



PHOTO MASTERCLASS PART 17

BIRD BEHAVIOUR



Watching the birdie is not as simple as it sounds. Solid fieldcraft, endless patience, lightning-fast reflexes and a deep understanding of your subjects' lifestyles and habits are vital if you want to capture inspiring images of bird behaviour.

WITH WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER MARK CARWARDINE

WE SEE BIRDS every day, yet they can be surprisingly tricky to photograph. The smaller ones appear tiny, even through a telephoto lens, and few of them stop moving for more than a millisecond. So perhaps it's no surprise that, for many years, most bird photography was rather lacklustre. Mundane, unimaginatively composed, illustrative portraits were the norm until the early 1980s.

But the bar has been raised and the challenge now is to provide an intimate glimpse into our birds' action-packed private lives. Images of them singing, yawning, fighting, preening, stretching, swimming or even staring at their toes (as gulls often do) are far more interesting than pictures of birds doing nothing much at all.

All the usual photographic 'rules' apply: focus on

the eye, keep the background simple, and think about composition and light, for example – pictures of bird behaviour must have aesthetic appeal as well as interest value. But the most important ingredient is drama. This usually happens very quickly and is easy to miss. Experience, anticipation and quick reflexes can make the most of such unpredictability, but there is no time to be surprised or spellbound. Quite simply, you have to focus on the picture-taking and enjoy the experience later.

So this month we'll be looking at how to capture that 'decisive moment' – the term coined by pioneering lensman Henri Cartier-Bresson to define the serendipitous instant when a photographer captures a whole world, an entire event, in a single click of the shutter.

▲ In a clown-like pose, a gentoo penguin in the Falkland Islands scratches its head with its foot. By capturing such a comical moment, Kevin Schafer's photo draws the attention far more than a classic portrait. It's the sort of image that you have to look at twice.

MEET THE EXPERT...

Every issue, our world famous photographers share their knowledge and skills.

KEVIN SCHAFER USA

Award-winning photographer and author of *Penguin Planet*, Seattle-based Kevin Schafer is a founding Fellow of the International League of Conservation Photographers.



Kevin Schafer is highly respected for his photos – and for his strict code of ethics. “Any power a photograph possesses is directly tied to the belief that it represents a real event,” he insists. “Take that away and all you have left is an illustration, a digital trick.”

Unfortunately, these days, it is all too easy to resort to trickery. “Trust is particularly important when photographing bird behaviour,” Kevin emphasises. “You have to represent a true moment in time.” And this inevitably means longer hours in the field. “People sometimes think wildlife photographers are inherently patient,” Kevin laughs. “But I think it’s just that we’re willing to put up with more discomfort, frustration and boredom than the average person. It’s not the same thing at all.”

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Capturing bird behaviour often requires long periods of waiting for just the right shot. “I once spent four hours on a beach in the Falkland Islands,” Kevin recalls. “I was lying on my belly, with the wind blowing sand into my eyes and camera, and flies landing on my head, hoping a penguin would stop in the right spot and do something interesting. Most of the penguins emerging from the sea stood in the wrong place, turned their backs or wandered off. But one stopped and lifted his foot to scratch his head. That was the shot I’d waited for.”

The patience to wait for that ‘decisive moment’ is crucial. But practice is equally important. “Get out there and search for unusual perspectives, subtle compositions and beautiful light,” says Kevin. “The more pictures you take, the more you’ll learn to see.”

Kevin Schafer’s top tips for bird behaviour photography



A pair of wandering albatrosses on South Georgia in the throes of their courtship ballet.

1 Never walk past a picture

Kevin came across these wandering albatrosses moments after stepping ashore on Bird Island, South Georgia – in the rain. It would have been easy to leave his camera in the bag and assume he’d see dancing wanderers again. Fortunately, he stopped and took pictures. It was the only time he saw this behaviour in five days.



Two male puffins battle it out on a Scottish clifftop.

2 Keep an open mind

It’s important to be flexible. Kevin went to Staffa, off the west coast of Scotland, to photograph its distinctive basalt columns. But when he found a delightful colony of puffins, he changed his plans. These males were fighting so fiercely that both birds rolled off the cliff together, separating in mid-air just before hitting the water.

YOUR STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE...

Mark Carwardine shows you how to apply the theory to get the perfect picture.

1 ANTICIPATE THE ACTION



- » **Research the birds** you plan to photograph – it’s important to have some idea of what to expect before going into the field.
- » **Spend time observing your subjects** to understand their behaviour. This will help you to anticipate their actions. When a sleeping bird wakes, for example, it is likely to yawn and then stretch one wing after the other.
- » **Keep your eye glued to the viewfinder.** The defining moment may be a long time coming, but you can bet that the second you look away will be the instant the bird does something spectacular.

2 DON’T HESITATE



- » **Shoot first and ask questions afterwards.** If something unexpected happens, a moment’s hesitation is enough to miss the shot. One of the great advantages of digital is that you can fire away and delete all the near-misses later at no extra expense.
- » **Keep firing until the action has stopped.** There is usually a split-second when everything comes together, so the more pictures you take, the better your chances of capturing the perfect shot.
- » **Don’t worry about checking exposure** or the action will be over long before you have finished fiddling with your camera.

3 KEEP YOUR DISTANCE



- » **Don’t get too close** when photographing bird behaviour. There’s a good chance that your subject will suddenly move or open its wings, and then part of its body will be cut off by the edge of the frame.
- » **Leave room in the frame** to make it easier to follow the action. Framing too tightly makes it very hard to keep up and almost impossible to compose effectively.
- » **Be careful to focus on the bird’s eye** – or, at least, on its head. Without due care and attention, even the best autofocus can miss rapidly moving birds altogether.

4 SET YOURSELF A PROJECT



- » **Dedicate sufficient time** to a particular species or an individual bird. This is a much better way to hone your photographic skills than flitting from one potential subject to another.
- » **Photograph your subject in every possible aspect.** When taking pictures of feeding birds, for example, capture every step in the process: foraging, pecking, capturing, holding, squabbling and swallowing.
- » **Don’t despair** of your inevitable failures. Just remember that all you need is one or two outstanding shots to make it worthwhile.



ESSENTIAL KIT... BINOCULARS

Few serious wildlife photographers go into the field without a good pair of binoculars. You need these to locate potential subjects and learn to second-guess what's likely to happen next. Whooper swans, for example, bob their heads just before taking off, while penguins often stand and preen after emerging from the sea. Best of all, observing and understanding your subjects will heighten your enjoyment.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

- » **Size and weight** – heavy binoculars are tiring to carry and difficult to hold steady.
- » **Magnification** – you need sufficient magnification to see detail (that's the whole point of binoculars), but not too much to hold them steady (7x, 8x or 10x are best).
- » **Twilight value** – this is the light-gathering power of the binoculars. Anything with an object lens that is smaller than 30mm will be too dark.
- » **Field of view** – the wider the field of view, the greater the chance you have of picking up a bird quickly.

CHEAPER ALTERNATIVES:

- » **Spend what you can afford** – cheap bins may give an unclear image, strain your eyes and have a narrow field of view, but any binoculars are better than none at all.

DOS & DON'TS

- » **DO use a fast shutter speed** to freeze movement.
- » **DO look for potential subjects** in areas where the birds have become used to the presence of people.
- » **DO stay with a particular bird** or group of birds – the longer you do, the more you'll be in tune with their behaviour.
- » **DON'T lose concentration** – constant vigilance is crucial.
- » **DON'T switch off your camera** – it should always be on and set to the correct exposure for the light conditions, ready to fire at a moment's notice.

MASTERCLASS CHALLENGE UK...



Bird behaviour is easiest to photograph in your garden or local park. **David Tipling** explains how you can encourage interesting action and get some top shots.

Singing

Singing birds can be targeted in parks, gardens and at other sites where they're used to the presence of large numbers of people. Identify favoured song perches before waiting in position for your subject to perform. Early mornings soon after dawn are the best time. Think about the background – the less cluttered, the better.



Family life

Waterbirds offer great opportunities for capturing images of family life. Mallards, coots, moorhens and swans on stretches of water frequented by humans will probably allow close approach. Look for shots that show the bond between parent and young, such as nuzzling or passing food. Explore all the angles, shooting low where possible for added impact.



Feeding

Providing birds with food and water is a good way of capturing action. Birdfeeders act as meeting points that can spark off photogenic squabbles, particularly in species such as woodpeckers, starlings and finches. For natural looking shots of birds drinking, sink a dish into the lawn and disguise the rim with moss. Be ready to capture fleeting moments.



Nesting

Offer birds nesting material by placing sheep's wool, pieces of dried grass – or, for bigger birds such as pigeons and magpies, small sticks – on your lawn. If you don't have a garden of your own, try this in your local park. If you know a local population of house martins or swallows, create a muddy puddle – they may visit it to collect mud for their nests.



MASTERCLASS READER PHOTO OF THE MONTH

Now it's your turn. Use all our experts' hints and tips to take great photos of bird behaviour. Use David's ideas for inspiration, though you don't have to photograph the same subjects. Upload up to eight images on our website and the winning shot will be published in *BBC Wildlife*.

HOW TO ENTER

Log on to www.bbcwildlifemagazine.com and click on Photo Masterclass, then follow the instructions to upload your images. Closing date: Wed 6 June.

RULES 1) The contest is open to amateurs only. 2) Up to 8 entries per person. 3) Entry of a picture constitutes a grant to BBC Worldwide to publish it in all media. 4) Entries will be judged by *BBC Wildlife*. 5) The winning image will be published in the August issue. 6) No correspondence will be entered into and winners will not be notified. 7) Entries will not be accepted by post or email. 8) Image file names must include your full name.



'URBAN & GARDEN WILDLIFE' WINNER: SUE JARVIS

We chose Sue's shot because she has captured a charming moment in starling family life. The birds are clearly in an urban setting, and the diffused, clutter-free backdrop emphasises the detail of the youngsters' feathers and beautiful colours in the adult's plumage.