Post-processing Top Tips: Part 1 – Glenn Pure

Four most important things to do before uploading your photos

You've been out with your camera and been lucky enough to get a bird shot you are really happy with. Of course, you want to share it with the world. That's easy, just download it from your camera, reduce the size to meet the BLP size requirements and upload it. Right?

That's what I thought when I first joined BLP. I've since realised I was off the mark. It's not just important, but *essential* to do more – and it will take minutes, not hours, in front of a computer. Nor will you need to save for expensive software – in fact it can all be done with free software. Of course, you can take this further especially once you see how easy it is to improve a photo. But I'm going to cover the four basics only here. If you ever want to upload your photos elsewhere or entering photo competition, these tips still apply and will make a big difference.

The first essential is to *set your camera to take RAW images*. Really, do I have to do this? After all, RAW files are a lot bigger and require more work once you get them home before they can be turned into a photo that can be printed or uploaded. Well, no, you *can* stick with JPG images – but only if

    a. photos are never under or over-exposed,
    b. your birds are always beautifully and softly lit (never in harsh sunlight or backlit) and
    c. you never photograph black and white birds or others with extreme contrast where the dark bits or white bits are likely to be clipped and lacking in detail.

The reason a RAW file is a lot bigger is because it contains far more information – specifically tonal information that will usually enable you to recover a good photo from under-exposure or over-exposure or from difficult lighting situations or subjects.

Camera manufacturers usually provide software for editing and converting their proprietary RAW files into universal file formats like TIF or JPG. Best still, this software is usually free. Download the latest version – don't rely on an outdated version provided on a CD with your camera as manufacturers are constantly making improvements. And learn how to use it. Of course, you can also use Adobe Camera Raw which is integrated into Adobe software such as Photoshop Elements, Photoshop and Lightroom. Don't assume the free software provided by camera manufacturers is inferior though. It may actually produce the best quality RAW conversions. The other good thing about RAW files is that any edits you do to them are completely reversible since the edits are recorded as additional metadata appended to the RAW file. The original RAW data is not affected and you can revert back to it at any time.

Second, now that you have taken the step of shooting in RAW, take advantage of that extra tonal information in your RAW file to *extract detail from those washed-out highlights and inky shadows*. A bonus is that you can easily fix bungles where you may have set the camera white balance to the wrong setting. You'll never have to think about the WB setting on your camera again as you can simply select the right WB in the RAW software. As for the lighting adjustments, this will take a little more space than I have here to explain, so I'm going to defer that specific subject to the next newsletter.

The third item on the list is '*Crop thoughtfully*'. It is rare indeed to get a photo straight from the camera that requires no cropping whatsoever. When cropping, subjectivity and personal

taste play a significant part – but there are some 'rules' that can help. It can be tempting to crop too hard and make the bird fill or nearly fill the frame. This can sometimes produce a photo with great impact – but just as often not. Try showing more of the bird in its environment, provided it doesn't get 'lost' in the surrounds. In many cases this will produce an equally or more powerful image. More often than not, it's also better not to place your bird bang in the centre of the photo. Photographers and artists have known about the *rule of thirds* for a very long time: many compositions look better if key elements (eg your bird's head or eye) sits a third the way in from the edge of the crop either horizontally, vertically or both. It's really more a guideline than a rule but give it a try. Don't be afraid to try different crop formats as well – landscape, portrait, square etc. Choose to best format to suit your subject and its surrounds and don't be afraid to experiment. It's easy to undo a crop and try again.

Last but not least is **final sharpening**. Most images will need to be reduced in size before that can be uploaded to BLP as the maximum image size accepted is 1400 pixels wide by 1050 high. A size limit is also typical for other online photo sites and photo competition websites. The problem is that when an image is downsized, it loses sharpness. Your beautiful crisp bird image will now look a little soft and lacking in detail once downsized. There are technical reasons why this happens but the message is that it's essential to apply a ***modest*** amount of sharpening – just enough to bring back that crispness. The bog-standard sharpening tool in most software is called the unsharp mask. It is a little complicated and can introduce nasty looking halos and other artefacts if not used carefully. A simpler tool available in some software packages (including the free, open-source, GIMP image software) is simply called 'Sharpness'. It is much easier to use and is much less prone to producing strange artefacts. So try that first. For those who have Photoshop Elements, the sharpness tool can correct for different sources of blur so it must be set to 'Remove Gaussian Blur' to be effective. As for settings to use, some experimentation will be needed. In Photoshop Elements, I use a setting of 0.3 to 0.8 pixels radius (typically 0.4 pixels) and an amount of 40% to 70%. I won't go into the unsharp mask tool here but there are mountains of information on the internet on how to use it and even articles in past BLP newsletters. To find the latter, use the search tool on the BLP home page and enter "unsharp mask".

The effect of final sharpening after size reduction. The two panels are a
1:1 crop from the final image. The left panel is before sharpening.

There's actually a fifth thing you should also do – noise reduction. But I wanted to keep this brief so I might cover that another time.