

Great Bird Photo Tips

Follow these tips to take great photos of your bird

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Courtesy of Kim Craig, Arizona

Know how to work your camera to take great and focused photos of your bird.

Have you ever attempted to take a great photo of your bird only to be disappointed at the outcome? Bad angles, blurry subjects and red eyes are only a few of the problems. You don't need an elaborate camera to get that one great shot. Whether you use a digital or print camera, an expensive single lens reflex or a throwaway, you can take decent photos by developing a few skills and mastering a couple of tricks.

Study your camera's manual. Most disposable and point-and-shoot cameras only offer fixed focus, which means you can't zoom in or out or sharpen the focus. The lens "sees" within a preset range, usually several feet and beyond. A camera with automatic focus sharpens the focus for you from a pre-set minimum distance to infinity. Auto-focus cameras usually carry additional features, such as zoom and automatic flash. Manual cameras adjusted by hand for focus and light give the photographer more control over the look of the photo.

If you want holiday card-worthy photos, follow these tips from BIRD TALK contributing photographer Christopher Appoldt.

Great Bird Photo Tip – 1

Shoot at bird's-eye level. Appoldt advises shooting at the bird's eye level or slightly below. "Shooting from below will make the bird appear larger," he said.

Great Bird Photo Tip – 2

Get close. Get as close to your bird as your camera's focus range will allow. If the camera intimidates your bird, back off. I use a telephoto lens to get great close-ups of my birds without encroaching on their space. They're also less likely to be distracted by a far away camera and more apt to continue engaging in the behavior I want to capture on film. Use the zoom feature to fill the frame with your bird or to capture close-ups of its face.

Great Bird Photo Tip – 3

Create a clutter-free background. Nobody wants to see a sink full of dishes across the room in an otherwise engaging photo. Busy backgrounds detract from the subject. "When a viewer looks at a photo," Appoldt said, "the human brain has a tendency to pull the eye toward contrast. If you keep the main contrast within the bird, their attention will stay focused there, which is the result you're usually after."

Photograph your bird against a plain wall for portrait-style pictures. Add seasonal decorations or other birdie props as appropriate, but don't clutter the area with nonessentials. Be aware of mirrors, windows, television screens and other surfaces that might cause glares or reflect camera flashes. Set your bird in front of a matte background instead.

Great Bird Photo Tip – 4

Take lots of pictures. You might have to take dozens of photos to get one good shot. "When you're using film, the general rule of expectation is that you'll get two to three keepers out of a roll of 36," Appoldt said. "The more shots you can get, the greater the possibility you'll get something really interesting. So many things can go wrong: bad focus, bad angle, you might move, or the subject may move or blink. The more you take, the better. You'll eventually get one that's unflawed. An advantage of digital is that you can see right away if you need to keep going. Use a tripod to keep the camera steady and in place."

Great Bird Photo Tip – 5

Take candid shots. A photo of your bird in action shows its personality. Shoot your pet bird playing with a colorful toy, eating its favorite food, relating to a family member, splashing at bathtime, preening another bird or while it's in full scream.

Great Bird Photo Tip – 6

Use one light source. "People often fail to take mixed lighting sources into consideration," according to Appoldt. "Incandescent light bulbs, daylight and flash offer three different light temperatures and will cause shifts in colors. The camera will be confused about what to do with the different light sources. You can't overcome it with film because film is

set to specific color temperatures. The same rules apply with digital cameras, but you can program some digital cameras to make a custom 'white balance,' which will differentiate between the different light sources in the room. Check your manual for instructions."

Great Bird Photo Tip – 7

Avoid overexposure. Don't stand too close to your bird when using a flash, or the result will be a washed-out or overexposed picture. "The camera exposes for what its light meter determines is 18-percent gray," Appoldt explained. "It's very easy to fool that and get underexposure or overexposure especially with an automatic flash."

Great Bird Photo Tip – 8

Show your colors. Colorful birds can be photographed against almost any color background, but what about cockatoos and other pale birds? Photographing a white cockatoo in a white room or with a person dressed in white will get you a photo of just a beak, feet and eyes. Use medium or pastel colored backgrounds when photographing very pale birds. If you're an experienced photographer with good equipment, photograph white birds against black. In some cases, this much contrast results in overexposure of the bird because the camera's eye compensates for the black.

Great Bird Photo Tip – 9

Use the flash. Override the automatic flash feature on your camera, and use the flash as fill lighting for outdoor shots. This eliminates shadows and makes people and birds stand out against the background. How many photos have you seen where the bird is just a silhouette against the sunset or other scenery? The photographer probably forgot the flash.

Great Bird Photo Tip – 10

Eliminate redevye. Use a camera with a redevye reduction feature to eliminate that devilish red glare that often shows up in pupils. Appoldt explained that redevye reduction works by sending out a series of strobe flashes to shrink the pupils of the eyes before the major flash goes off. "The redevye will still be there, but it will be much smaller," he said. "If you have an adjustable flash attachment on your camera, tilt it up a little so it doesn't fire directly into the eyes. Experienced photographers can buy an off-camera flash to get the light up and off eye level so you don't get red eyes."

Great Bird Photo Tip – 11

Get comfortable. A comfortable bird looks more natural in a photograph. "I know it's a good shoot when a bird starts to preen and emulate its owner's voice," Appoldt said. "Give your bird time to get accustomed to the camera, the noise of the shutter and the situation. Many birds don't like having lights and reflectors overhead, and they might not like the large black 'eye' you keep pulling up to your face. More often than not, it's the noise of the shutter that seems to make birds jumpy."

Great Bird Photo Tip – 12

Have fun! Cameras now offer more options than ever. You can also crop, correct, enhance and duplicate photos through computer programs, such as Adobe Photoshop. Capture your bird's personality, and document its progress. I can see that the yellow in Cracker, my double yellow-headed Amazon, hasn't varied much because I've photographed her often over the past 26 years. Get your camera, and make some discoveries about your own bird.

Digital versus Film Cameras

Should you use film or a digital camera? There are advantages to both. High-definition print and slide film offers clarity and excellent color. Appoldt advises using a camera with good optical functions. "The better the optics, the better the overall quality of the image," Appoldt said.

A digital camera enables you to view your photographs immediately and delete the ones you don't like without the expense of film. "At six mega-pixels and above," said Appoldt, "you can equal the quality of some of the best print films. Most readily available 35mm print films aren't fine grained enough to show all the detail in the feathers. Slide film offers much finer grain and detail."