

## Some Thoughts on Bird-craft and Bird Photography - Les Peters

### The Good Old Days

My earliest memory about wildlife photography happened during the 1960s, when I was watching a BBC television program called *“Look”*, hosted by Peter Scott. A famous German photographer was showing off his 1000 mm lens and explaining how *“mit mein HUGE lens”*, he was able to get terrific pictures of birds. They were magnificent pictures, and from this introduction, I got a strong impression that if you had a huge lens, that was it. Things would be made easy. Terrific pictures of birds, glowing with detail, could be a just a click away.

So as soon as I reasonably could, I bought a 300mm lens with a 1.4 teleconverter, and an Olympus OM2. This would have been in the mid 1970s. It was then I began to realise there was more to photographing wild creatures things than I had thought.

### So what was wrong with my '70's gear?

Nothing really - but it did disappoint me, for reasons that still apply today.

Firstly, I found it wasn't always easy to sight on a small moving target. With all but the fastest lenses, if you are out in full sun the view through your camera isn't that bright. And you generally lose brightness in the pursuit of reach.

And the reach that you long for makes it harder to find your subject.

To prove this point, I suggest you make a circle with their thumb and forefinger, then hold your hand up at a full arm's length and see how easy (or difficult!) it is to follow a moving object. We won't mention the problems that focusing adds to this exercise.

And even with a reasonably long lens, it still won't do that much for you if you want to photograph small birds. It will be straight-forward to get close-ups of big birds, but **for the small ones, there's no two ways about it, for good pictures it's best to get close to them.**



*Photo taken at Monarto Conservation Park SA.  
Nikon D300, Nikkor 300mm F2.8 VRI plus 1.7xTC;  
1/160s, F5.6, ISO 800.*

### So have things improved?

In comparison with earlier times, everything about modern photography is wonderfully better. Compared to the zooms of old, and even those of a relatively short time ago, things have improved beyond all reasonable expectations.

The reach achieved using modern equipment is nothing short of startling. It encourages photographers to electronically zoom on their images and gaze fondly at every pixel, often before they have finished photographing what's in front of them.



*Modern image resolution: full frame (7,000 pixel image) at top, and at 1:1 below.*

Most cameras now have pretty good auto focus, even in fairly indifferent light. With fast lenses camera focus can be pretty much instantaneous, and their power to track the focus on a moving object can be remarkable.

Once you have taken your image, processing of RAW images allows considerable latitude for correction and improvement after the photo's been taken. Many people like to say it pays to get your pictures right first time, but this isn't always possible. It's a nice thing to have some options available.

## Quo Vadis?

You're perhaps wondering by now where I'm going with this. ***If much about bird photography has improved over time, one thing hasn't changed. The birds.*** And that's what I want us to think about here.

But first, I want to ask you “*What do you think what makes a wildlife picture arresting?*” Several things spring to mind, which I'll try to quickly summarise:

- drama
- eye height
- background
- composition
- clarity
- and lots more

With these aspects in mind, let's think about how most people go about taking wildlife pictures and what impact this will have on their photographs.

## 1. Birds as "Targets of Opportunity"

This is the most common approach. People see a bird, walk straight towards it and try to take its picture. There is often a reliance on the 40x zoom their camera offers to get the size and detail. Others approach the bird or animal with the hope that speed and surprise will do the trick.

In the natural world there only a few reasons for one animal to directly approach another. Unless you're dealing with something tame that is hoping for a feed, most creatures will expect that you're either looking for a fight or a meal. Consequently, the most likely outcome is that you're either going to get an image of a frightened or a fleeing bird. We are all familiar with the *"there it goes"* shot, or the less successful *"there it went/there it was"* shot.

You may also get a picture of a bird telling you to back off. Wrens often do this and I personally don't find such pictures very appealing. They look pretty upset and let's face it, they are.

So perhaps the first and greatest golden rule in my view is ***never approach a bird or animal directly***. If you wander more circumspectly, never directly towards a bird but always towards one side or the other, you are much more likely to get a close, large image and have a better chance of capturing natural behaviour. The slower you approach, the better. And finally, be aware of there is a limit to distance you can approach creatures without changing their behaviour or making them leave.

## 2. The Waiting Game

Let's think back to the last time you may have attended roll call at the end of a bird walk. Perhaps you found that those birds which eluded you during the walk became visible as people have got into their seats and settled down for lunch. You've stopped moving, your interest in birds is less obvious, and soon they begin to appear and resume their normal activities.

Sitting around is a pretty good strategy, especially with a glass of wine in hand, keeping the other one ready for the camera or sandwiches, depending on the circumstances.



*Photo taken at Mount Warning NSW.  
Nikon D300, Nikkor 70-200mm F2.8 plus 1.7xTC;  
1/250s, F2.8, ISO 800, plus flash at -1.7stops.*



On a similar note, I remember that when I went for a ride on a horse for the first time, I was struck by the way birds and other wildlife ignored me. It seems I was just part of a two headed horse. And there's a similar reaction, or lack of it, when you travel on water in a canoe. If you care to stay down low and don't move or just sit down, I find that after a short while much the same thing happens - you get ignored.

Shore bird photographers go one better and slowly crawl on their front to get close to a bird. I don't know for sure, but getting grubby seems to be part of the attraction for this branch of bird photography.

I have a friend who gets remarkable pictures by climbing up a tree and waiting for the birds to visit her. The birds' curiosity usually gets the better of them and her 200mm lens is enough to get an excellent picture of Thornbills and other LBJs. A touch of bird-craft can go a long way to helping get good close pictures.

If you manage to set yourself up so you don't resemble the average human figure and you don't look like you're capable of moving fast, some photographic success usually follows. In addition, most birds are curious and have an appetite for looking at you from the highest vantage point in the vicinity. If you set yourself up at the right distance from such a vantage point, particularly when these are limited, you'll gain an advantage.



*Wrens have a taste for the high life, and will seek the highest vantage point.*



*Set yourself up close to the highest thing around and you may be on your way to a nice close picture.*

### **3. Parallel Running**

Everyone is familiar with the idea of bird hotspots. In my local patch, it's the Brown and Striated Thornbills, Grey Fantails, White-fronted Treecreepers (going up), Sitellas (going down), Superb Wrens, White-browed Scrubwrens, White-naped Honeyeaters, Silvereyes and Red-browed Firetails which frequently travel together. Moving this way gives them many eyes with which to spot predators. And let's face it, that usually means people.

However, if you initially keep your distance and only move slowly with the group as it travels, the alarm calls usually fade out quite quickly, and then it's possible over time to gradually move closer to the birds you want to photograph. Using this technique Babblers have often come close enough to almost be under my feet. Wrens will sometimes feed their chicks just a short distance away. Good judgement of time and distance are required to make this technique work. That means keeping the right distance until your presence has been completely accepted. Always move quietly and slowly. And lastly, as has been mentioned already, accept that there is a limit to how close you can go.





*The parallel running technique tends to get the most intimate shots of bird activity.*

### **Some Other Points**

You may find that your clothing has quite an affect on the reception you'll get using this approach. The birds I hang around with like greys, soft greens, blacks and light browns. I have a camouflage outfit which works wonders with bush birds, but it's hopeless for working near water birds. I expect it makes me look like a hunter, especially when combined with that strange triple barrelled gun (tripod) I carry.

There are, of course, many other techniques. Baiting and using calls come to mind. I don't find them nearly as interesting as parallel running; there are so many more possibilities for interaction between the birds and their environment when you do. I also like taking pictures using a remote. Perhaps we'll look at this in a future article.