



PHOTO MASTERCLASS PART NINE

BIRD PORTRAITS

in association with
TAMRON®



A beautiful close-up photograph of a bird can offer a multitude of pleasures – character, composition and colour, to name but three. But you've got to get close to your subject and this means you must develop your field skills as much as your photographic ability.

WITH WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER MARK CARWARDINE

BIRDS MAKE FABULOUS photographic subjects. They can be found almost everywhere, they are often brightly coloured and they have wonderfully expressive postures.

With so many natural and photographic variables – from the species and vantage point to the quality of light and choice of lens – the range of portrait-making opportunities is phenomenal. You can take shots of an entire bird or exquisite frame-filling images of a small part of its head, and you can shoot it standing still, singing or even sleeping.

One of the greatest challenges of bird portraiture is getting close enough. We all see birds every day, and birders observe them closely through binoculars or telescopes, but taking close-up pictures is another matter altogether. Some species are large and approachable enough to fill the frame

without too much effort, but the vast majority require more time and trouble. Even with a super telephoto lens, it's often necessary to stalk your quarry or spend hour after hour working from hides. So, in bird portraiture, field skills are as important as photographic skills.

But how do you turn a simple bird portrait into something memorable and breathtaking? As with so many forms of photography, the golden rule is simplicity. The simpler the design, the more powerful the image. But then how do you capture the character of the subject? Must the eyes be in focus? Should the bird be looking straight at the camera? We'll be answering all these questions this month – helping you to turn a 'nice, but so what?' image into something much more compelling.

▲ A delightful image of a pair of waved albatrosses engaging in mutual preening on Española in the Galápagos. The relative tameness of Galápagos wildlife enabled photographer Tui De Roy to get close enough to capture the character and apparent tenderness in the birds' actions.



MEET THE EXPERT...

Every issue, our world famous photographers share their knowledge and skills.

TUI DE ROY NEW ZEALAND

Best known for her photography of the wildlife of the Galápagos Islands, Tui De Roy is as at home with emperor penguins in the Antarctic as with harpy eagles in Peru.



Tui De Roy always takes the time to understand her subjects before photographing them. "I rarely take pictures in the first week of a trip," she says. "I prefer to observe and get to know the birds before I start shooting." This, she believes, is the key to her success. "Sometimes I can't resist a few 'insurance' shots," she laughs, "just in case I never see the birds again, but for the most part I'm quite restrained."

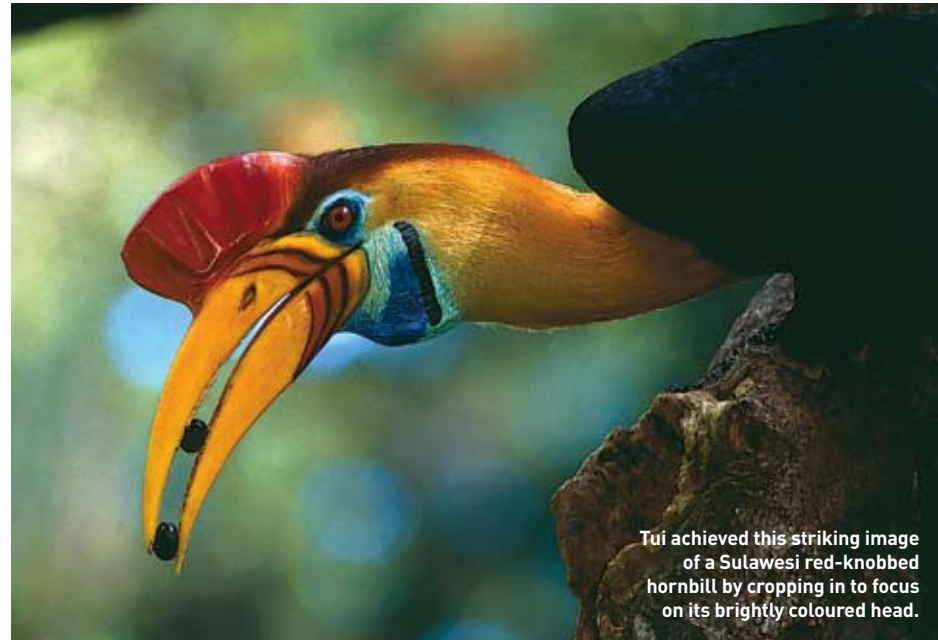
Still a traditional film-shooter who has yet to go digital, Tui rarely pre-visualises a photograph. She prefers to let events and opportunities unfold in the fullness of time. After hours or even days of waiting, her careful observations pay dividends when everything comes together in a critical nanosecond. Tui believes that an ability to predict the right moment is more important than any amount of planning.

"People always think I must be incredibly patient. But patience isn't the issue when there's nothing else in the world I'd rather do."

"People always think that I must be incredibly patient," she says. "But patience isn't the issue when there's nothing else in the world I'd rather be doing." She is currently working on a four-year book project,

photographing all 21 albatross species around the world. "I've photographed 16 species so far," she says. "I'm just off to Tristan da Cunha and Gough Island, in the South Atlantic, to photograph three more. That leaves just the Amsterdam albatross and the Indian yellow-nose to complete the project, but they're both so rare and their breeding grounds so remote they'll probably be the biggest challenge of all."

Tui De Roy's top bird portrait photography tips



Tui achieved this striking image of a Sulawesi red-knobbed hornbill by cropping in to focus on its brightly coloured head.

1 It's not what you include – it's what you exclude

When Tui was 12, shooting her first wildlife pictures on a borrowed camera in the Galápagos Islands, her father gave her some advice that she has never forgotten: the key to a good picture is not what you include – it's what you don't include. Less is more – so make sure everything in the viewfinder really matters.



Blue-footed booby courtship is one of nature's great comedic performances. But you have to take time to understand what is going on.

2 Be sensitive to your subject

Try to understand what the bird's life is about and open yourself up to its world by learning to recognise its day-to-day behaviour and its highs and lows. This will give you a heightened awareness that will show in your pictures, enabling you to portray the bird from its own perspective rather than from a human (or outsider's) point of view.

YOUR STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE...

Mark Carwardine shows you how to apply the theory to get the perfect picture.

1 EXPERIMENT WITH EYE CONTACT



- » **Try taking pictures** with and without eye contact. When a bird looks straight at the lens, it can evoke a great sense of intimacy and draw the viewer in. But sometimes it's hard to tell if it was merely curious or if it was staring the camera down out of fear.
- » **Make sure the eyes are pin-sharp.** Try to focus on the centre of the forehead rather than the end of the beak.
- » **Try placing the eyes off-centre,** rather than in the middle of the frame, for a more interesting composition. Leave plenty of empty space for the bird's gaze.

2 CHOOSE YOUR SUBJECTS CAREFULLY



- » **Notice the 'quality'** of the bird you choose to photograph – not all individuals of a single species are equally beautiful.
- » **Focus your attention** on the most brightly coloured individuals (usually males at the height of breeding condition) as these make the most appealing subjects. Most birds look rather dishevelled when they're moulting – generally a time to avoid – and dull, shabby individuals at any time of year make less than desirable subjects.
- » **Seek out birds** with brand new feathers that haven't suffered the ravages of time or been bleached by the sun.

3 WORK WITH THE LIGHT



- » **Be aware of the light** – it can make or break a bird portrait. If it's poor quality or throwing strong shadows over the bird's face, for example, the picture is unlikely to work.
- » **Manoeuvre into the best position** for atmospheric side-lighting. This works best when the sun is low, throwing subtle shadows and enhancing plumage detail and colour.
- » **Experiment with silhouettes and rim-lighting** (shoot against the sun, so the bird's outline glows from behind, while retaining detail in its face). Keep the subject isolated and the background simple.

4 SET YOURSELF A TASK



- » **Improve your photography** by setting yourself a specific task. Pick one species and try to take as many different portraits as possible.
- » **Depict common subjects** in unusual, out-of-the-ordinary ways. Think laterally – a great way to hone your artistic skills and break new ground, as common species are often overlooked by professionals.
- » **Predict the moment.** Don't wait until you have the perfect image in the viewfinder – by the time you fire the shutter, it'll be too late.
- » **Think 'in the round',** as if you are walking or flying around your subject, to find new angles.



ESSENTIAL KIT... LONG TELEPHOTO LENS

Unless you're photographing very tame subjects, such as albatrosses or penguins, you'll need a telephoto lens to create intimate bird portraits. Even with a 500mm, it's surprising how close you need to be to capture clear images of most species. You need an even longer lens for extreme close-ups.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

» **Focal length** – don't be tempted to go for anything less than a 400mm (or a 300mm with a 1.4x converter – see September). It would be a false economy.

CHEAPER ALTERNATIVES:

- » **Digiscoping** – use a digital compact camera coupled to a telescope (holding it up to the eyepiece or, better still, fixing it with a special adaptor kit). The quality isn't as good as with an SLR and telephoto lens, and there can be problems with movement, heat haze and focusing, but this offers impressive magnification and is an increasingly popular technique for photographing rare vagrants.
- » **Change location** – try shooting in places where birds are used to people and can be approached more easily.

DOS & DON'TS

- » **DO get down low** for a more intimate 'worm's-eye view'.
- » **DO shoot** in early morning, early afternoon or subdued overcast light.
- » **DON'T forget** to use a tripod, or another suitable support, when you shoot with a long lens. Long lenses magnify not only the subject, but also the blurring effects resulting from camera shake.
- » **DON'T risk** disturbing the birds by trying to get too close.

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MASTERCLASS CHALLENGE UK...



With the UK's abundance of bird species, a stunning portrait is within everyone's grasp. Follow **Chris Gomersall's** tips to make the most of your local favourites.

Robin

Introduce natural perches near a food source (or use existing garden props, such as a bird bath), anticipate where a bird is most likely to perch and set up your camera accordingly. A dark background adds drama, especially if the subject can be naturally spotlighted. Think of the balance of the whole photo – don't just focus on the bird in isolation.



Mallard

Low-angled autumn sunlight really accentuates plumage colours and textures, so even a humble mallard in the park reveals its full splendour. Light is warmer still towards the end of the day, contrasting here with the cold, blue ice. Wait for the wing and neck stretch that always follows a good preen, and leave sufficient room in your frame to include it.



Kingfisher

Successful bird portraits most often require the subject to be concentrating on something other than the photographer – potential prey, in the case of this kingfisher. Watch for a 'catchlight' reflection in the bird's eye as it turns its head before releasing the shutter, to add vitality. And make good use of rich autumn colours, even if they are just hinted at in the background.



Sanderling

Lying down with your camera gives an intimate perspective with ground-level birds such as this sanderling, and presents less of a threat, which allows the bird to relax. A low viewpoint also helps to make your subject stand out clearly against the out-of-focus foreground and background. Look for unusual postures that reveal something of the bird's character.



MASTERCLASS READER PHOTO OF THE MONTH

Now practise your new photography skills on your local birds. Use all of our experts' hints and tips to take up-close and personal portraits of any British bird. Upload your photos on our website and the winning image will be published in *BBC Wildlife* and on our website.

HOW TO ENTER

Log on to www.bbcwildlifemagazine.com and click on Photo Masterclass, then follow the instructions to upload your images. Closing date: Weds 25 October.

RULES 1) The competition is open only to amateur photographers. 2) Up to two entries only per category. 3) Entry of a picture constitutes a grant to BBC Worldwide to publish it in all media. 4) Entries will be judged by *BBC Wildlife*. 5) The winning image will be published in the December issue. 6) No correspondence will be entered into and winners will not be notified. 7) Entries will not be accepted by post or email.



'BIRDS IN FLIGHT' WINNER: GARY JOHN

A great class. We chose Gary's grey heron for its sense of movement and the way it depicts the bird in its environment. See the runners-up on our website.