
BIRD PHOTOGRAPHY: EXPOSURE, ANGLES, AND VIEWPOINTS

Quick Guide
Written by Tobie Schalkwyk



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Photograph by Tobie Schalkwyk

Exposure? So what? It's a combination of aperture, shutter speed, and ISO; right? "What can be added that was not said or documented before?" I hear you thinking. Well, true. The exposure triangle is the core of exposure. But the meat around that core is hardly ever discussed.

In this guide I'm making the assumption that you know all about the exposure triangle, so that's not what we're going to discuss. We're going to look at other factors influencing exposure, and what to pay attention to and what to ignore.

Then we're going to have a quick look at the importance of the angles at which you shoot your birds and the viewpoints or perspectives from which you do so.

EXPOSURE

Picture this: you see this beautiful bird in flight. Perfect! It flies straight to you – even better! You’ve never photographed this species before so you battle to control your excitement as you feverishly set the exposure perfectly. Shutter speed: check. Aperture: check. ISO: check.

The exposure ruler in your viewfinder confirms the fact that you’re spot on! As you keep your finger on the shutter release button in continuous shooting mode, you can already imagine the ‘oohs and ‘aaahs’ of your social media friends and you picture the ‘Like’ count shooting up to record highs!

At home you rush to your laptop and can’t wait for the photo import to finish. Then, disaster! You’re looking at a set of perfect silhouettes! You cannot control the disappointment and disbelief as you try to salvage what you can by adjusting the Shadows and Darks sliders of your post-processing package! But, not even the fact that you’ve shot your images in RAW is enough to help you out.

So, what went wrong? It could be one of a few things, but the most common culprit is metering. Your camera advised you to set your exposure based on the total scene. The problem is that most of the scene comprised of bright sky and/or white clouds, so your darker bird carried minimal priority as your camera made its exposure recommendations to you. What, then, is the solution?



Photograph by Tobie Schalkwyk


*Nikon D7100 + Nikkor 300mm f4 + TC E14 II (35mm equivalent
of 630mm) f/7.1 | 1/800s | 200 ISO | Beanbag*


METERING

In non-bird genres of photography the exposure is usually set to equal levels all over the scene. In bird photography your main concern is your subject; the environment around it is of lesser concern. How do you achieve this?

Spot metering. This metering mode would advise you to set your exposure based on a single (the selected focus) point. This might mean that you sometimes will have under or overexposed surroundings, but so what? The main importance is that your bird's exposure is spot on.

Spot metering ignores the surroundings and ensures that this lilac-breasted roller is well exposed in spite of the fact that the background is overexposed. It contributed to an artistic/high-key-type shot which is never to be scoffed at.

 **Key Lesson:** Spot metering is the 'go to' option for bird photography in most situations as a bird's size is so small compared to its environment that the other metering options may produce under or overexposed subjects.

 **Recommended Reading:** If you'd like to learn how to use your flash unit for better photography, grab a copy of Photzy's premium guide: [Electronic Flash – Parts and Practices](#).

AUTO ISO

Stay away from Auto ISO unless you really have a purpose for it! Bird photography is one genre where you do not want the camera to guess what you're up to! I have tried this on a few occasions and 90% of the time I was really disappointed with the results!

The only case where you might want to try it is where your bird is moving around between shaded and sunlit areas in a tree. But even then you should not have high expectations from the results.

PRE-EMPTING EXPOSURE

Is it possible to pre-empt exposure so that you have minimum adjustments to do on the bird you're most likely going to encounter next? Yes, and it might be a life saver!

- If you're not sure what bird you're going to encounter next, look around and find a spot or object that is not too bright but also not too dark. An 'average lit' greyish tree trunk is a gift in this case. Use it for setting your exposure. Be ready to quickly run up or down with your ISO settings based on whether your next bird is very dark or pure white.
- If you expect your next bird to be either white or black, do exactly the same as above but with a bright/dark object close by.


⚠ Note: After pre-empting your settings, a bird in flight may play games with your camera's 'mind' as the single metering point moves around between the bright sky and your subject. Fight the urge to adjust settings unnecessarily at this stage. Your pre-empted settings should at least position you somewhere usable during post-processing as it's within your camera's dynamic range (see Dynamic Range lower down).



Photograph by Tobie Schalkwyk

Nikon D600 + Tamron 150-600 G2 @ 200mm f/6.3 | 1/640s | 400 ISO | Handheld

The exposure in this shot was pre-empted by using the shaded areas in the background as I knew there was a good chance that a local pair of Verreux's eagles would show up. The shot would not have been possible without pre-emption as the bird was in view for only a second or two.

 **Key Lesson:** Some shots would be almost impossible without pre-emption. Remember to re-adjust your pre-empted settings as the light changes from time to time due to cloud formations passing by or other factors.

BRACKETING


Bracketing allows you to shoot two or three (or even more in some cameras) shots and your camera will automatically adjust exposure between them. In most cases it allows you to select the number of bracketed shots and then the adjustment amount (in f-stops) between each of them.

For example, you may set the number of bracketed shots to '3' and the exposure gap between them is 0.3 f-stops. Or perhaps a full f-stop. You may also have a choice to select the bracketing order (for example, the underexposed image first, then the image at the selected exposure, and then the overexposed image).

This is a handy feature in the event where:

- you need to pre-empt your next shot's exposure but you're not sure about the bright/dark tones offered by the next bird to be photographed;
- when you shoot white or black birds and you're scared of over/underexposing them (one of the bracketed shots should be reasonably spot on); or
- when shooting a black and white bird and you want to make sure that one of your shots will cater best for both tonal ranges.

Practice setting and using bracketing. It's a very handy tool in your skills toolbox and it may just serve you well on one or more occasions.

 **Recommended Reading:** If you'd like to learn how to use your flash unit for better photography, grab a copy of Photzy's premium guide: [Electronic Flash – Parts and Practices](#).

A FEW THOUGHTS ON EXPOSURE

Keep the following tips in mind regarding exposure:

- White birds always tend to be overexposed, especially in bright sunlight. You may want to underexpose them a touch (by 0.3 – 1 f-stops). It's easy to raise the highlights/shadows/exposure a little on white birds in post-processing without blowing your whites, but it's impossible to recover blown whites.
- Underexposed black birds tend to generate noise if you raise shadows/exposure in post-processing. Rather, over-expose them slightly during the shoot and lower the shadows/exposure slightly in post-processing. This usually has the added benefit of reducing possible noise that was generated during the shoot.
- If in doubt, just try and have your exposure more or less on target. As long as you're reasonably close to the center of your camera's dynamic range, you should be able to recover brights or darks successfully in post-processing.
- Bird photography leans itself more toward shooting in the sun than any other genre, but it's still not your best friend in some instances. If you get a day where the sky is covered by a thin layer of clouds, grab your gear for a bird shoot!

You'll never have a better diffuser of sunlight!

- On sunny days your best shots come from early mornings (before 10am) and late afternoons (after 4pm) because of softer sunlight. I love to arrive at my planned venue for a shoot at about 6am. It's sometimes too dark then to take useful shots, but what's wrong with enjoying the sounds and looks of nature as you settle in and wait for the light to increase? Perhaps with a flask of hot coffee for company? It has the added advantage of not moving around in suitable light and scaring away your potential subjects!
- Remember that the adjustment of your focal length might close your aperture slightly if you have it wide open, resulting in underexposure. For example, if you've selected f/5 for a lens with an 'f5-6.3' specification, the setting will automatically change to f/6.3 as you zoom in fully on your subject. You'll have to adjust your shutter speed or ISO in order to keep the same exposure level.

Being on the 'wrong' side of a bird is not the end of the world, especially with a relatively static bird. Expose for the shaded section and use rim light and/or wind to create an artistic effect.



Photograph by Tobie Schalkwyk

*Nikon D7100 + Nikkor 300mm f4 + TC E14 II (35mm equivalent
of 630mm) f/7.1 | 1/2000s | 320 ISO | Beanbag*

💎 **Key Lesson:** Some bright/dark colored birds may be over/underexposed regardless of the fact that all of your settings are spot on. Rather, underexpose white birds slightly and overexpose black birds slightly. Then make adjustments in post-processing.

The amount of deliberate under/overexposure is not cast in stone and would depend on the presence of clouds, the time of day, and other factors. Experiment until your gut feeling is close to spot on for your needed settings in each situation.

ANGLES AND VIEWPOINTS

So what does 'angles and viewpoints' have to do with exposure? Well, not much directly, but quite a lot indirectly. In most instances there's not a lot you can do to influence it, but you can influence your images by waiting for the right moment to release your camera's shutter.

HAVE THE SUN BEHIND YOUR BACK

If you're lucky enough to settle down in a bird hide or perhaps at a point overlooking the relatively static position of your subject (for example, a bird's nest or a regularly visited flower), try your best to have the sun behind you. Shooting a bird from its shadowed side usually leads to a lot of frustration during post-processing and (frankly) is usually not worth the effort, especially with dark birds.

Of course, there's always the exception to the rule! Rim light can create beautiful images, especially on very light birds and at a moment when their feathers are lifted by a breeze.



This backlit spoonbill's feathers created an interesting subject with the help of a breeze.

◆ **Key Lesson:** Having the sun behind your back is nice to have, but if that is not possible, you can still get interesting shots with the help of rim lighting and wind movement.

Photograph by Tobie Schalkwyk

*Nikon D600 + Nikkor 70-200mm f/2.8 + TC 14E II (@ 35mm
equivalent of 630mm) f/6.3 | 1/1000s | 400 ISO | Handheld*



Photograph by Tobie Schalkwyk

Nikon D600 + Nikkor 70-200mm f/2.8 @ 200mm f/5.6 | 1/1250s | 1000 ISO | Tripod


DON'T UNDERESTIMATE THE HELP OF ARTIFICIAL LIGHT


If you do not have control over the shaded part of your subject, why not use artificial light? A remote speedlite or two closer to your subject (wirelessly triggered) can create wonders!

I have found that, in general, birds are not scared of flash lights. They might 'flick' their wings for a split second as the flash is triggered, but other than that they will not pay it much attention. Place it about 6' from your bird and control its strength from your wireless controller.

If possible, make adjustments before your birds arrive (whilst checking the replays on your LCD screen), because once it pays you a visit you do not want to pay much attention to exposure issues but rather focus on your subject.

The white-breasted sugarbird on the previous page was snapped in the garden. I've lit it up from the left and front using a 600w studio strobe at the lowest setting. The sun was coming from the right so without the strobe, the bird would have had dark shades on the left, rendering the image useless.

 **Key Lesson:** Sometimes dark shadows might spoil your image. Lots can still be achieved with the help of artificial lighting (even a simple reflector) or by changing your position in respect of your subject.

 **Recommended Reading:** If you'd like to learn how to use your flash unit for better photography, grab a copy of Photzy's premium guide: [Electronic Flash – Parts and Practices](#).



Photograph by Tobie Schalkwyk

Nikon D600 + Tamron 150-600 G2 @ 600mm f/7.1 | 1/1000s | 800 ISO | Handheld

DON'T FORGET YOUR BACKGROUND

One fantastic trait of long range lenses is the rendering of beautiful soft backgrounds. The secret is to position yourself as close as possible to the bird with a background as far away as possible if it's not an open sky.

Sometimes there might be a tree or other object right behind the birds that would create a very busy background even if it's blurred. A few steps to the left or right might eliminate it and offer you a clean sky or other object far away.

This fiscal shrike had trees behind it to form a busy background, but just by taking a few steps to the right I was able to exchange it for a faraway hillside.


ANGLES

Some birds' colors reflect much better from certain angles, not only of the bird relative to you but also relative to the direction of the sunlight. Always be on the lookout for the bird's movements that reflect its colors best, and snap away!

In terms of height, birds on a perch high above are usually the least attractive. If possible at all, try to get a vantage point at least at the same vertical level as the bird. Birds in flight from below usually reveal beautiful feather detail, though.

A bird shot from vantage points higher than itself sometimes expose beautiful colors, especially the wing colors from flying birds. It sometimes creates the illusion that you are in the air together with the bird.

A bit of light from a different angle and this apparent dull-colored hadeda ibis (image on the next page) was transformed into a canvas of beautiful colors.

 **Key Lesson:** Don't fall into the trap of only producing stereotyped shots. Interesting variations can be achieved by waiting for the moment when your bird's colors are displayed in different ways.



Photograph by Tobie Schalkwyk

Nikon D600 + Tamron 150-600 G2 @ 600mm

WIND DIRECTION

As shown with the spoonbill image on page 11, a breeze can add a beautiful dimension to your bird image, especially with white birds like cattle egrets and other birds with long feathers. Be ready for moments when the wind lifts or ruffles their feathers, and snap away!



Photograph by Tobie Schalkwyk

CONCLUSION

Exposure is, without doubt, the most important aspect of bird photography. A perfectly sharp or well-composed image is useless if you cannot make out the details of your subject (unless you aim for a silhouette)! Practice it; play with it until you can adjust it in a second without looking away from your viewfinder.

Always keep an eye on your ISO. That should be the dial you're looking for first as the light strengthens and you can afford to bring down the exposure a bit, and the last one in order to increase exposure. Once it's on or below 200, you might look at shutter speed and/or aperture adjustments to decrease your exposure level.



Hey there!

Let's get real for a minute... Learning photography can be super challenging! But we're here to help you every step of the way! Here are 3 of our most useful (*and FREE!*) photography resources:



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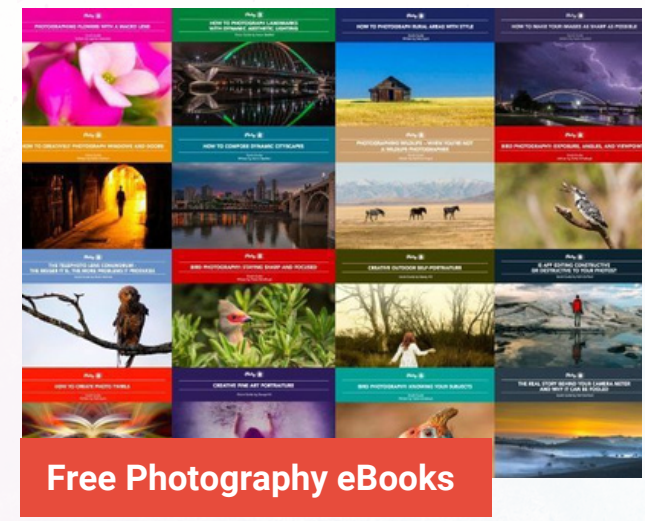
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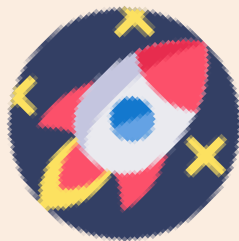
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tobie Schalkwyk is a retired Web Systems Developer hoping to soon make an income from photography alone. He has a passion for all genres of nature photography, especially bird photography, but he also gets involved in other genres of photography like weddings, events, and in-studio portraits.

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