

## Travelling Light – Glenn Pure

My partner and I travelled to China as tourists earlier this year. Being my first overseas trip since buying a DSLR and my foray into bird photography, I naturally didn't want to miss any bird photo opportunities that might present themselves. But I also wanted to travel as light as possible.

First some context though. Most of our travel was to be on organised tours, none of them bird or nature photography specific. So any bird photos would be purely opportunistic. I also had doubts there would be much to photograph - a number of other people who had been to China commented to me on the lack of birdlife.



*Red-billed Leiothrix*

*Canon 700D, Canon 70-300mm IS USM; 1/160s, f9, ISO1600*

I've prepared this short piece in case my experience might be of some use to others who are also planning to 'travel light' especially now we've returned and I can report on what worked and what didn't.

The first part is about what I packed and why:

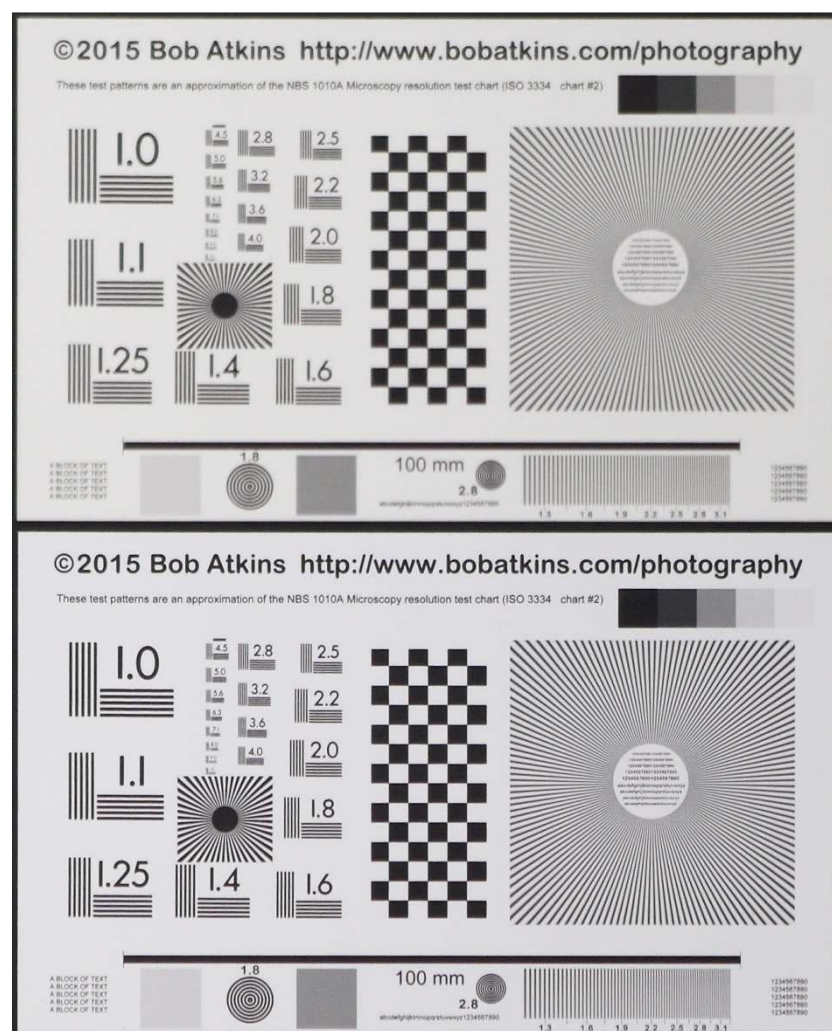
- Would I take my DSLR or obtain something more compact, like one of the high-end superzooms?
- If I did take the DSLR, would I include my 'bird lens' - Canon 100-400mm zoom - or opt for something else?
- Would I need or want a tripod or monopod?
- How would I store and backup my bird and other images?

I decided to take the DSLR and a few lenses instead of risking a new, untried camera. In the spirit of travelling light, I decided not to take a tripod or monopod. For image storage and backup, the best solution seemed to be a small notebook computer. That would also be useful, of course, to maintain email contact while we were away as most of our accommodation included WiFi.

After settling these details, the remaining issue was whether to take the 100-400mm zoom. I had doubts it would be a good idea. First it's a bit on the heavy side, weighing in at 1.6kg. Next, where would I pack it? I didn't really want to carry it in my hand luggage but also

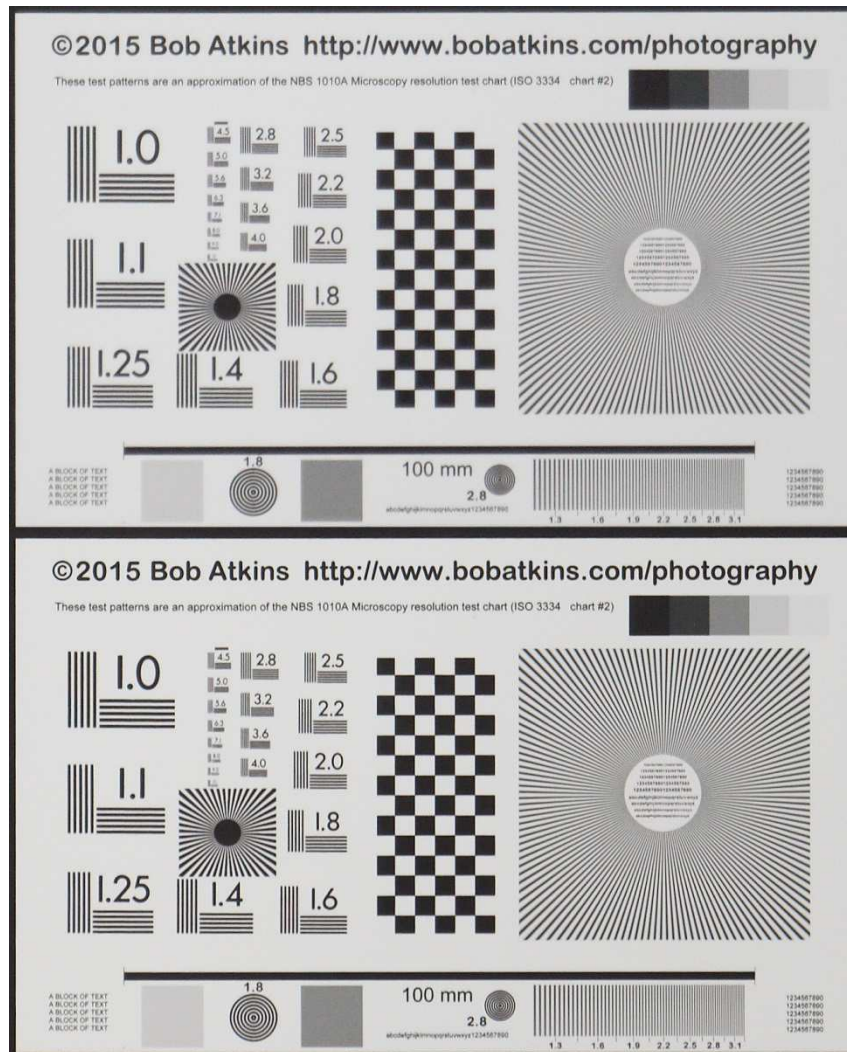
didn't want to risk it in the checked-in baggage. And finally, if I didn't take it, what would I use instead? In the end, I opted for something smaller and lighter, and that could be used if I needed a telephoto for other purposes as well. After looking around, I decided to buy a Canon EF 70-300mm IS USM. It's had pretty good reviews on its optical performance and it's small and light, weighing about 700 grams.

After the trip, I actually ran the 70-300 lens through some quick DIY optical tests and compared it with my 100-400mm. Consistent with the reviews I'd seen about this lens, the 70-300 did very well. The main problem with it was chromatic aberration at the periphery of the frame but that was unlikely to be an issue in most situations, and even if it was, it can be dealt with reasonably well in post-processing (using the Canon Digital Photo Professional software and applying the Digital Lens Optimiser). The other minus I found with it was the image stabiliser was noisy, but that was an annoyance rather than a real problem. I did buy it second hand at a good price on eBay so can't complain too much.



*Photograph of test pattern done with the EF 70-300mm lens at 300mm. Aperture was f5.6 (top panel) and f8 (bottom panel). These images are 1:1 crops from the centre of the frame. Post-processing involved Canon Digital Lens Optimiser at 50%, noise reduction turned off and sharpening in DPP set to 5 out of 10. The test image was taken using flash to minimise impact of camera shake (although some*

*is still apparent in the vertical plane as evidenced by poorer resolution of the horizontal lines in the test image).*



*Photograph of test pattern done with my Canon 100-400mm at 400mm. Aperture was f5.6 (top panel) and f8 (bottom panel). These images are 1:1 crops from the centre of the frame. Test conditions were the same as the 70-300mm lens – but I had to move further back to get the test image the same size in the frame.*

While this test showed the 70-300mm was a little softer and lacking contrast at f5.6, it was another matter at f8 where differences between it and my 100-400mm were harder to pick. The test results shown are for the centre of the frame. Results at the edge of the frame were worse for both lenses, as I'd expect, but broadly comparable for both (noting the worse chromatic aberration I saw on the 70-300mm mentioned earlier). Both lenses managed to resolve to about 4 lines per millimetre at f8. At the distance these targets were, the maximum the camera sensor could resolve is about 5 lines per millimetre, assuming each line registered as one pixel wide and the gap between each line was one pixel. I almost never photograph birds at full aperture and usually use f8 so it seems the 70-300mm lens was, in hindsight, a good choice.

Moving on to the question of what I would do differently next time ... By and large, the gear I took worked out well but a couple of other things would have come in handy. First, I could

have done with a better solution for carrying and quick access to the 70-300mm lens. While we were doing our touring, I had the camera out most of the time or in a small padded case with a shoulder strap where it was quickly accessible. For the telephoto lens though, I carried this in a lens bag in my backpack. It was a nuisance to access there and not quickly accessible if a bird 'moment' did arise.

One option would have been to use a lens bag that I could hitch to a belt. I did have another smaller wide angle lens on my belt like this and that worked well – but I think the 70-300mm would have been too big and heavy for that. I also considered a shoulder bag but didn't like the idea, even though I was carrying a Lowepro camera bag with me that could have taken the lens. I still haven't settled how to deal with this problem yet but a chest harness or vest could be a possibility.

There were things I regretted taking. The main item in this category was the Lowepro camera bag. It was just too bulky and cumbersome. I would have been better off leaving it at home.

The decision not to take a tripod wasn't a problem. I don't normally use one anyway and there would have been very few times, if any, where I would have had the time to set it up and use it. My experience with bird photography so far has been that bird movement is more of a problem than camera movement anyway – a tripod can't fix that. One less thing to carry in the backpack was something I have no regrets about either.



*Vinous-throated Parrotbill*

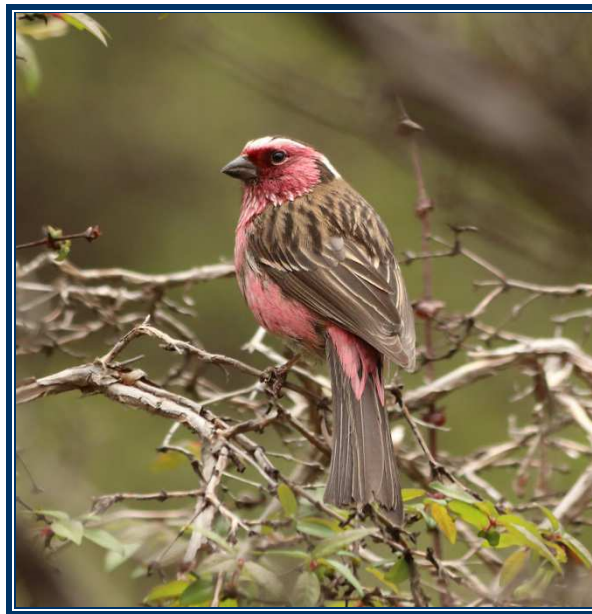
*Canon 700D, Canon 70-300mm IS USM; 1/80s, f9, ISO1600 -0.7EV*

The small notebook computer worked out well. I downloaded photos to it most days, then deleted them from the SD card in my camera. I wasn't comfortable about just having a single copy on the notebook so planned to also copy the images to a USB thumb drive. As we were having a few days in Hong Kong just before our main China tours, I thought that would be a good chance to get a suitable USB drive. It turns out I should have bought something before we left home as the one I bought in Hong Kong failed. I ended up purchasing another in China part way through our trip – luckily that one was reliable. Since



getting back, I've bought a 64GB Sandisk Extreme USB 3 thumb drive. It writes a lot faster than the other USB drives I have and will be something I definitely take next trip.

Last but not least, the bird experience. It was much better than I expected. This was partly because we spent some time out of the big cities (virtually all cities in China are big cities – the largest is Chongqing with over 30 million people). Most of the good bird sightings and photos were from Sichuan province in the west of China – primarily at two locations. One was the Huanglong Scenic Area and nearby Nine Villages Valley in north Sichuan province. The other was the panda 'zoo' near Chengdu, which many tourists visit (officially, it's a giant panda research facility). The latter has a large campus and extensive vegetation cover along with plenty of birdlife. Luck was on my side as well. We had a half-day at this location and while our tour group was finishing lunch, I spent 30 minutes on one of the main pathways in the 'zoo'. Among the trees and bamboo stands was a bush that had small ripe fruits that looked like miniature orange mulberries. This was a real hot-spot for birds. Most of the birds also didn't seem too worried by the tourists walking past nearby, or me standing a couple of metres away with my camera.



*White-browed Rosefinch*

*Canon 700D, Canon 70-300mm IS USM; 1/640s, f8, ISO800 -0.3EV*

Of course, there were many birds that eluded being photographed. Among them were a number of pheasants. I could only identify one, from a poor quality photo I managed to get - it was a male Lady Amherst Pheasant, which has a magnificently long tail. I saw this on a timbered mountainside at Dali in Yunnan province.

As well as the photos I've included with this article, which will give you some idea about how I went with the 70-300mm lens, I've also posted a wider selection of images to the Oriental Bird Club's online image database. The site administrator also helped identify a few of the birds I was having trouble with. You can see these photos here:

[http://orientalbirdimages.org/photographers.php?action=birdercontrib&Birder\\_ID=1590](http://orientalbirdimages.org/photographers.php?action=birdercontrib&Birder_ID=1590)