And the end product will last us through our lifetimes, instead of serving as a soon-digested dish of roast canvasback or grouse. Moreover, we have the constant challenge of trying for improvement, for we know there could always be a better shot. As one of the by-products of this fascinating sport (but art is perhaps a better word) we are able to learn much about bird behavior as we watch and wait for the ultimate moment when the shutter is tripped.

In these days of the new films that offer high speed and good color resolution in measures undreamed of a few years ago, together with many improvements in the cameras themselves, and the high-speed flash and other ancillary equipment, the beginner can quickly learn to obtain successful results. An initial investment of well under five hundred dollars can give him all the equipment necessary for many kinds of bird photographs under a wide variety of conditions.

On the subject of equipment, I will not presume to dictate the specific items. Everyone's taste and pocket varies, and as so many excellent cameras are available now, this must be left to individual decision. I will merely mention briefly my own preference, with which, after about five years devoted to this activity as a spare-time interest, I am currently well satisfied. I have a good Japanese reflex-type 35mm camera with a top shutter speed of 1/500 sec., and a 300mm German-made telephoto lens, which can be interchanged with the regular camera lens. I believe that this sized telephoto, which gives a magnification of 6X, is about as large as can be effectively hand-held without the danger of blurring due to hand tremor. Even with this, I recommend shutter speeds no slower than 1/100 sec. except when the camera can be tripod-mounted or otherwise steadied. I highly

recommend a reflex camera; with this, I can be in a blind with only the business end of the lens protruding, and can see, through the lens, exactly what the camera is seeing at the precise moment when the shutter is tripped. The rest of the equipment needed to get started consists of a light meter, tripod, handy carrying case, and home-made blind. Flash equipment can come later, when more difficult conditions are being met than should be attempted at first.

A good place to begin is at the feeding station. Here, the subject is easily coaxed within camera range. Our feeder is located about 10 feet from a window, so I set up my camera on the tripod, with telephoto lens attached, in front of the open window. I then draw the curtains on either side of the camera, and pin them tightly above and below the end of the lens. Then, having determined my lens opening, focus, and shutter speed, all I have to do is wait, with my finger on the shutter release. If all this sounds somewhat like shooting the proverbial fish in a barrel, I must agree that such is the case. Even under such a simple and comfortable set-up, however, one can sometimes obtain a shot of a rare visitant or an unusual pose. The superb work of Crawford Greenwalt, President of DuPont, is familiar to ornithologists; his early photography was devoted to flight studies at this feeder, using ultra high-speed flash equipment. This type of work can result in valuable scientific information on the aerodynamics of bird flight.

Photography at the feeder, however, is suggested merely as a good place to begin, to stimulate the amateur to more arduous and challenging aspects of his art. Obviously, one of the finest opportunities is afforded at the nest. Here, we have both a predestined point where the bird will return, and a chance to catch it in the intimate poses of caring for its young. But before attempting to work at tree nests, I suggest starting this phase of photography with nests built on or near the ground. For this, it is well to install the blind several days before actual photography is begun, to allow time for the parent bird to become accustomed to its presence while it is still unoccupied. It is also advisable not to set up the blind until the young are beginning to hatch, or at least until the eggs are hard set. At this juncture, the parent is not so likely to desert, provided the blind is well anchored and will not collapse or blow over. In fact, a well designed and properly installed blind will be ignored, even though the click of the shutter may cause a temporary panic.

A caution is in order in respect to nests in thick cover. Sometimes an over-enthusiastic photographer will cut away the concealing vegetation to such an extent that, while the nest is clearly revealed to the camera, it is also exposed to natural predators. I urge strongly that the photographer does not endanger the contents of the nest for the sake of his photograph — it is just not worth it, under any circumstances. It is far better to confine one's efforts to nests that do not need to be disturbed; there is more than sufficient challenge here.

For the blind itself, tastes vary. I know of professional nature photographers who swear by the kind of cardboard cartons used for shipping refrigerators. These can be folded, and are thus light and easy to transport. But their lightness presents a problem, for they require adequate guying to resist heavy winds. One of the first British photographers to use blinds devised an ingenious method for taking ground nests. From a slaughterhouse, he obtained a cowhide complete with head and horns, and stretched

it over a light wooden framework in the shape of the body. He cut a small hole in the animal's throat for the lens aperture, and a large hole in the belly for his legs. Apparently such birds as lapwings, skylarks, redshanks, and pipits did not object to the peculiar six-legged cow which stood motionless over their nests, and he obtained some splendid photographs. But strange situations sometimes developed when he was seen by farmers carrying off his cow over one shoulder, with its legs pointed stiffly skyward.

My blind is a cube-shaped tent, with burlap sides and a canvas roof. I have chosen burlap for the sides, because I am able to see fairly well through a single thickness, whereas two thicknesses are opaque. Thus, the bird on the outside cannot see what is inside. The fabric is supported at the four upper corners by uprights made of the thin iron rods used by gardeners to support plants. The lower ends of these uprights are forced into the ground for stability. Four additional rods, connected to the top ends of the uprights, provide horizontal support to the upper edges of the blind. The ends of the rods are connected by flexible wire passed through holes drilled in them. For transportation, the eight rods, still connected, can be folded into a compact bundle, and the fabric is rolled into a tight ball. The entire blind weighs only about 12 pounds. When installed, I weight the lower sides of the fabric with stones, dirt, or sand, so that the walls will not flutter in the wind.

In entering the blind, it should be realized that many birds will remain suspicious and are reluctant to return to the nest, even after the person has disappeared within the blind. But if two persons go to the blind, and shortly thereafter one person walks away, the bird is apparently satisfied, and will not hesitate to attend to its domestic affairs.

I mentioned earlier the occasional call for daring. This is often entailed when working with nests built in trees or on cliff faces. I recommend this kind of bird photography only to those who have strong nerves, some engineering skill, and great agility. Sometimes it is necessary to rig a blind in another tree near to the one holding the nest, and occasionally a tower has to be erected. For nests within fifteen or twenty feet of the ground, I suggest building a framework out of two ladders, arranged in the shape of a capital letter A, supported by guy ropes attached to nearby trees. The top ends of the ladders are lashed together and the crosspiece of the A is formed by a strong board which serves as a platform for the photographer. A burlap blind is then draped over the top of the A.

Photographing seabirds at their cliff nests is generally easier than might be expected, for blinds are not so necessary here, due to the relative tameness of most species. Gannets, for example, can be approached openly within a few feet when nesting, and birds such as murres and puffins will usually remain fearlessly within range of the telephoto. But cliffs are far more treacherous than tall trees, and the photographer must use the greatest caution in climbing amongst them. If possible, he should confine his work to the nests close to or on the upper rim of the cliffs.

In contrast to the types of photography already mentioned, where the camera is set up in advance focused on a predetermined spot, one can also indulge in the kind which I refer to as "shooting on the fly." In this case, the camera is carried around in the hand, with the hope that a suitable subject will present itself. This entails many hours of fruitless looking and hoping, but occasionally the chance arrives, and when it does the camera must be ready with lens opening, focus, and shutter speed preset, for such

chances are generally fleeting. During the peak of the spring warbler wave, I have sometimes found it profitable to wander quietly alongside a wooded stream. Here, as the warblers come close to the water to drink, and to feed on the newly-emerged insects, it is possible to catch them at close range, for they are relatively fearless. But these restless creatures are not likely to hold one position for more than a few seconds, so great speed and precision are needed to obtain good, clear pictures under these conditions. Photographs of such species as ducks taking off, landing, or passing overhead also present a challenge, but action shots of this kind, taken at 1/500 sec. or even faster, are to be greatly prized. When the hunting season is over and the waterfowl have regained a little confidence, the blind and decoys of a gunner can serve well for this purpose. The photographer can even mount his camera on a gunstock, to hold it steady and facilitate sighting.

During the spring and fall migrations of the shorebirds, when they are populating our northern sandbars and mudflats, I have discovered that I can approach them more closely from the water than from the landward side. In a rowboat or canoe, with someone to paddle me gently towards them as they feed busily at the water's edge, and by crouching in the bow as inconspicuously as possible, I can generally bring them well within range of a good shot with the telephoto, sometimes closer than twenty feet. Walking towards them on the flats, I am lucky to get within double that distance before they take alarm. The only exceptions are the small "peep" sandpipers; with them, I can squat quietly in the grass near the shoreline, and have them come within ten feet of me.

I have presented here a brief description of the major types of bird photography to which I have been devoting my efforts to date. Undoubtedly, other techniques and situations will develop in the future. I have so much to learn, and I have yet to take a photograph with which I can say in all sincerity I am fully satisfied. But I can see improvement, and each new bird species I record on film brings its own small measure of achievement. And I have found that the greatest sense of accomplishment comes with the shots that require the highest degrees of ingenuity and patience.

Then the question arises — how can one derive the greatest pleasure and value from one's work? There are, obviously, the scientific and educational aspects: color slides are valuable adjuncts to lectures on such topics as wildlife and conservation, and interested audiences, both lay and technical, young and adult, are easy to find once the lecturer becomes known in his neighborhood. He can make an important contribution toward fostering an interest in nature if he is willing to serve as a speaker. Moreover, the demand for illustrations for books and journals devoted to ornithology and wildlife in general is rising steadily, and one should not overlook the possibilities of contributing to such sources. If the amateur is too modest to have his best pictures shown in public, he can at least take pleasure in exhibiting them to his intimate friends.

I hope that I have been able to convey some of the thrills, pleasures, and lasting edification that can come from the art of bird photography. No written words, however, can fully express the triumph of the photographer crouching tensely in his blind when, after days of planning and waiting, he reaches his goal. As his subject moves into focus and the shutter clicks, he has indeed arrived at Hemingway's 'moment of truth.' Surely few other endeavors can offer this in fuller measure.