Custom Shooting Modes. U1 and U2: What Do I Use Them For?
– Rodney Appleby

Unlike the famous B1 and B2 that most people know about, the U1 and U2 settings (on a Nikon, or C1, C2 and C3 on a Canon) that sit on the mode section dial (the one on top with all the letters on it) of your DSLR camera have often been looked at by most people with the occasional passing thought, "I wonder what they do?". I have to admit that for many years I also wondered about this until I saw an article in one of the newsletters that I read and thought "Wow, how much easier would that make life".

Mode Selection dial of a Nikon D7200, showing U1 and U2 settings.

Let me set the scene. You are wandering around the edge of the clearing trying to get a shot of that ever-elusive whipbird. It is a little dark and there are branches everywhere. So, you have the camera set on single focus point, the speed is a little slower, so you can keep the ISO down a little lower, and the aperture is open a little more as well. Of course, you aren't using Auto mode because it will slow the speed so far down everything will be blurry, right? "I know it is here, I just heard it." Then, all of a sudden there is a shrill cry overhead. Coming into view with the clear sky as a backdrop is a Sea-eagle, giant bream in the talons, glistening in the sun. What a shot! We have all been there (or kind of). And we all know what happens next. You swing the camera skywards. Why won't the camera focus? Ahh, single spot, you need more points because it is fast moving and there is no contrast. No, no, it is fast moving, I need a higher shutter speed otherwise it will be blurry. The aperture is too far open, the white of the eagle will be washed out from all the light. Got it, done. And the bird gently soars over the other side of the clearing as you grab the perfect picture of its tail feathers.

And this, people, is where U1 and U2 come in handy.

These two modes allow you to custom program two sets of camera settings, which will be remembered when you turn the dial to that mode. You can set default values for aperture, speed, focus point and a number of other parameters; exactly what you can set will depend on your camera – time to grab that manual. And this was the "Aha!" moment. I tend to run two different settings: one for general shots, saved as U1; and one for faster action/flight shots, saved as U2. So, in the above scenario, when I see that prize-winning Sea-eagle shot coming my way I rotate the dial to U2 and it is all ready to go: "Click", and we're done. And as that Whipbird pops out of the bush and sits on the branch in front of you, a quick turn back to U1 and "Click", we have him as well. Celebrating with the good scotch tonight, boys and girls!

It is really easy to set the user settings up. First, set the parameters you want on the camera. Then – with a Nikon D7200 - press the Menu button on the back of the camera, go to the Setup menu (the one with a wrench) and scroll down until you see User Settings. Select this, select U1 or U2 and press Ok. There, done. It took me longer to type this than it does to do it. And if you do change settings during a shoot, switch back and forth to recover your favourite settings. Give it a try and you will never go back.

OK, it's an Eastern Osprey, not a Sea-eagle. But if my wife Sara had set up
U1 and U2, she would have gotten the front view.