The Use of Fill-flash in Bird Photography Part 1- Tom Oliver

Capturing bird images is one of the more difficult genres of photography and sometimes we have to photograph birds in less than optimum conditions. In a perfect world birds would sit quite still, for at least 10 seconds in perfect light, until you take a number of perfect images. Unfortunately, in a lot of cases, a bird just will not pose or move the way you would like and will stubbornly remain in shaded areas out of direct sunlight. So, how do we fill in the shadow areas on a bird without the resulting image looking “false”? We use our flash units. Learning how to effectively use fill-flash can dramatically enhance your bird images.

We could increase the ISO but this can result in very “noisy” images. We could reduce shutter speed but this can result in blurred images. Not everyone will agree, but the judicious use of fill-flash is one way of capturing that elusive image in less than optimum conditions.

The effect we are trying to achieve is an image that does not look "flashed." Another plus is in many cases, fill-flash will put a catch-light in the bird's eye. The difference in fill-flash and no fill-flash can be dramatic.

Photos by Tom Oliver

The above photos, of an Egret backlit by the early morning sun, illustrate the value of using a fill-flash. The silhouette on the left may have some artistic merit, but lacks detail. Both images are of the same bird, but I changed my shooting position slightly for the image on the right so that the bird wasn’t “lost in the sky” when I used the fill-flash.

In the bush a flash can be used for daylight fill-flash photography. When a bird is backlit, a flash can fill in the strong shadow that obscures the bird's head.

Setting up your flash

Usually our "*main"* light source, known as ambient light, is made up from both direct and indirect sunlight. A flash unit is used to "*fill-in"* (or lighten) those areas of a bird which are in shadow.

An accessory flash, with a variable flash output control i.e. plus or minus flash exposure compensation, is required to perform the job efficiently. Accessory flashes are much more powerful than a camera's built-in flash.

You want the fill-flash to be set at *less* than a ratio of 1:1 with the ambient light. Most flash units will allow you to set fill-flash at +/- $^{1}/_{3}$ increments. I usually set my flash at - 1.7, which means the flash is underexposing by $1^{2}/_{3}$ *f*-stops. The low powered light provided by the flash will "wash" away the shadows and provide more plumage detail. The value of underexposure can be adjusted depending upon the ambient light conditions.

The image below was taken about 6:30 am early last winter. The sun wasn't quite up and the Scrubwren was foraging for food. If I had not used a fill-flash, I doubt I would have captured a decent image.

Photo by Tom Oliver

You will notice enhanced detail in the bird's feathers due to the contrast added by the use of flash. I was also able to keep the ISO at 200, which kept any "noise" in the image to a minimum. The Aperture was *f*/6.3, Shutter Speed was 1/60 s and a Nikon 500 mm, tripod mounted lens used.

I waited until the bird rested for a split second and managed to capture the image without any "blurring" due to camera shake.

In the next newsletter I will continue with **Part 2** of this article, which will include more example images and the type of equipment required to project your camera fill-flash across longer distances when used with a zoom or telephoto lens. If members would like me to answer any queries on this subject, please contact me (tomoliver@optusnet.com.au) so that I can address your issues and include the answers in **Part 2**.

In all aspects of bird photography the safety and well-being of the bird is paramount. For those members who may have misgivings about using a fill-flash to photograph birds, I've attached a link to an illuminating article written by Dennis Olivero and Donald Cohen.

> ***Dennis Olivero*** *obtained his DVM degree from the University of Minnesota where he also did an internship in small animal medicine and surgery.*
>
> ***Donald Cohen*** *obtained his doctorate in medicine at State University of New York in Buffalo and went on to a flexible internship at Mercy Hospital in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He completed his ophthalmology specialty training at Pittsburgh Eye and Ear and has been practicing ophthalmology for twenty years in his clinic in Mooresville, North Carolina.*

http://www.naturescapes.net/docs/index.php/category-health/36-health/119-flash-photography-and-the-visual-system-of-birds-and-animals

Links to web pages used as a source for the above article are listed below:

http://www.outdoorphotographer.com/how-to/shooting/daylight-fill-flash.html

http://www.birdsofoklahoma.net/BirdPhotoBasics.htm#Fill-Flash

http://www.moosepeterson.com/techtips/flash.html