



**Setups for
Photographing Songbirds**

John James Audubon

- ❖ John James Audubon was an American ornithologist, naturalist and painter.
- ❖ He was known for documenting all species of American birds and for his detailed illustrations of birds in their natural habitats.
- ❖ His major publication, "The Birds of America (1827 – 1839) was a color-plate book still considered to be the finest ornithological work ever completed.
- ❖ Audubon died in 1851 and the National Audubon Society was founded in 1905 and named in his honor.

"A true conservationist is a man who knows that the world is not given by his fathers, but borrowed from his children."

Audubon's Illustrations usually depicted birds on elaborate perches.



FYI - Audubon shot and killed every bird he painted.



"The moment a bird was dead, no matter how beautiful it had been in life, the pleasure of possession became blunted for me."

Bird Photography Comes Full Circle

- ❖ For a few, one of the most exciting new challenges in bird photography harkens back to John James Audubon's illustrations.
- ❖ The challenge is to take images of birds on beautiful, elaborate perches similar to Audubon's color-plates.
- ❖ This can seem difficult, but once the principals are understood, and with a lot of practice, it can be relatively easy and extremely rewarding.

Altamira Oriole



Downy Woodpecker



Bobwhite Quail



What is needed for successful songbird photography?

- ❖ Availability of songbirds – probably the most important thing.
- ❖ Obtaining and maintaining a constant food supply – year round!
- ❖ Supply of suitable perches.
- ❖ Camera, lenses, tripod and ETL flash (Gimbal head really helps).
- ❖ Pruning shears.
- ❖ Clamping device to hold perches.
- ❖ Tons of Patience.

What is nice to have for successful songbird photography?

- ❖ A photo blind, a place to hide or a method for untethered photography
(See Untethered Wildlife Photography - April 12).
- ❖ High ISO, frame rate and low noise enabled camera.
- ❖ Vertical grip on the Camera – hours taking pictures in vertical mode may cause your wrist to ache for days.
- ❖ Pleasing background – helps if it is very far away!
- ❖ Battery pack for flash – see the Flashpoint flash battery packs.
- ❖ Flash Extender – Better Beamer or Harbor Design.

Feed the birds every day year-round!

You want the birds accustomed to finding food at your feeding station!

Birds eat all day long. When your food supply is gone they are forced to find another supply.

It might take them a few days to get accustomed to feeding again at your feeding station.



Bird Food

- ❖ Black-oiled Sunflower seeds.
- ❖ Suet!!!
- ❖ Smaller bird seed.
- ❖ Mealworms – live and freeze dried.
- ❖ Fruits & Nuts.

It is a false economy to buy cheap bird food!

Suitable Perches

- ❖ Apple, cherry, plum, serviceberry etc. Blossoms of flowering trees.
- ❖ Skinny, dead trees.
- ❖ Logs, especially moss covered.
- ❖ Shrubbery.
- ❖ Garden utensils for those “technically” non-nature images.

Ok. We are ready to talk about setups!

On the day you plan to photograph birds, it is necessary to put away all sources of food, except one!

I leave up one feeder like the one pictured.

I wrap a piece of mat board around the middle section, leaving a 4" vertical opening facing my perch.

The perch is attached to a very cheap (Walmart) tripod. The branch is shoved in the hollow part of the handle and shimmed with some short clippings.

I place the perch about 6 feet away, and about 4 feet off the ground.



Not Shown – but cover the top of the tripod and handle with loose scraggly hedge cuttings or branches to prevent birds from staging off the tripod in lieu of the branch.

Something heavy can be hung from the center column to prevent the tripod tipping over from the wind or a big bird.

I sometimes use this feeder,
especially when doing BIF.

- The important take-away is you need to limit the choices of food, and places to perch.
- It really helps to set this up where there are not a lot of other places to land!
- Bigger birds like red-bellied woodpeckers, blue jays and red-winged blackbirds will sometimes chase the feeding bird away.
- But, for the most part, birds are very respectful and they patiently wait for their turn at the feeder, hopefully on your perch.



Flowering Branches as Perches

- ❖ The purpose of the Flowering Branch (beyond the obvious) is to provide a staging area for birds to land on while waiting for their turn at the feeder.
- ❖ Prune the flowering branches off the parent tree being careful not to leave an ugly wound on the tree (or your finger)!
- ❖ Carefully examine the branch and determine the best orientation for the majority of the flowers to be in the same plane of focus as the bird.
- ❖ The bird will land on the sturdiest part of the branch so prune away a nice place, where you want them to land.
- ❖ You can clone out any visible pruning collateral later.

Cardinal on Wild Plum

Note the pruning collateral.

I intentionally used an image before cloning out the pruning collateral.



Goldfinches on Redbud



Chickadee on Wild Plum



Camera Settings

- ❖ Use the largest aperture, you can use, that will provide the depth of field you need. You can get by with a larger aperture than you might think. I generally stop down 1 stop from wide open.
- ❖ Shutter speed is far more important, for sharp images. These birds are constantly moving and will require a much faster shutter speed than normally used for static objects.
- ❖ I try to stay above 1/500 sec for perched birds.
- ❖ This is the time to use servo focus. Try to keep the focus indicator as small as you can and constantly on the bird's head.
- ❖ Master the ability to be able to constantly move your focus point.
- ❖ I love rear button autofocus for everything, but it really shines here. If the bird's head moves off your focus point, pressing the shutter button won't cause a re-focus.

Using a TTL Flash

- ❖ A TTL flash (with a “Better Beamer”, or a “Harbor Digital Design” flash extender) set to “fill” will definitely improve your images.
- ❖ A TTL flash set to “fill” will not only open up the shadows on bright days, but will add contrast and detail on cloudy days.
- ❖ Very Important: Most people do not realize that their flash unit needs to be zeroed-in to work effectively. A flash that is zeroed-in will, besides just lighting your subject more effectively, will also recycle much faster.
- ❖ Most flashes are aimed too low! The camera is designed to turn your flash off after the correct amount of light is reflected back from your subject. If the flash is missing your subject, the flash output will not be consistent!
- ❖ Focus your camera on a wall at the distance you plan to shoot and take a picture with your flash. Then take one without the flash. What you focused on should be lit and not somewhere else. Adjust your flash until it lights where it is expected to.
- ❖ Adjust your fill flash compensation so that you can't tell you used a flash!

Flash Accessories



Flashpoint Blast Pack

- Extra large capacity swappable lithium battery.
- 1,800 full power flash shots!
- 3 hours for full charge.
- Dual ports drive two flash units or route both ports to one flash.
Twin Power Adapter sold separately.
- LED battery Power Level Indicator on top.
- Order with flash cable to match flash brand.
- Can be ordered as a kit with cable, strap and extra battery.

Con: Relatively expensive \$269, or as a kit \$349. Twin Power Adapter \$20.



Harbor Digital Flash Extender

- Each model is made to a specific flash.
- Won't fall off in the wind.
- Won't melt your flash.
- Doesn't have to be assembled each time.

Cons: Doesn't disassemble, bulky, takes up a lot of space. More expensive than Better Beamer - \$58.

Backgrounds

- ❖ I think the background is as important as the subject matter.
- ❖ Use the biggest aperture you can, to cause the background to go completely out of focus.
- ❖ Take time placing the perch and feeder to insure the least amount of obstacles will appear in your image.
- ❖ Watch out for shadows of trees appearing in your image background.
- ❖ Depth of Field Preview will often show unwanted features in your background.
- ❖ Depth of Field is also influenced by how large your subject is, in the viewfinder. Try to make the largest bird, that you are likely to photograph, nearly full frame and crop in post processing for smaller birds.

A Pleasing Background

The question I am asked most often is “How do you get your backgrounds so clean and green”?



The Actual Background

Answer:

- Long Lens
- Large Aperture
- Far away background
- No major distractions



**Skinny Dead Trees
(I have more than two!)**



Drilling Skinny Dead Tree Holes

Be careful!

You will be using a spade bit and drilling at an angle! (3/4" to 1" holes)

Keep your hands away from the bit!

I put 6 holes, 3 per side, in each tree.

Place the holes on opposite sides.

Orient the tree so the holes are perpendicular to your camera and pretty much out of view.



Filling Skinny Dead Tree Holes

Note:

I now fill exclusively with my homemade suet!

Can't keep it in the holes!



Homemade Suet

- 2 cups reduced suet
- 2 cups peanut butter
- 4 cups quick oatmeal
- 2 cups mesa flower
- 2 cups wheat flower

I make my own peanut butter using raw peanuts and sunflower oil, in a food processor.

Cook all ingredients in a slow cooker, stirring until consistency of peanut butter.

This does not make suet cheaper! - just a lot better, and it won't melt in the summer!

Pictures on Skinny Dead Trees



White-breasted nuthatch



Downy woodpecker

More Pictures on Skinny Dead Trees



Red-bellied woodpecker



Hairy woodpecker

Mossy Logs

Fill with live mealworms at first, until you attract the birds you want.

Then, you can substitute freeze-dried mealworms!



Picture on a Mossy Log

Marty's catbird!

I spent days and hours getting a lot of nice pictures of the gray catbird, but Marty got this one in 20 minutes.

Note:

The catbird's display is because it is being dive bombed by another bird.



Picture on a Mossy Log

Here, the brown thrasher is loading up with freeze-dried mealworms to take back to the chicks.

I believe that feeding birds, while they are rearing their young, takes a lot of stress out of their lives and greatly improves chick survivability!

Brown thrasher



Marty, and her cat, photographing the brown thrasher on the mossy log.

The brown thrasher has been one of the most difficult birds to photograph. They are very elusive and secretive.

With time, we were able to completely forego the blind and just sit and photograph them.

This also worked great for catbirds, as well as woodpeckers and cardinals.



A Picture on a Garden Implement

I didn't spend a lot of time with this setup, but I plan to this year!

I just took these in the rain one day.

This year I want to get the bluebirds feeding their chicks on this old hand tiller.



Another Picture on a Garden
Implement



A Few Final Notes

- ❖ Setting up to photograph birds on elaborate perches is a lot of work and takes a lot of planning and experimenting!
- ❖ It is also a lot of fun and very rewarding!
- ❖ There are a lot of people taking pictures of birds. Only a few are going to this extreme, so your images will really stand out!
- ❖ The birds will get amazingly tame over time.
- ❖ When you have a lot of birds at your feeders, even normally very shy birds will be tempted to join them.
- ❖ Plus other wildlife will be attracted.

Birds will become tame.

This pileated woodpecker landed on one of my “planted” trees while I was putting suet on another tree less than 10 feet away.

Often the nuthatch will land on the same tree, where I am putting in the suet!



Other critters will come!

2 pairs of turkeys nested and raised their broods on our property.

I have been putting a 5 gal. bucket of whole corn out every day – 150 lbs. every 10 days!

The corn attracted them originally, and now keeps them around.



Other critters will come!



We had 3 separate doe's, each raising 2 fawns on our property.

I saw them nearly every day, sometimes all 9 of them at the same time, while photographing birds!

It was a blast to see all the fawns chasing each other and playing together!

We are currently getting anywhere up to a dozen deer coming to our whole corn daily.

Coming April 12th

Untethered Wildlife Photography

By Bill Welch - ©a natural selection



Untethered Wildlife Photography

By Bill Welch

Canon 7D MkII

1/6400 sec @ f/
11, iso 6400



Bill Welch
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Get out and shoot something!