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November 2010





On The Wing

A look at the many facets of avian photography and techniques for getting colorful, inspiring images

*By Mike Stensvold
Photography By
Chris Klapheke*

After a 10-year absence to tend to other business, Chris Klapheke rededicated himself to photography in 2004. He really never had paid any attention to birds before, but a workshop with bird photography guru Arthur Morris at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico got him hooked.

“I’m not a birder, and I don’t know the name and call of every bird I’ve photographed,” Klapheke says. “What I do know is I find birds beautiful, and the act of image capture is in itself a sport. For a good bird capture, you have to plan, be patient, and when the time comes, be quick. The whole process appeals to me, not just the final image. Sometimes just being out there with the birds is so nice, I don’t worry about the final images.”

“When casual viewers see a good bird image, they don’t realize the planning and effort that goes into getting that image,” Klapheke continues. “Arthur Morris was the first one to introduce me to light direction, wind direction, temperature, species habits and other items that go into a successful image. Later on, I was introduced to Alan Murphy’s style of shooting—the setup bird portrait. Alan’s shots are almost painting-like, and the clarity and detail of that style of shooting is alluring to me. I now assist Alan on several workshops a year, and I’m also the cook on our workshops in South Texas—that’s my other hobby. Some people might think that going from practicing law and running regional retail chains to a workshop cook is going in the wrong direction, but I think it’s just fine!”





*Chris Klapheke's stunning avian photography is diverse. To be sure, Klapheke takes his share of simple shots of birds on branches, but he also strives to get blurred images of whole flocks and freeze-frame shots in flight. It's a specialized kind of photography with specialized equipment that can be hard to find. Klapheke has leveraged his love of taking these pictures into a business that sells the type of gear he uses (www.outdoorphotogear.com). He makes a point of selling the same items that he uses for his own photography. **OPENING SPREAD, LEFT AND RIGHT:** Bird blur at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, New Mexico; Crested caracara (captive) photographed at St. Augustine FotoFest raptor workshop. **OPENING SPREAD, BOTTOM:** Snow geese blur at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, New Mexico. **LEFT:** Snow geese in winter morning mist at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, New Mexico. **BELOW, LEFT:** Harris' hawk, Roma, Texas; Northern cardinal, Roma, Texas. **BELOW:** Snow geese in snow, Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, New Mexico.*

Bird Portraits

For bird portraits, Klapheke mostly uses long lenses on his DSLRs, 500mm and 600mm, frequently with a 1.4x teleconverter. Sometimes he adds an extension tube to allow for closer focusing (600mm superteles normally have a minimum focusing distance of around 18 feet).

Klapheke points out that when you're using such a long lens, your depth of field gets compressed. "When shooting a small bird that fills the frame of a long lens," he says, "you have to really stop down. I shoot between $f/8$ and $f/16$ on close shots. Lighting is pretty much ambient, and we like nice white overcast days to extend our shooting time."

Klapheke says that one flash accessory bird photographers use all the time is the Better Beamer by Walt Anderson of Visual Echoes, adding, "Most of the time this is used for fill-flash and to get that ever-important catchlight in the bird's eye."

Cautions Klapheke, "You can't sneak up on a bird, so you have to create an environment where the bird will come to you."

Regarding blinds, Klapheke says, "I'm usually shooting out of a blind, be it a permanent one on our workshops in Roma, Texas, or using a Doghouse, or a great poncho blind by Kwik Camo. Most of the time, I set up a perch. A good place to set up a perch is where





ABOVE: *Booted Racket-tail, Tandayap, Ecuador. Careful planning and the right gear are needed to capture an instant like this one.*

your birds are used to going, typically where a feeder is. But before we get to a perch, the birds must be comfortable coming to the area, even when feeders are present. The main thing that makes birds comfortable is the presence of a staging area, typically a tree, where the birds can land and survey the scene around a feeder or perch, before committing to flying down. Keep in mind where that staging tree is when positioning yourself and allow for light over your shoulder and wind; birds land into the wind. These things affect how you'll set up your perch near the staging area. You would like the bird to land facing you and with the light on its face."

Continues Klapheke, "Birds do need a reason to land, and most likely that's food. It can also be a water drip, especially in dry climates. You can make a water feature easily out of a lid, or you can even scoop out the ground and line it with a plastic bag. Birds like dripping water, and you can make that happen with a milk jug that's pierced with a tiny hole. If you're keeping your regu-

lar feeder, position the perch in between the staging area and the feeder. I like to remove the regular feeder and replace it with a smaller, more controlled feeder, usually a tray feeder. One tip is to make access to your feeder small enough so only one bird can feed at a time. While one bird feeds, another is likely to sit on your perch, waiting."

Klapheke explains that food to attract birds varies by bird and by area. "Many things work besides feeders. You can dab peanut butter on the back side of your perch, or staple orange slices on the back of a large perch, to attract woodpeckers, for example. The combinations of food and perches are endless and depend on what your subject birds prefer. With peanut butter, be warned—you better get the shot quickly before the bird feasts, as it will have 'peanut butter mouth' just like a little kid!"

Another consideration is the size of the perch. "A good perch is commensurate with the size of the bird's grip," says Klapheke. "Small birds look better on smaller perches. Your perch will look



ABOVE: *Klapheke uses a number of different setups to get his graphic and vivid bird photos. This is his hummingbird setup (clockwise from above): Canon EF 600mm lens, Canon EF 24-105mm IS zoom lens, AF-S Nikkor 500mm f/4G ED VR lens.*

better with some greenery, which you can add to larger perches with a handy staple gun and some florist tubes to keep the greenery fresh. If the greenery is actually part of your perch, make sure the leaves are small, as to not hide the bird.

“A leafy or thorny perch can be trimmed only at the area you want the bird to land on,” adds Klapheke. “That brings up the main theme of getting birds to pose for you on a perch: control. You want to control the area around the perch—staging; the way the bird approaches the perch—wind and light; where the bird lands—trimming the perch; how long it stays—controlling the food source; and, of course, the background—distance. Alan Murphy’s CD *The Guide to Songbird Setup Photography* is a great resource that explains a lot of scenarios in detail.

“In South Texas, we found a kingfisher on a pond,” recalls Klapheke. “Kingfishers are extremely skittish and don’t care for humans. So we set up a Doghouse blind for a few days empty, in a position where the morning light would be over our shoulder. We then waded into the pond and stuck a pole in the mud. Onto this pole we tied a perch and some greenery. Then, we needed a controllable food source. Of all things, we inflated a baby pool, filled it halfway

with water and added minnows. The pool was then tied to the bottom of the pole, where the kingfisher would have to dive into the light to reach. We—in most of my stories, the ‘we’ is Alan Murphy and me—got into the blind in the dark before dawn and waited. The funny part of this story is that the first day, the kingfisher arrived in the morning dark and ate all of our minnows! So we had to improvise and plan some more. The solution was to take camo cloth and cover the baby pool. Fishing line ran from the cloth into our blind. The next morning, the kingfisher arrived at morning dark, but was frustrated as it couldn’t reach the minnows. The second the morning light hit the perch, we pulled the fishing line, and off came the cloth. The result was a happy kingfisher and happy shooters.”

Adds Klapheke, “That’s why I love bird photography. You really have to outwit them!”

Hummingbirds

Hummingbirds are drop-dead gorgeous—and especially challenging photo subjects. Says Klapheke, “A basic concept of hummer shoots is that your camera won’t be able to freeze wing movement, so you have to use your flashes to do so.

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ON THE WING

(Cont'd from page 74)

Your camera is set on $\frac{1}{200}$ or $\frac{1}{250}$ sec., and ambient light isn't your friend. A shaded area works best for controlled ambient light. You'll need five or six flashes, and the ability to trigger them all at once, with a transmitter or a flash that works as a transmitter.

Start with a feeder hanging from a reflector arm or other hanger, and depending on your lens (a 300mm lens works great), position yourself about 10 feet from the feeder.

Explains Klapheke, "Your flashes are arranged as follows: two angled toward the feeder, one looking down from above—think "hair light" in a studio—and two on a background. Yes, the backgrounds in most hummer shots are fake. I use prints of out-of-focus plants and attach them to a reflector. Why is this? Well, we've all seen images of fast-moving objects with an entirely black background. The same would be true of hummer shots without a lit background. So, two flashes light up a paper or cloth background to give color to the shot. Usually, flashes are manually set to $\frac{1}{64}$ power to give you about $\frac{1}{20,000}$ of virtual shutter speed. Lots of trial and error here, as many hummers are different, and ambient light differs as well."

To get the hummer in the frame, Klapheke says to tape off all but one of the feeder's access points. "When the hummer is used to going to one place, pretty quickly actually, remove the feeder and place a flower in its place. Make sure you get a flower that hummers actually go to and one that's local. With a syringe, put hummer solution—4 to 1 water to sugar—into the flower. Before long, the hummer will be lapping it up. One insider tip is to trim the petals of the flower closest to your lens a little, so you can see more of the hummer's beak."

For a full discussion of hummingbird photography, Klapheke recommends Linda Robbins' CD *The Hummingbird Guide*.

Birdscapes

"I think birds in their environment are a little easier than tight shots, but they seem to be less dramatic to me," say Klapheke. "You really have to nail the composition to make a few birds, small in the frame, have a big impact. We have a few tricks to make 'birdscapes' have more impact, like slow

shutter speeds and looking for patterns. The 24-105mm zoom is a great lens for this type of shooting, and it's a lot easier to carry around than the 600mm!

"To find large flocks of birds," he says, "you need a good open area and food. This lends itself to nature preserves or bodies of water—not only the shores and lakes, but water treatment areas. The shorter the lens, the bigger the flock needs to be. You can make a small flock look very large with a long lens. Lighting is the same as for other shots—morning and evening light is best. However, one thing to keep in mind with flocks is that you can really make hay with silhouettes. You have much more leeway with flocks, as you're not trying to get the light just right on a bird's face, with a catchlight. I think flocks are where experimentation shines. You really have no set expectations with flocks and patterns like you do with portraits. This is one place where you can go all over the place and see what you get. With abstracts and patterns, you run into personal preference. There's really no yardstick here."

Regarding shutter speed, Klapheke says, "I think my favorite here is $\frac{1}{5}$ sec., depending on light, of course. This gives you some nice blur, but still keeps enough definition so that the viewer knows that birds are in the frame. Fast shutter speeds are good, too, but mainly when birds are so thick that you can't see background or sky. That way you still get a pattern instead of a shot with random birds flying."

Adds Klapheke, "If the birds are just sitting there, you can create movement with zoom blurs."

OP



When he's not out photographing birds, Chris Klapheke runs an online store for photographic accessories for the outdoor mobile photographer; Outdoor Photo Gear (www.outdoorphotogear.com). All the items mentioned in this article are available there.

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