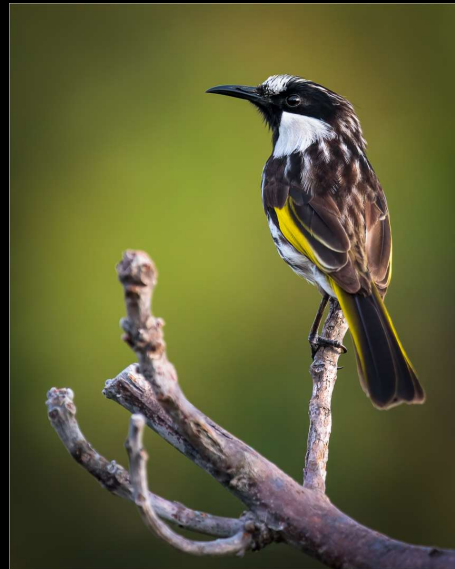# For the love of birds

Stephan Labuschagné APSSA, AFIAP, MAPS

Martie Labuschagné AFIAP, FAPS

Good evening, everyone

I want to start of by thanking everyone for being here tonight .

It is an honour for me to be here and share with you my techniques, my way of doing my photography and my ideas.

Please do keep in mind that there are a host of different ways, settings, processes and opinions out there. The opinions that I have and processes that I follow are the things that works for me.

Let's dive into my version of "For the love of birds"

As many of you know I was born in South Africa, I have been a photographer from very early in my life, Both my parents were competitive club photographers, so it was just natural that I could say f-stop before I could say mom or dad. Photography is part of my DNA, it's part of who I am, and I cannot imagine my life without a camera in my hands.

For many photographers born in Africa, wildlife is part of what you photograph, I am no different, even though I enjoy sport, scapes and many

other subject matter. The natural world around me, is where I always gravitate towards.

So why birds?

As heavens to the east start to brighten up, you can hear birds chirping away. Their return to the roosting spots at dusk marks the end of the day. Very often, bird sounds are the first and last natural sounds you will hear every day.

Birds are found across the world in all major habitat types from forest, grasslands, snow capped mountains and even our own man-made concrete jungles. There's more about birds that just their appearance, their behaviors, their intelligence and their songs. The ability to migrate between continents and the change into breeding colours are unique in the natural world. My fascination with birds, turned into an obsession with photographing them in their natural environment.

I hope that I can inspire you tonight to go out there, visit your local park, sit down for a while, listen to the bird calls and song and observe the beauty and splendour they bring to the world and hopefully take a few images of our feathered friends.

Discussion points
1. Short overview on the basic of Nature vs Bird photography and some ethical behavior from us as photographers
2. Preparation work
3. Look at the equipment and what role equipment play in the art form
4. Camera settings and why
5. Techniques when in the field
6. Post processing workflow – LR, PS and others
7. Competitions, why
8. Question time

Topics

- **Bird photography /Nature photography & Ethics**

- *Preparation*
  - *Resources*
  - *People*
  - *Places*
  - *Subject knowledge*
  - *Conditions*
  - *Clothing*
  - *Support systems*
  - *General*

- *Equipment*
  - *Cameras*
  - *Lenses*
- *Settings*
  - *Set & Forget settings*
  - *Situational settings*
- *In the field techniques*
- *Back home*
  - *Workflow*
- *Competitive photography, Club & Salon*
- *Questions*

Bird photography /Nature photography & Ethics

What is nature photography? What is wildlife photography? When is my image regarded as open and not nature?

Nature vs wildlife vs non nature or open is a presentation and discussion that cause a lot of confusion at times, and normally ends in a disagreement. We all have different opinions as to what we think it is or should be. I don't want to spend to much time on the topic, lets rather look at some background information and how we can get the correct information on the topic
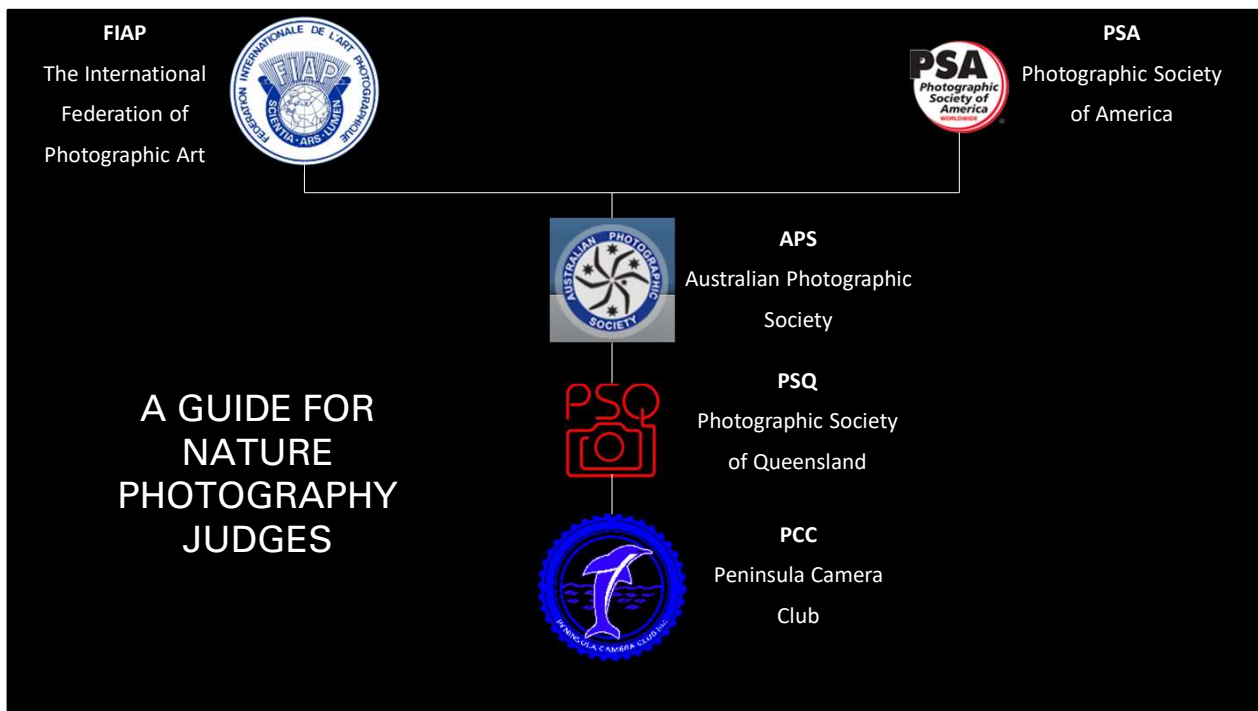
Organizations

Here we have a sort of "Organization chart" of the club and amateur photography hierarchy.

1. FIAP & PSA are the 2 major organizations for amateur photographers in the world, FIAP is European and PSA American. There are many more organizations throughout the world, these 2 are the most relevant for Australian club photographers in the discussion and understanding of how everything fits into place
2. Now you might think, what has FIAP, PSA, APS & PSQ to do with us, we are PCC members and very few of us are members of any of the top 3 Societies/organizations.
3. PCC is a member of PSQ, PSQ follow the rules set out by APS for nature, APS follow FIAP and PSA guidelines. By default, if we compete in a nature category, we must comply by the regulations.
4. Until recently the 2 bodies had some differences in definitions and regulations when it comes to nature/wildlife etc.
5. In 2021 they all agreed on a document titled "A GUIDE FOR NATURE PHOTOGRAPHY JUDGES". This guide not only guides the judges in the process of judging, but it also gives us the photographers a better understanding of what is nature/wildlife. A copy of this document is available on our club's MPC page under documents. Please download and read it, a lot has changed over the last few years.

6. For this presentation I would rather focus on how I do my photography. It is however important that we know what we can and cannot do during our post processing.

Cropping
A very basic function that can make or break an image.
Don't limit yourself to 16:10, 16:9, 4:3, try different ratios, even crop a vertical to horizontal and visa versa
Here we have an example of how a basic crop can turn in average image with man made distractions into a nature image worthy of processing.

Bird photography /Nature photography & Ethics

- *Nature - The following image editing techniques are allowed:*
  - Adjustments that enhance the image without changing the content of the original scene, including exposure (globally and selectively), colour balance, contrast, dodging and burning, sharpening (globally and selectively), noise reduction, conversion to greyscale monochrome (with no colour added), straightening and resizing.
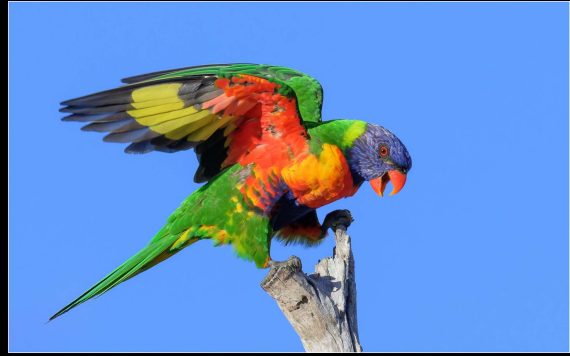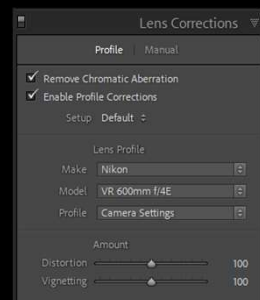
The key is "without changing the content of the original scene"

Bird photography/Nature photography & Ethics

- *Nature - The following image editing techniques are allowed:*
  - Editing that removes small elements that were not part of the original scene (such as spots caused by dust on a digital sensor or scratches on a scanned image).
  - High dynamic range (HDR) techniques - because the pictorial content of the individual images and the combined image is the same.
  - Focus stacking of images - because although this involves the combining of several images the pictorial content is not being changed.
  - Adjustments that compensate for lens deficiencies such as distortion, chromatic aberration and lens flare - because they do not change the pictorial content.

Lens Corrections ▼	
Profile	Manual
✓ Remove Chromatic Aberration	
✓ Enable Profile Corrections	
Setup Default ⬍	
Lens Profile	
Make Nikon	
Model VR 600mm f/4E	
Profile Camera Settings	
Amount	
Distortion	100
Vignetting	100

1. This can cause a lot of debate, what I feel is acceptable to remove, others may think it's not okay to remove and visa versa. I think the important part is "that were not part of the original scene"
2. HDR is new in nature, as with all techniques it should be done in such a way that it enhances the image and that the HDR technique doesn't become the main focal point
3. Also, a new addition in nature.
4. LR and Camera RAW settings that can be set. It's not on by default and it's a good idea to correct during initial processing.

We cannot alter the truth

Bird photography /Nature photography & Ethics

- *Nature - The following image editing techniques are NOT allowed:*
    - Any form of manipulation that alters the truth of the photographic statement
    - Cloning

If given a choice, most people will choose the image on the right as the better of the two, even though both images are well captured, well exposed, good composition, smooth out of focus background, catching red eye and very good colours. So why do we prefer the image on the right? The piece of vegetation in the left image going from the top right, all the way through the tail to the bottom. It catches your eye and draws your attention away from the main subject that is the bird. In the open category, remove the vegetation, in nature, we cannot remove it.

Bird photography /Nature photography & Ethics

- *Nature - The following image editing techniques are* **NOT** *allowed:*
    - Any form of manipulation that alters the truth of the photographic statement
    - Cloning
    - Blurring the background to obscure elements in the original scene

A smooth out of focus background makes the subject standout and the image on the right is the most desirable outcome. The black spots on the water is distracting and our attention is drawn away from the main subject. In an open category the image on the right is acceptable and I would change the background for an open competition, for Nature, we cannot change the background to hide the imperfections. I believe that a good nature judge should recognize that when in nature, you are not allowed to remove the distractions and should not penalize the photographer for it.

The same applies for darkening the background to hide distractions.

We normally use a vignette to draw the attention away from the corners of the image into our main subject. I personally think it's not about if you use a vignette, but how you use it. The image on the left, is without a vignette, the image on the right is a "overdone" vignette, the center image is a very suttle vignette.

If you do feel like using a vignette, do it in such a way that it's not obvious, the image on the right is clearly to much and it's obvious that a vignette is being applied. The center image does have a small amount of vignetting applied. Unless you see it next to the left image in full resolution, it's almost not visible.

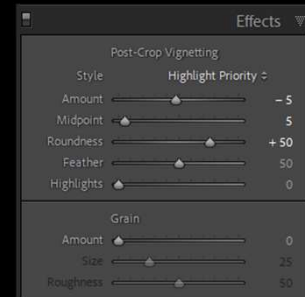*Bird photography /Nature photography & Ethics*

- *Nature - The following image editing techniques are **NOT** allowed:*
    - Any form of manipulation that alters the truth of the photographic statement
    - Cloning
    - Blurring the background to obscure elements in the original scene
    - Darkening the background to remove elements in the original scene
    - Adding a vignette not originally produced by the camera
    - Replacing image elements (such as the sky)

As with blurring the background, replacing the background to remove distractions are not allowed in nature, if used in open, then replacement is allowed and sometimes advisable, specially when you have a boring or distracting background.

But take care when you do replace the background that it fits the scene, in this instance I replaced the dull blue sky with some clouds. By looking at the center image we can see that it just doesn't fit right, first, the subject and the distant clouds cannot be both in focus, also the size ratio between the clouds and the subject if incorrect, the image on the right, the clouds are blurred and it looks better, the cloud size vs the subject size is still off and can be improved.

Bird photography /Nature photography & Ethics

- *Nature - The following image editing techniques are NOT allowed:*
    - Any form of manipulation that alters the truth of the photographic statement
    - Cloning
    - Blurring the background to obscure elements in the original scene
    - Darkening the background to remove elements in the original scene
    - Adding a vignette not originally produced by the camera
    - Replacing image elements (such as the sky)
    - Combining images by stitching

What is meant by stitching?
Like creating a panorama in landscapes, you take multiple images, moving the camera either left/right or up/down, taking multiple images with an overlap of images, then combining the 2 or more images together to create one image. It's not a technique you would normally use for moving subjects it would be almost impossible, for static subjects it does work and create a very high-resolution image.

Bird photography/Nature photography & Ethics

- *Ethics*
  - The welfare of the subject is more important than the photograph. Never disturb any birds, especially breeding birds.
  - Any local or national conservation requirements must be obeyed. This includes getting appropriate permits and observing restricted areas.
  - Permission should be sought from private landholders before venturing on to their land.
  - There should be minimal disturbance to the surroundings.
  - The use of recorded tapes, stuffed predators or other animals as baits of any kind is not acceptable.
  - The capture of free animals and birds is in most cases illegal and should never be done.
  - Damage to, moving or removal of any natural feature is not acceptable.
  - Any nature picture should record the truth of what the photographer saw at the time the picture was taken. Subsequent manipulation on a computer must ensure no radical changes, additions, or subtractions to the picture.

A quick look at Ethics
We all want that once in a lifetime image, we put time & money into our photography, and we should do it responsibly. Ethical behavior in nature photography, is just as important as ethical behavior in business.
Here we have a short list of what is expected from us as nature photographers.
I believe that when I visited a place " I only take pictures and I only leave footprints"

Topics

- *Bird photography /Nature photography & Ethics*

- *Preparation*
  - *Resources - Websites*
  - *Research - People*
  - *Find - Places*
  - *Learn - Subject knowledge*
  - *Conditions – What effect they have*
  - *To camo or not to camo – Clothing*
  - *The forgotten items - seating*
  - *Support systems*

- *Equipment*
  - *Cameras*
  - *Lenses*
- *Settings*
  - *Set & Forget settings*
  - *Situational settings*
- *In the field techniques*
- *Back home*
  - *Workflow*
- *Competitive photography, Club & Salon*
- *Questions*

- Resources
- Research
- Find
- Learn
- Conditions
- Clothing
- The forgotten items
- Support systems

Preparation
- Resources

- *Websites*
  - YouTube
  - eBirds
  - Birdlife Australia
  - Juzaphoto
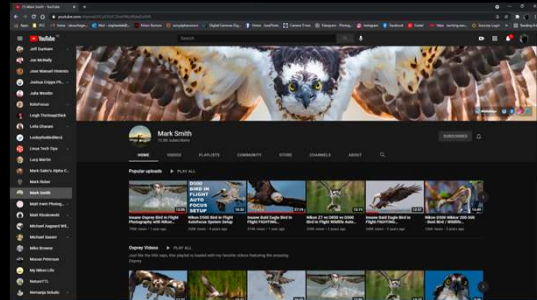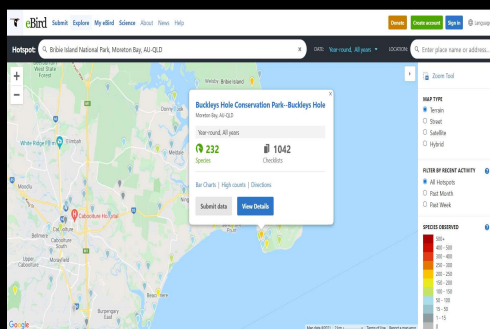
Use the internet to find some inspirational images and places.

YouTube is a good source for finding information, but be warned, like any source there are really good info, but also a lot of false and misleading information. Many YouTubers are not competitive photographers and do not comply to the rules that we do as club photographers, they are commercial photographers or use the internet to make money. There are many websites with very good information, be picky and get more than one opinion on a lens or camera or technique.

Preparation - Research

- *People*
  - Art Morris
  - Duade Paton
  - Georgina Steytler
  - Steve Perry
  - Matt Kloskowski
  - Mark Smith
  - Tim Grey
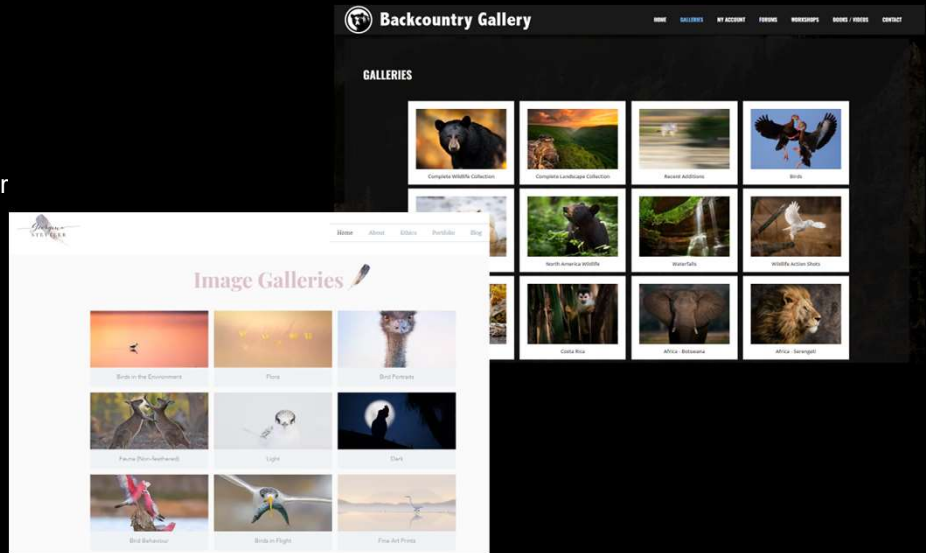
I learn from other photographers. Don't be afraid to ask people how they do things, ask as many people as you can find.

The above list are a few people I follow on social media and you not only get some great tips but also great inspiration from your fellow photographers
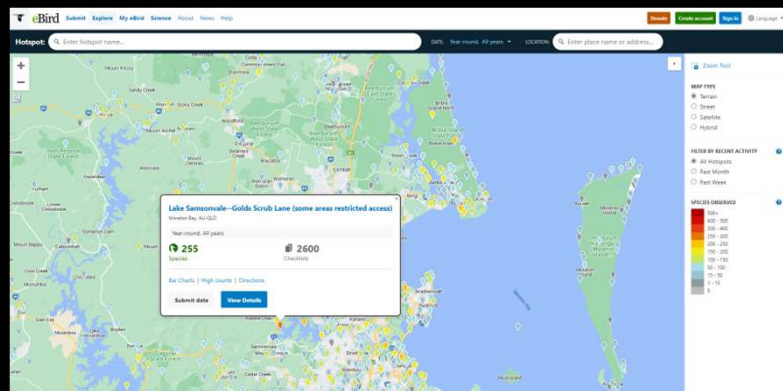
Places

I use eBirds to find birding spots, not only locally but internationally, it gives you species list, dates observed and species information.

Facebook is a very good source to finding current hotspots.

In and around Brisbane there are many spots, depending on the time of the year you will find different species at different locations.

Preparation
- Learn

- *Subject knowledge*
  - Bird behaviour
  - Seasons - What birds,
                 where and when

Know your subject

This is one of the most important factors to consider.

Just like when doing sport photography, if you don't know the rules of the game, it's very difficult to predict what is going to happen next.

The rules for birds are very simple and they give a lot of clues in their behavior.

1. 99% of the time a bird will take off or land against the wind, positioning yourself with the wind at your back or at least within 90° to the wind direction, you will have a very good chance of getting the bird as it takes of or land

2. Terns and gulls like to take baths in the afternoon, they spend a few minutes ducking into the water, slapping their wings and jumping out of the water while flapping their wings. After taking their bath they will fly out of the water and shake the excess water off.

3. Check for birds stretching or defecating, a good sign that they are getting ready to fly off.

4. Bee-eaters return to the same perch on a regular basis. During the courting process the male will bring food to the female, if she accepts, they will mate. Once they made their nest and are in the breading process, the male will continue to bring food. He will return with the food to the same perch close to the nest, when it is safe, he then take it to the female inside the nest, when the chicks hatch, both parents will do this, returning to the same stick or rock, before entering the nest.

If you know their rules, you can exploit it to your advantage

Preparation - Conditions

- *What effect the conditions have*
  - Wind direction and strength
  - Early morning and late afternoon – Golden light
  - Tides – What works best for each location
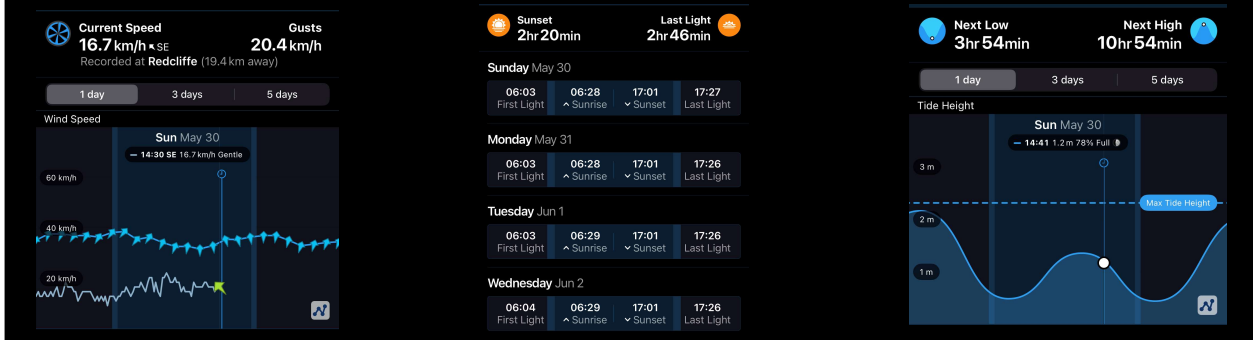
E.g. 1. It's late January and the terns are returning the beach after breeding; they have chicks that need to be fed regularly and I want to get a few images of them feeding the young.

I get to the beach 6am in the morning, at high tide with westerly wind and no Terns! Why?

1. Best tide for the Terns are after high tide, sand banks are staring to form, this allows the Terns to be more in the open where they can see danger approaching from a distance.

2. I am on the eastern side of the island and with a westerly wind in the morning, the birds will keep on flying away form me, I want them to fly parallel to me or towards me.

Ealy morning about an hour or two after high tide, with an easterly wind all the way to north, northwest would be better.

E.g. 2. I want to have a crack at the Pelicans flying in for the evening to roost at Donnybrook.

1. This time I need the tide to come in, high tide around or just after sunset. This forces the Pelicans to leave their relative haven in the middle of the passage and fly towards to shore.

2. A westerly to northerly wind is perfect.

Coastal wading birds shape their lives around the tides, different species respond differently to high and low tides. Many birds rely on the shallow water of the intertidal zone for foraging, but this habitat appears and disappears as the tide ebbs and flows.

The first 2-3 hours of the day is the very best, the sun is low on the horizon, making for soft golden light and the birds are hungry after a long and sometimes cold night, they will be very active, the second-best time is the last 2-3 hours of the day, again the light is soft and golden, birds are returning to their roosting spots and often a good time for a bath. Midday sun does not make for good photography, harsh light and dull colours, and the birds are less active.

Tides, time of day, wind direction and speed are import, tides wash up food for many species, from plant material for various species to dead fish for kites and other scavengers. Different birds require different situations, if you know their behavior you can set yourselves up for success.

Preparation
- To Camo or not to Camo

- *Clothes*
  - *Dull colours*
  - *Right shoes for the job*
  - *Camo – Hide/Car*

A few items we tend to neglect is the clothes we wear.
1. No, we don't need to wear camouflage clothing, I prefer a pair of khaki pants or jeans and a dull colour shirt, light green or brown. Long sleeves if you don't want insect bites all over your arms and legs. There are situations where camouflage would be to your benefit, some birds are skittish and being invisible will increase your chances of success.
2. Shoes are one of the items that can make life very difficult or very easy for you. Decent walking shoes for when you walk in the forests or open fields. Watertight shoes works very well for the beach, no wet feet or socks. When you get back to the car, take them off, put them inside your plastic box and you can get back to the flip flops for the trip home without having to vacuum your car every time you have been to the beach.

Preparation
- The forgotten items

Other

Bug spray

Seating – Chair & Yoga matt

1. A bit later we will discuss our field techniques in more details, and part of our technique is to get lower to the ground, the easiest way to that is to physically lie down is sit down.
2. A yoga matt is a very easy way of getting low, it's light, easy to carry and protect you against sharp rocks and wet sand
3. I make use of a small chair as well, it's light, easy to carry and for beach work it's perfect. An inexpensive way of keeping your self dry on wet sand, also works great if you just want to have a few minutes rest

Support systems

- *Support*
  - Tripod/Monopod
  - Beanbag
  - Ground Pod
  - Car support

Never underestimate the importance of camera/lens support. Specially for long lenses
Tripods or monopods for when you are walking.
Don't forget to use your car as a mobile blind or hide. You will get closer to a bird using
your car than you would by approaching it on foot.
A ground pod, bought or self made is one of my favorite methods for getting low with
shore birds

Topics

- *Bird photography / Nature photography & Ethics*
- *Preparation*
  - *Resources - Websites*
  - *Research - People*
  - *Find - Places*
  - *Learn - Subject knowledge*
  - *Conditions – What effect they have*
  - *To camo or not to camo – Clothing*
  - *The forgotten items - seating*
  - *Support systems*

- *Equipment*
  - *Cameras*
  - *Lenses*
- *Settings*
  - *Set & Forget settings*
  - *Situational settings*
- *In the field techniques*
- *Back home*
  - *Workflow*
- *Competitive photography, Club & Salon*
- *Questions*

- Now that we are inspired to go out and have done our homework on where and when and what, we need some equipment, after all photography is nothing without a camera and a lens.
- Let's have a look at equipment and the importance of it

Equipment

- *Cameras*
  - *The make and model that you are comfortable with*

Cameras! You need the most recent, most expensive camera, with all the bells and whistles and every time a new model is released, your camera will stop to function and can never take a decent photo again. Correct?

That is incorrect. More important than the latest camera technology is knowing your camera.

What do I mean by that?

Simple, what is your camera's strong and weak points?

Do you know what is the maximum ISO you are willing to shoot at?

Have you tested your cameras focus system for different scenarios, what works best when, what focus mode for static vs moving subjects?

How quickly can you change settings, SS, f-stop, ISO, exposure compensation, focus mode? You need to be able to operate your camera blindfolded.

The most important thing is to use the equipment that you are comfortable with, there are no real big differences in image quality between different brands, choose the system you feel comfortable with

Equipment

- ***Lenses***
  - *70-200mm f2.8/f4.0*
  - *80-400mm, 100-400mm*
  - *XXmm – 600mm f5-6.3 (Tamron/Sigma)*
  - *100-500mm, 200-500mm f5.6, 200-600mm f6.3*
  - *600, 800mm f11*
  - *300mm f2.8, 400mm f2.8, 200-400 f4*
  - *500mm f5.6, 500mm f4*
  - *600mm f4, 800mm f5.6, 6.3*

Lenses, You cannot take a decent photo without a long expensive prime lens, right?
Not true, as with cameras it's more important to know the limitations of your lens, test your lens for sharpness and focus speed, check if your camera lens combination is front or back focusing.

Lenses with a focal length < 200mm is very difficult to get full framed images of birds, it's not impossible, you just need to work harder, be more patient and use a different technique, visit the zoo or bird parks, it's still nature.

300+ mm is more known for bird photography and there are multiple methods of getting there

200mm + 1.4 =280mm,on DX body 420mm equivalent, or 2x convertor = 400mm on DX body 600mm equivalent, yes you sacrifice light and quality. There is unfortunately always a tradeoff.

80 or 100-400mm are great for a start, light and easy to use and a very good inexpensive starting point

Tamron and Sigma make very good zooms, the up to 600mm zooms are good enough for most people and relatively inexpensive.

The OEM's do make great zoom, Nikon 200-500, Sony 200-600, Canons 100-500 RF are very good

The more exotic lenses like the 300, 400, 500, 600 and 800 primes are just that, a prime lens made for a specific task, and you pay a premium for it. They are aimed more at the

professional marked and if you can get a second hand one at a decent price. It's worth every $.
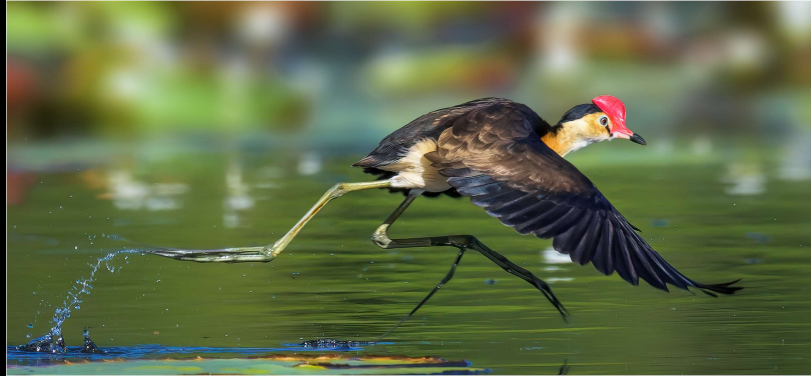
Equipment
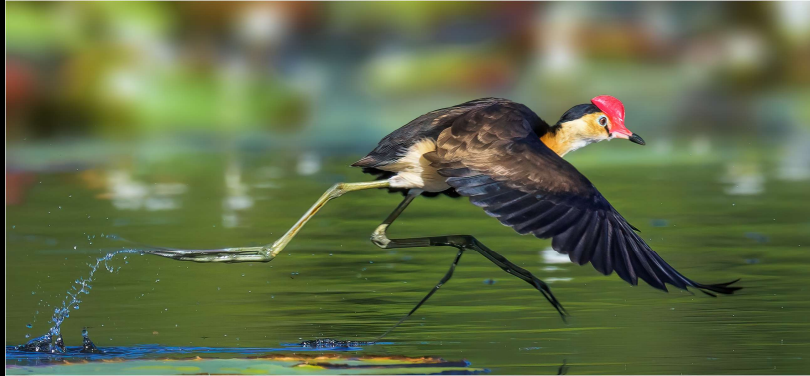
What difference does a camera and lens make?
The following images was taken late 2021 in NQ, any guess as to the camera/lens combination
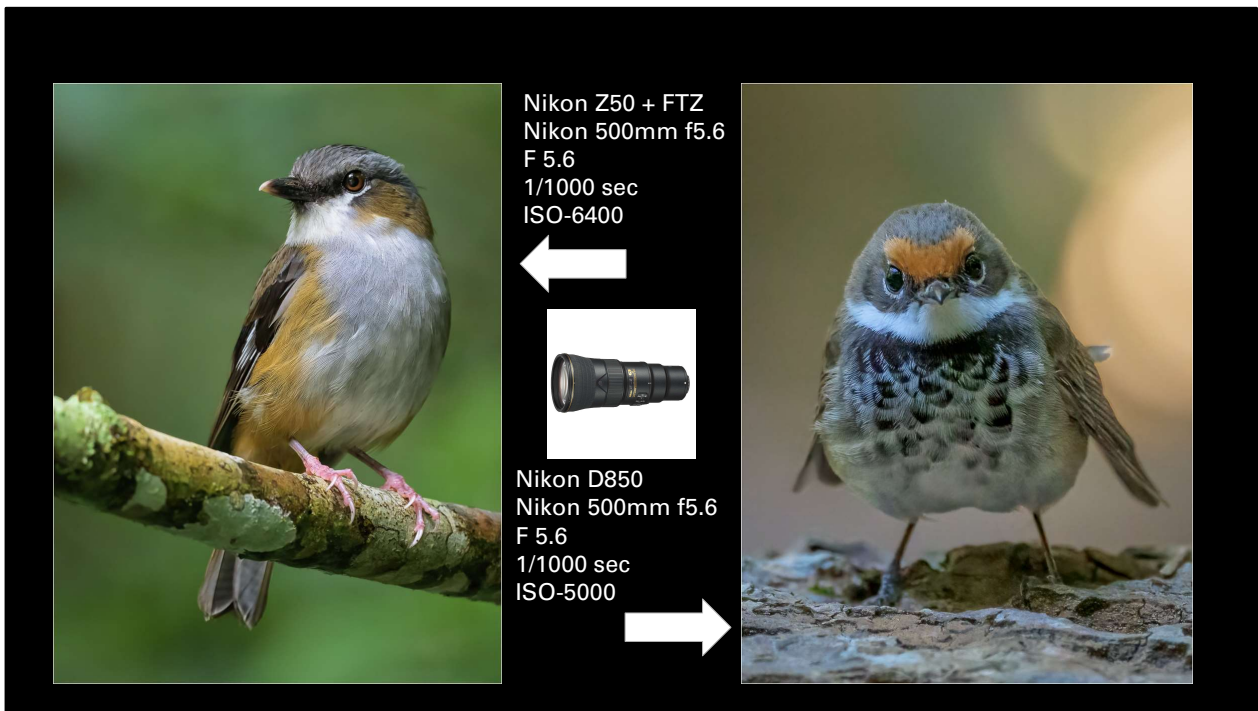Keep in mind I only shoot Nikon

Nikon Z50 + FTZ
Nikon 600mm f4
F 7.1
1/3200 sec
ISO-640

Z50 is a mirrorless entry level DX camera, body only cost around $1000
600mm f4. $16000

Any guesses?

Nikon Z50 + FTZ
Nikon 500mm f5.6
F 5.6
1/1000 sec
ISO-6400

Nikon D850
Nikon 500mm f5.6
F 5.6
1/1000 sec
ISO-5000

Same lens for both images
Entry level DX body
High end FX body

Any guesses?

Nikon D500
Nikon 200-500mm f5.6
F 11
1/2000 sec
ISO-3200

These days you can get a second hand D500 for < $2000
The Nikon 200-500 < $2000

Equipment

A Good lens is an investment.

A camera body, is a consumable

My philosophy has always been.
A good lens is an investment, A camera body is a consumable.
Rather invest in good glass, if you look after it, it will last you a very long time.

Yes, it is true that the latest camera technology makes things easier, the new generation of mirrorless cameras have >90% viewfinder coverage, eye-af, subject tracking, lenses and bodies are becoming smaller and lighter. But all that tech won't help if you don't know how to use it. A good technique with and older less advanced system will result in better images than the latest tech with poor technique, and remember the more you practice, the luckier you get.

Topics

- *Bird photography /Nature photography & Ethics*
- *Preparation*
  - *Resources - Websites*
  - *Research - People*
  - *Find - Places*
  - *Learn - Subject knowledge*
  - *Conditions – What effect they have*
  - *To camo or not to camo – Clothing*
  - *The forgotten items - seating*
  - *Support systems*

- *Equipment*
  - *Cameras*
  - *Lenses*
- *Settings*
  - *Set & Forget settings*
  - *Situational settings*
- *In the field techniques*
- *Back home*
  - *Workflow*
- *Competitive photography, Club & Salon*
- *Questions*

Camera settings
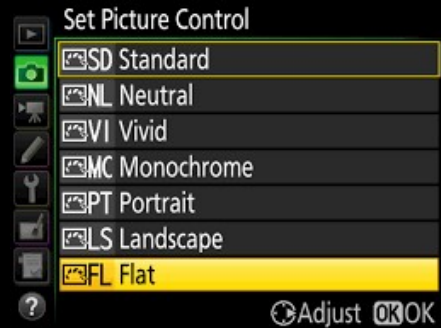Set and forget settings
Situational settings

It doesn't matter if you use aperture priority, shutter priority, full manual or manual ss and f-stop with auto iso like I prefer to use. There is no one size fits all, as long as you are comfortably with the settings and know how to use it. Stick with it.

The following are my settings, and the way that I setup my camera for how I take my photos. It's not the only way, there are many different ways and as with equipment, use the settings that works for you.

Settings

- **Set & Forget**
  - RAW – Uncompressed
  - Highest bitrate possible 10,12,14
  - White balance auto
  - Picture control – Flat/Standard/Neutral
  - Colour space – sRGB
  - File number sequence – on
  - Peak highlights
  - AF-C
  - FN buttons

Set Picture Control
- SD Standard
- NL Neutral
- VI Vivid
- MC Monochrome
- PT Portrait
- LS Landscape
- FL Flat

Adjust OK OK

AdobeRGB	sRGB
PROS	PROS
WIDER RANGE OF COLORS	SIMPLIFIED WORKFLOW
MORE VIBRANT AND ACCURATE COLORS FOR PRINTS	DISPLAYS CORRECTLY FOR WEB
CAN BE CONVERTED TO sRGB	SUITABLE FOR PRINTS
CONS	CONS
COMPLICATES WORKFLOW	CANNOT BE CONVERTED TO AdobeRGB
WILL NOT DISPLAY CORRECTLY FOR WEB WITHOUT CONVERSION	NARROWER RANGE OF COLORS

How I set my equipment up.

Why do I shoot in a "Flat profile"
Have you ever taken a photo, then look at the back of your camera and wonder…. Why does it look different to what I see with the naked eye, colours looks different, the contrast is high and in general, not what I saw with the naked eye.
The simple answer is that your eyes perceive contrast and colour saturation different from the camera sensor. The camera display a jpg image according to the profile you have selected in your camera. If you have selected vivid, it will display vivid, of you selected landscape, it will display the profile settings as it was programmed by the manufacturer to fit landscapes.

I found that if I select the "Flat" profile for Nikon users or the "Normal/Neutral/Standard" profile for Canon/Sony shooters, I get a more realistic preview. In the end if you shoot RAW, it doesn't matter, all the information is still available and when you get to LR/PS your colours, contrast, saturation etc. are still there.

I just prefer the flat profile as a starting point, and I will decide the amount of contrast, saturation etc. in post.

colour space – sRGB, why?
There is always a compromise, sometimes you must sacrifice something to make life easier for yourself.
I prefer to sacrifice the colour space, sRGB instead of AdobeRGB. The pros of sRGB outweighs the Cons for me when using sRGB.

Apart from colour space, I use the best quality the camera can offer, remember that when you shoot in RAW, profiles, white balance and other settings make no real difference, it can be adjusted in post processing
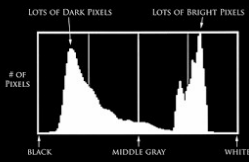
File number – on, easy to find images in lightroom

Peak highlights – after a burst, have a quick look at the basics, focus, exposure & burned-out highlights and I correct if required

AF-C in Nikon & Sony, AF-Servo for Canon

Make use of FN/function buttons to perform a certain task for you, different focus modes, etc

Settings

- *Situational settings*
  - Auto ISO (64/100 – max you are comfortable with)
  - Manual f-stop (f4 – f11)
  - Manual SS (focal length * 1.5) (e.g. 600mm lens * 1.5 = 900 SS = 1/1000 minimum) Normally 1/2000 to 1/4000
  - Exposure mode
  - Exposure compensation
  - Focus points
  - Back button focus
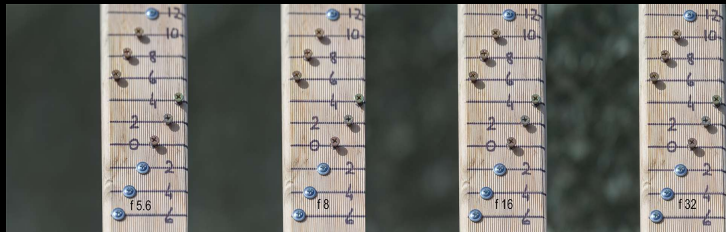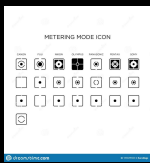
It's not possible to use a high SS all the time, in bad light such as a forest, settings will change. I will then use the lowest f-stop I can, increase my SS till my iso is at a level I am comfortable with the noise. It might be f-4, 1/250s iso-10,000
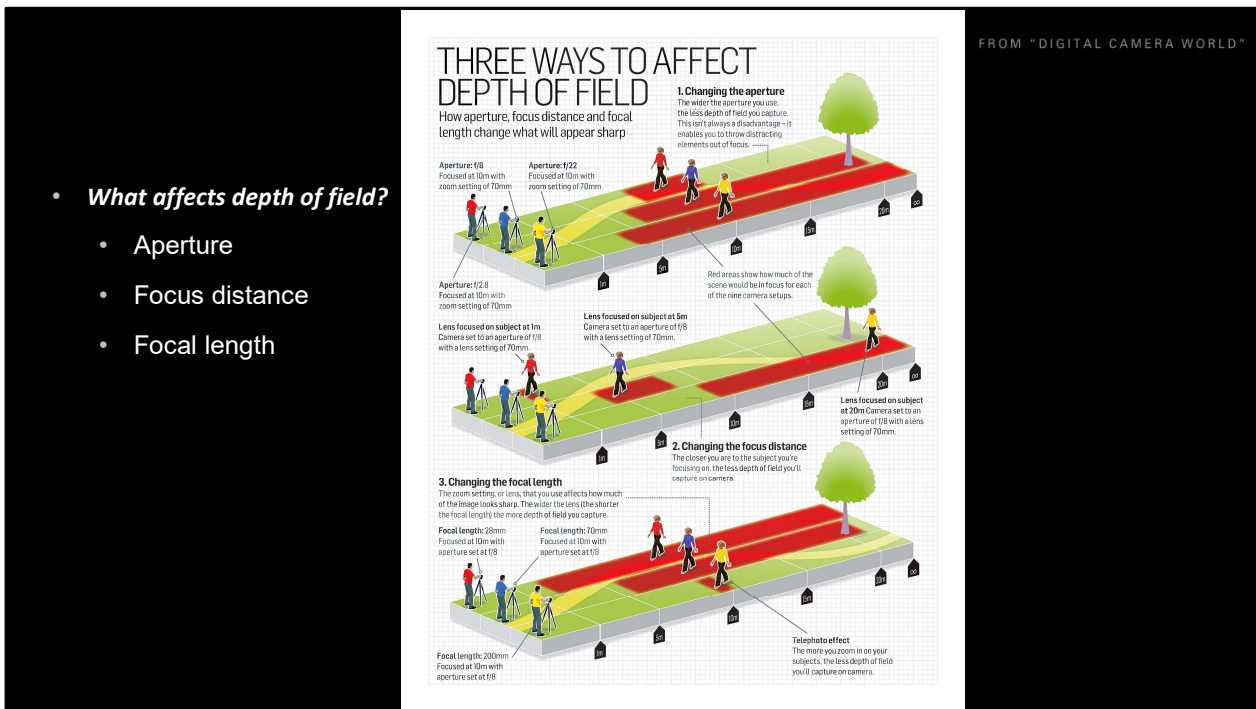
To often I hear experts or professionals using the phrase "I always shoot wide open". In other words, f2.8, f4, f5.6 wide open for the lens the person is using
Comments like this send shivers down my spine, 2 things come to mind immediately.

1. **The person making these comments don't understand what effects DOF.**

There are 3 ways to affect depth of field
- Changing the aperture.
   Subject is 10m away from camera, lens is set @70mm
   F-stops 2.8, 8, 22
- Changing the focus distance
  Lens @70mm, f-stop @f8
  Subject distance changed 1m, 5m, 20m
- Changing the focal length
 Subject @10m, f-stop @f8
  Lens @28mm, 70mm, 200mm

2. **Not all f's are equally sharp.**
- When using a zoom lens with a variable aperture these lenses are not always 100% sharp wide open. It's a commonly known fact and multiple articles have been publish

around this phenomenon. I have tested various lenses and it's not limited to the 3rd party lenses but also happens with the OEM lenses.

Test you lens and camera combination, run through your f-stops from wide open to f16 and find your lenses "Sweet spot"

DOF is one of the most misunderstood concepts in photography. Experiment with depth of field at home, change the subject to camera distance, change the f-stop, experiment and know when to use what f-stop. There is no GOLDEN f-stop. Different situations require different f-stop
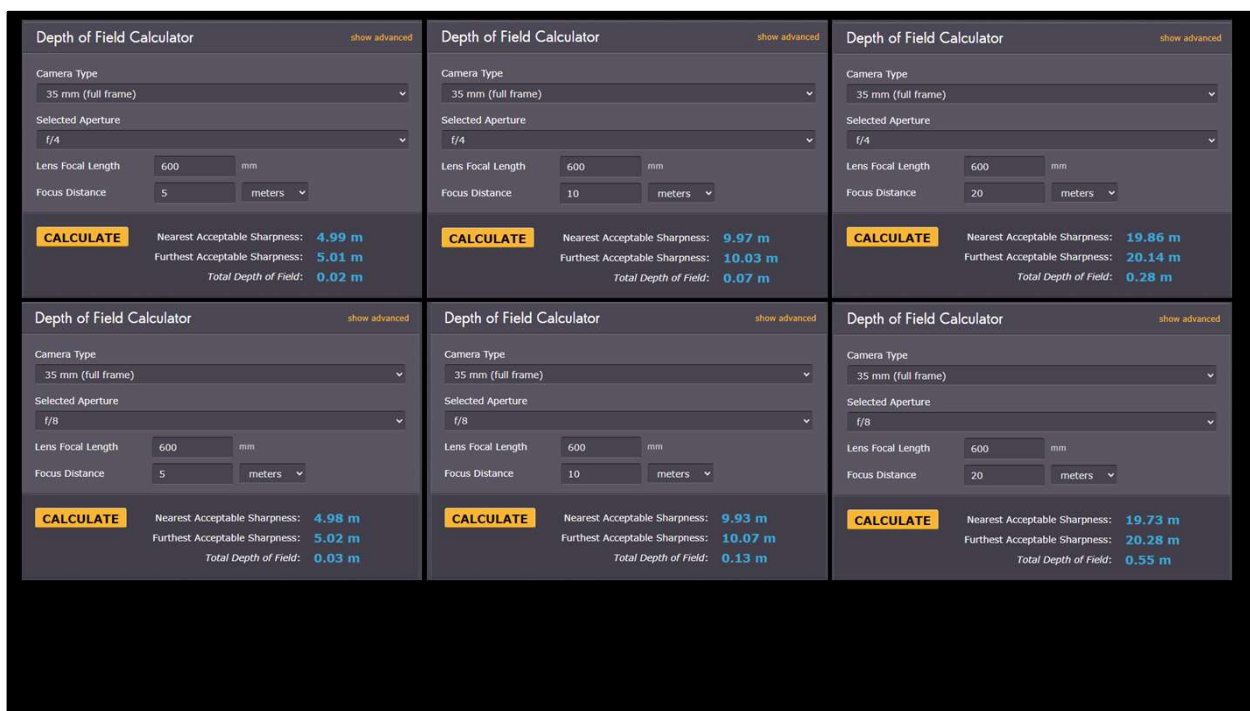
I said in the beginning, don't believe everything you hear or read, do your own research, do your own testing at home.

It's as easy as taking the cereal box, put it at a 45° angle 5 meters away from you. Put your camera on a tripod, use single point AF, switch off your vibration system, focus on a repeatable spot on the box and take the photo wide open, repeat at various f-stops and distances. Have a look on your PC, not the back of your camera at 100% magnification. The effect of subject distance will be obvious within the first few images. Sharpness at different f-stops will also be very clear.

Now I am not saying do not shoot wide open, but know when to shoot wide open, know the limitation of your lens before you shoot wide open.

When you are back home tonight or tomorrow, go online and Google "DOF calculator". Put a few values in the calculator and you will be surprised at how shallow F4 or even f8 is at 5m on a 600mm lens. The 1cm difference in DOF between f4 & f8 at 5m will have almost zero effect on your background, but it would make a world of difference if your camera focused on the bird's wing instead of the head or eye.

Yes, At distances greater than 20m, I do shoot wide open, I have tested my lenses multiple times, I did micro adjustments over and over till I am 100% happy that my camera and lens

combination works well together, and I get repeatable results over and over again.

Topics

- *Bird photography /Nature photography & Ethics*
- *Preparation*
  - *Resources - Websites*
  - *Research - People*
  - *Find - Places*
  - *Learn - Subject knowledge*
  - *Conditions – What effect they have*
  - *To camo or not to camo – Clothing*
  - *The forgotten items - seating*
  - *Support systems*

- *Equipment*
  - *Cameras*
  - *Lenses*
- *Settings*
  - *Set & Forget settings*
  - *Situational settings*
- ***In the field techniques***
- *Back home*
  - *Workflow*
- *Competitive photography, Club & Salon*
- *Questions*

Techniques that I use

Techniques

- *In the field*
  - *Stalking*
  - *Casual hike*
  - *Ambush (Hide and Seek)*
  - *Go to where the bird is going*

1. Stalk the subject – not very effective, bird will fly away when you get into their personal space. Rather use your vehicle as a mobile hide, when possible.
2. Casual hike – similar to stalking. With patients and luck, it can be effective, a wide range of birds can be found and once you have a target, use the ambush method.
3. Ambush method – Setup in a spot where you know there are birds, wait for them to come to you. Can take a very long time for the birds to get close enough and some birds won't approach at all
4. Go to where the bird is going – Keep an eye on the bird, look in what direction they are moving, if for instance they are wading along the beach from South to North, walk around them to the North about 20-30m to their position, find a spot, sit and wait, most probably they will keep on feeding and as soon as they get close, they will just go around at the distance they are comfortable at and keep going.
5. The key is to try and be as inconspicuous as possible, the smaller and less visible you are the better, soft sounds and small slow movements.
6. Most effective method is a combination. Take a walk on the beach and when you spot a bird or flock of birds, walk at a steady slow speed, don't walk directly at them, walk as if you are going to walk pass them, take your time. Keep an eye on them and if you see them becoming restless, stop and keep still. Once they calm down, move slowly forward. Rather stop and sit down at a comfortable distance to them and slowly work your way closer. If you are lucky enough to find a tidal pool, keep the pool between

yourself and the birds, sooner or later they will start moving closer to you, feeding birds will move up and down an area or all around the edges of the tidal pool and before you know, a 200mm is enough to get a shot. The key is patients, keep still and don't worry about other people walking past at a distance, sometimes they will scare birds from further down the beach and they just might come and land right Infront of you.

Techniques

Remember the

1 : 2+

Ratio

Ever wondered how some photos have that nice smooth out of focus backgrounds?
No PS tricks, not taken at f2.8 or f4
The 1: 2+ ratio
The distance from your subject to the background should be 2x or more than the distance from your camera to the subject
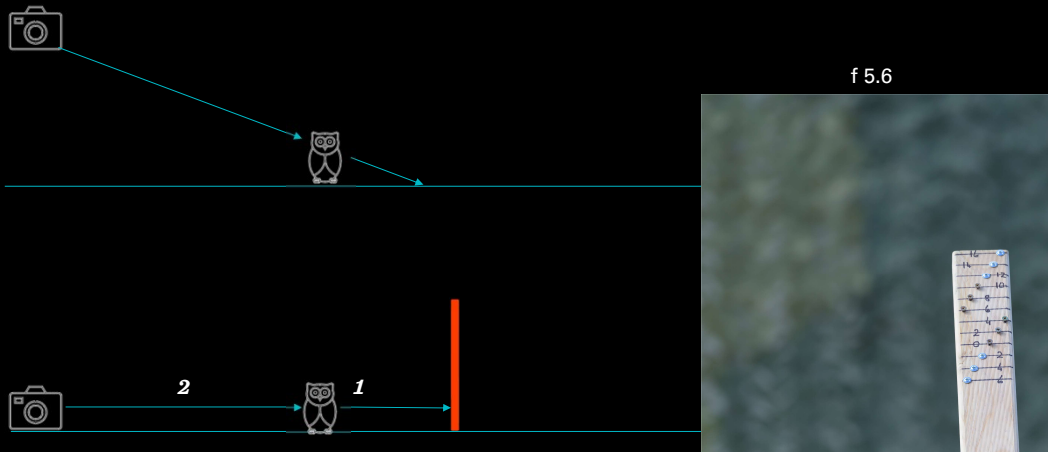E.g. Bird is 5m from the camera, try and get the background 10m away.
Easier said than done.
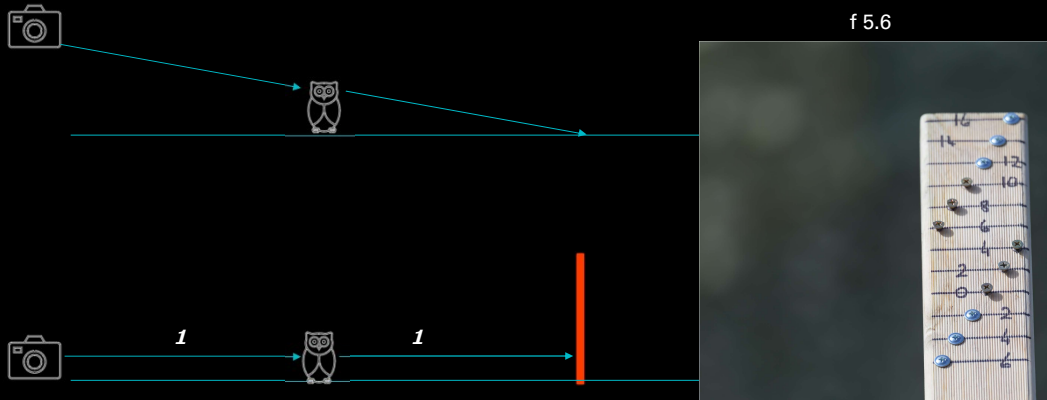There is a simple effective way of doing it

If we stand and take a photo of a bird on the ground, we are effectively creating the reverse of the 1:2 ratio.

The subject is very close to the background and apart from not being able to isolate the subject, you tend to look down on the bird, the eyes will be hidden from view, and it makes for a not so good look as it creates the illusion of you dominating your subject
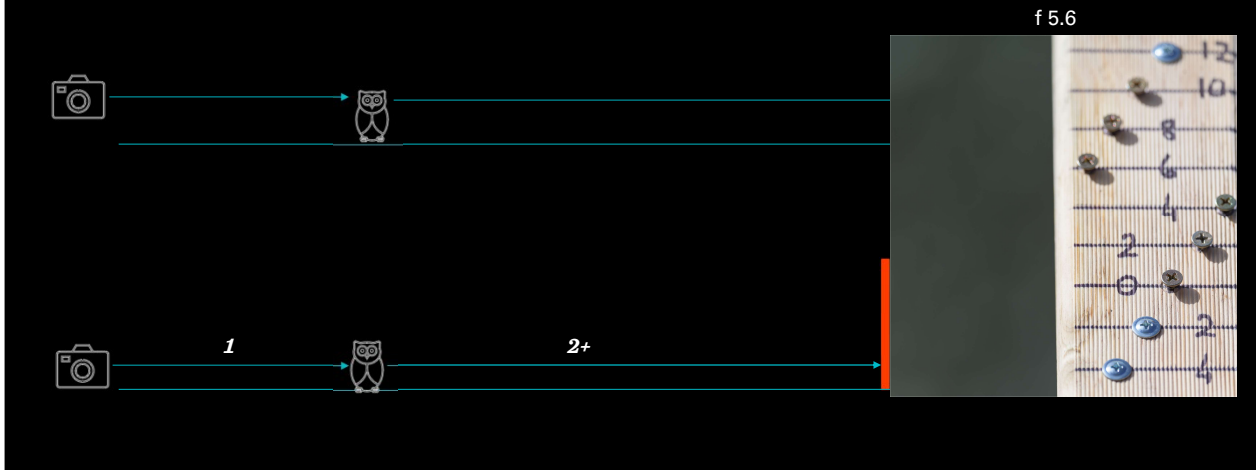
Going down on your knees or having a seat is better, you are separating the subject more

By using a ground pod or laying flat the horizon becomes your background, and you get to eye level with your subject.

Techniques

- Create the correct angle

ISO 100
F/6.3
1/2000
600mm

ISO 180
f/7.1
1/2000
500mm

Example of the difference in sitting vs using a ground pod on the beach,
left sitting, right using a ground pod, no PS
Getting eye level is not always possible, and eagle flying overhead is very difficult to get to
eye level. Same for photographing a bird from a hide when it's perched on a stick that is
lower than your position.

Techniques

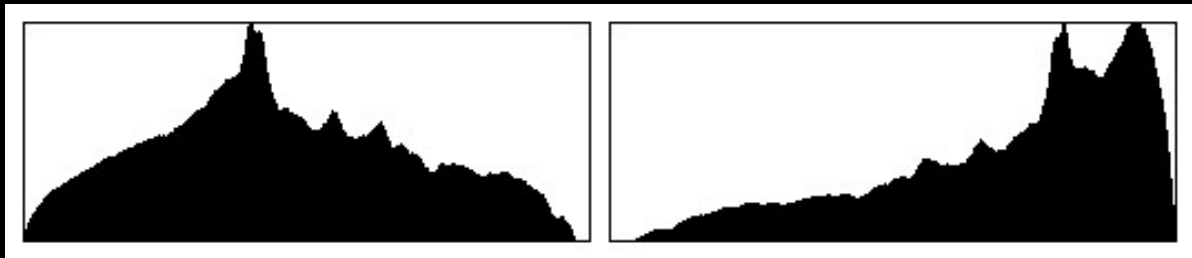- Create the correct angle, why?

There is another reason for getting to eye level with your subject.
1. If our subject is lower than the camera, it creates a distortion effect and the head to body ratio just look odd. It also creates a mental effect where we overpower or dominate the subject, especially small birds. You tend to lose the highlight in the eye of the bird and strange shadows are sometimes created.
2. Looking up to the sky creates the effect of dominance by the subject toward the photographer, personally I will only take images of birds of prey above the eye line, BOP are a dominant species and having a bigger bird higher than eye level gives it that dominant feel.
3. It doesn't mean you should never take an image of a bird overhead or down below, just be careful how you use it

Exposing to the right simply means increasing exposure so that the histogram is closer to the right-hand side of the graph. The increase in exposure means that more light, or signal, hits the camera's sensor during the exposure, reducing the noise levels in the image.

Ideally you want to get the histogram as close to the right as possible, but without clipping any highlights.

We expose to the right simply to limit the amount of noise in the darker parts of the image. Noise, hides in the darkness and by exposing to the right, we try to limit the noise levels

Topics

- *Bird photography /Nature photography & Ethics*
- *Preparation*
  - *Resources - Websites*
  - *Research - People*
  - *Find - Places*
  - *Learn - Subject knowledge*
  - *Conditions – What effect they have*
  - *To camo or not to camo – Clothing*
  - *The forgotten items - seating*
  - *Support systems*

- *Equipment*
  - *Cameras*
  - *Lenses*
- *Settings*
  - *Set & Forget settings*
  - *Situational settings*
- *In the field techniques*
- *Back home*
  - *Workflow*
- *Competitive photography, Club & Salon*
- *Questions*

Let's head to the PC and have a look at my workflow

Back home

- Post processing workflow

Let's see how we go from this RAW image to the final jpg ready for judging

Back home

- *Workflow*
  - Download
  - Initial check – **"If in doubt, keep it!"**
    - Breeze Browser/Fast Raw viewer
    - Adobe Bridge
  - Import into LR
    - LR Import settings
  - Second check – **"If in doubt, DELETE it!"**
  - Initial LR Edits
    - Add to quick collection
    - Rename image – keep original number
    - Lens Correction
    - Enable Profile correction
    - Basic sharpening
    - Basic noise reduction
    - Basic adjustments
    - Crop
  - Open & edit in PS
    - Topaz Denoise AI
    - Topaz Sharpen AI
    - Colour Efex Pro
    - Colour
    - Levels
    - Frame
    - Save & Return to LR
  - Make use brushes
    - Eyes
    - Enhance certain detail
    - Dull unwanted spots
  - Contrast via curves
  - Vignette
  - Export

1. Download card to PC
2. Philosophy during initial image checks
3. Import settings for LR
4. Philosophy during 2nd image checks
5. Initial LR edits
6. PS edits + additional software used
7. Back in LR make use of other tools
8. Final adjustments
9. Export

Topics

- *Bird photography /Nature photography & Ethics*
- *Preparation*
    - *Resources - Websites*
    - *Research - People*
    - *Find - Places*
    - *Learn - Subject knowledge*
    - *Conditions – What effect they have*
    - *To camo or not to camo – Clothing*
    - *The forgotten items - seating*
    - *Support systems*

- *Equipment*
    - *Cameras*
    - *Lenses*
- *Settings*
    - *Set & Forget settings*
    - *Situational settings*
- *In the field techniques*
- *Back home*
    - *Workflow*
- **Competitive photography, Club & Salon**
- *Questions*

Competition photography
The why!

Why competitive photography?

- ***Club vs Salon***

  - Why do I take part in club photography?
  - Why do I enter national and international competitions?

Why competitive?

Taking photos is only one part of the photography equation, sharing your images with others are just as important and you can choose to either share on social media or create a story book to tell a story. That's perfectly fine, I choose to share at a club within a competition. When you take part in a competition, you get the opportunity to share with others and you get to measure your work against other photographers. You get feedback from experienced photographers/judges, and you get the opportunity to teach others something, even if you don't realize it. In club photography, the award and feedback is the opinion of one judge, and as we know, opinions differ between judges.

Why national and international salons/competitions?

A club is a relatively small community, you compete against 10-50 other people and have to opinion of just one judge, once you enter a national competition you compete against the whole country, potentially 100's of other photographers and normally 3 judges per section. Internationally the number can end up in a few 100 from all corners of the world. Even though you don't get verbal feedback on your image from Salons, you get a score out of 15 or 45 and you can have a look at the accepted images for the salons and gauge your images against the best in the world over a period. If you enter a salon circuit, you get an even bigger audience and the opinion of multiple international judges.

It's also an opportunity to learn from others, you don't have to replicate their work, get inspiration from other photographers and your photography will improve when you

compete in national and international competitions

Remember the

80-6

Rule

I have used a lot of rules and guides and ratios, it can be difficult to remember.
So even if you don't remember any of it, remember just this one rule, the most import rule in photography

The 80-6 rule.

80% of the success of your image, is the 6 inches behind the viewfinder.

No matter what equipment you are using, no matter how you approach your photography, no matter what you photograph and if you take part in competition or just do it for social media.

The best tool you have with you is you yourself, read articles, watch videos, ask your fellow photographers, experiment at home and practice, practice, practice

Questions?

Thank you

Stephan Labuschagne APSSA, AFIAP, MAPS
Martie Labuschagne AFIAP, FAPS

Copyright
Stephan Labuschagne APSSA, AFIAP, MAPS
Martie Labuschagne AFIAP, FAPS