

## Working with Beanbags - David Jenkins

You've probably come to a conclusion that all I do is sit at a computer desk and open and close Photoshop layers and add modes. But not so - most of the techniques we've looked at I use because they save me time with images, occasionally rescue less than ideal ones, and enhance the really good ones (there aren't, by definition, lots of those in my collection, but you get the idea).

I'd much rather, and do, spend more time in the field taking bird photos than playing with Photoshop.

One of the techniques we use a lot, and I shared the concept at the BirdLife Melbourne Photography Group study night recently, is to use a beanbag to reduce the chance of camera shake and improve the sharpness of our pictures.

### What is a beanbag?

It's a bag that contains wheat or beans or rice or something similar to give it some weight, and to allow the camera/lens combination to rest on securely. The camera/lens pushes down into the bag, and the filling moves about to accommodate it; in doing so it provides a nice steady mounting place for the camera/lens. The beans (filling) move about and settle, taking the energy of my camera-shake, and dispersing it among the beans. It means I can shoot at slower shutter speeds without a tripod. Of course, it needs something to rest on - I'll get to that later.

### Beanbag styles

The very simplest I have ever used was a large sock filled with rice and tied off at the end.

The heat-bag that chemists sell, filled with wheat, is another of my favourites, and one has travelled many journeys with me.



*Heat pack bag filled with wheat. It is light, small, and can be used in an amazing number of locations.*

Commercial beanbags are available. These usually are a large “U” shape, and will hold upwards of 4-6 kg of beans. The “U” means they can be used in a number of ways, as shown in the examples below.



*Serious heavy duty bean bag. 6kg of beans in there.  
Works in a variety of shapes. U-shaped to securely  
drape over doors and fences and the like.*

They usually have a zipper closure and you buy them empty and fill with your own beans. If you travel internationally this can be good. A friend photographs in Africa; he takes the bag in empty, buys some local produce, and then empties it before he leaves. That way he doesn't have to explain to the customs people why he is importing beans when he returns home!

Another commercial bag called “**Camera Pod**” comes in a range of sizes, from small to very large, and they are filled with a very tiny plastic filler, which looks like red lentils. My advice is ***if you buy one, don't open it to see what's inside as the little red filler pieces really want to escape***. The **Camera Pod** also has a screw mounted on it so you can attach it securely to your camera or lens tripod socket.



*Small proprietary “Camera Pod”, with a Panasonic FZ200  
attached. Not too heavy and securely holds the camera.*



*Large proprietary "Camera Pod" with an 80-400 zoom.  
Gives good solid support for longer lenses.  
Use on larger bases such as fence posts.*

Some are water/weather-proof, and I like that; the last thing you want are wet beans beginning to sprout, or wheat fermenting. A number of them also have "GI Joe" camouflage materials, but let's face it, a camo bag on a bright red Landcruiser is not going to fool any bird that I've tried to photograph.

You can make one yourself. Any sort of material will suffice, and you can add a zipper on not depending on your sewing skill (or lack of it). I once showed this to a class, and the next week one of the students came in with a bag she'd made for each of her friends; each one had the person's name embroidered. A nice touch, but you don't have to go that far.

A quick search on eBay scored about 50 possible options, with prices starting from about \$15.00.

### **In the field**

Beanbags are so flexible that just about anything that is the right height can be used for a support. The bag melds over the support, so it doesn't even need to be a flat surface. So car roofs, bonnets, doors, bull-bars all provide a ready place to lean on with the long lens and beanbag support.

Fencepost, rocks, solid tree branches, pipes, bridge railings, signposts, etc, - you get the idea.





*Wheat bag on a gate rail. The bag drapes over the rail, and provides both a support and a platform for the camera. When we use it on such a thin support, we hold the camera strap as insurance. When working over water, **splash** is such an ugly word!*

### **In-car photography**

I like using beanbags in the car for places where it's easier to park the car and wait a bit for things to settle down, and the birds come a little bit closer.

The bigger bags hang over the door and provide a very solid and secure mount for the longest of lenses. I sometimes use the car window to raise or lower the camera position; just be careful with a really large bag that it doesn't put too much strain on the window winder. Set it first is my recommendation.



*U bag with a 300mm lens, on a car door. (Door is open to show both sides, but I normally work with the door closed.) Plenty of flexibility - the camera can be easily pointed up, down, left, right. Here the image stabilisation is turned on, but check the instructions with lenses with VR, IS, OS etc to see what they recommend.*

I also use the “U” bag on the door with the U up, and rest the camera on one arm and the lens on the other; this seems to allow for easier height and angle adjustment.

**Out of the car** with the bag on the roof, I use it to keep the camera stable while I do in-flight pictures. It is definitely harder to pan with rapidly moving birds (think Swallows), but OK on larger herons, raptors and swans.



*Using the U up, holding a 500 mm lens. Lens nestles into the centre, and the two large legs of the U prevent movement. This bag has 4kg of filling*



*With the U up, but lens on one leg, camera on the other.  
This is a good way to gain extra angle for high shots*



*Bag is flat and the camera/lens is pushed down into it.  
Good for large support areas. Not as good for higher angle shots.*

For use with long lenses, say 400-600 mm lenses on a tripod, perhaps with a teleconverter, or two, I use the big bag draped over the lens at the point over the tripod mount. It certainly helps reduce camera shake from my handshake, and also does a fair job of reducing vibration from “Mirror slap”.



*500mm lens on tripod. Bag is draped over the centre of gravity to help reduce shake from mirror bounce in DSLR. Normally we would use it with a cable or electronic remote release. Also works well in windy conditions. But make sure the whole rig can't be blown over.*

**Crash** is such an ugly word

## **Fillings**

Just about any small “bean”-sized produce will work. Wheat, rice, lentils, are smaller and a bit more useful for smaller bags and smaller camera sets, as the filling will easily move around to hold the camera in just about any useful angle. Beans - red/white/kidney - are all about equally as good. When it comes to the big bags that drape over the support, you need to be conscious of the weight. 5-6 kilos is a lot of bag to carry about and manhandle along the car door. I'd not even think of carrying one into the bush for a day's walk. Although sometimes in a sitting location I've



taken it in for a kilometre or so. But that was back when I was much younger - about 6 months ago!

Don't over-fill the bag. The point is for the beans to be able to move about to mould to the support surface and the camera/lens combination.

The white plastic "beans" that are used to fill toys, seatbags, and other things at first sound like a good alternative, but they don't have the weight to mould around the gear, nor reduce the shake. Which is a pity, because they're light.

### **Bean-bag Shots**



*This bird was working its way along a reed bed. I parked the car behind a clump of trees and put the camera on the bag through the open window, then just waited until it made its way out from behind the trees. The bag held the long lens so I wasn't getting any shake.*



*This was taken with a 600mm manual focus lens, using a 4kg beanbag resting on a downed tree branch. The young bird is begging for food on the adjacent tree. It is about 10 days on the wing; it still has some of the baby down showing.*

Convenient, easy-to-use, with no batteries or moving parts, beanbags are a great addition to your photographic tool set.