Creating Exceptional Portraits

Eurasian Eagle-Owl (captive). Olympus OM-D E-M1 Mark II, M.Zuiko 40-150mm F2.8 PRO. Exposure: 1/160 sec., f/2.8, ISO 800.
Due to the proliferation of cameras and social media, many more people take photos of birds and view them than ever before. But of course, quantity does not equal quality. To make truly memorable bird photographs, ones that grab a viewer’s attention, you must practice, have ample amounts of patience, and follow the advice of pros.

Scott Bourne is among the best professional bird photographers working today, and he is happy to share his knowledge with others. Bourne is an author, a lecturer, and an Olympus Visionary. A photographer for more than four decades, his work has appeared in more than 200 publications. He co-founded the Photo Podcast Network (photopodcasts.com) with journalist and author Marco Larousse, and he founded the wide-ranging photography site Photofocus.com. His website, www.scottbourne.com, features many astounding photographs as well as more than 30 educational articles about bird photography. Bourne has more than 237,000 followers on Twitter and another 3,500 on Instagram.

Bourne has shot hundreds of thousands of bird photographs showing everything birds do — feeding, drinking, fighting, flying, carrying prey, nesting, you name it. His favorite style above all is portraiture.

“Birders have life lists,” he says, referring to the list many birders keep of species they have seen or heard. “Here’s how my life list works: If I have a full-frame portrait headshot of a bird, it’s on my life list.” Under this definition, his life list is around 200 species. “I’ve seen way more than 200 birds, but I don’t count them unless I have the headshot,” he adds. While the task is daunting, he wants to take portraits of every bird species in the world.

“My simple goal is that if I get people to look at bird portraits carefully enough, and get them to think about these creatures as something special, maybe I can help speak for the birds in that regard,” he explains. “I have a Bald Eagle that I got really close to because he was super-tame, and the feather detail around his eye is astonishing. Most people aren’t going to see that detail of that bird in the wild. But with still photography, you get to look at that bird in a way that maybe you never would have. And you get to see the detail in the feathers around the beak, and the color of the eye, and the texture of the eye.”

If you want to pursue Bourne’s passion of making exceptional bird portraits, he offers the following eight pieces of advice.
1. Shoot at eye-level
Taking a bird portrait is a lot like taking a human portrait. “I learned to take human portraits before I learned to take bird portraits,” he says. “It’s amazing to me how much of that applies. I think I’ve been successful in my bird portraits because I apply those lessons.”

His first tip is to get parallel and eye-level with the bird. Bourne offers this example: “If you take pictures of your kids when they’re young, you tend to shoot down on them because you’re taller than them. And if you look at professional photography of children, you’ll notice that they’re almost always at eye-level because that’s much more intimate.” The same concept applies to photographing birds (and other wildlife).

In some cases, however, you may decide that a photo is better if you don’t shoot at eye-level. “Once I photographed a baby mountain lion that was six weeks old,” Bourne says. “He was small enough to fit in my shirt pocket, but he was going to grow to become a 300-pound killer in six months. So when I took his portrait, I shot up on him to establish his dominance and to give people a sense of where he’s going to be. If you shoot up on a subject, you establish dominance. If you shoot down on it, you establish subservience.”

2. Start with larger birds
Any bird photographer should start by trying to take images of larger birds or tame birds. For example, you probably live in a place near gulls of some type. “Gulls are typically not afraid of people, so they make great photography subjects,” he says. “They’ll come right up to you and steal your peanut butter and jelly sandwich.”

Other larger birds to seek out, especially when you’re new to photography, include eagles, hawks, egrets, herons, geese, pelicans, and swans.

3. Focus on the eye
“Like in a human portrait, the only thing that has to be in focus is the eye,” Bourne explains. “Now, if you want to get other stuff in focus, that’s fine, but the eye has to be in focus. If you can’t get both eyes, then get the nearest eye.”

Depending on the aperture of your lens (the f-stop), you’ll have more or less depth of field. If you want more things in focus, you need a smaller aperture (achieved by stopping down with a larger f-stop number). The smaller the aperture, the more depth of field.

4. Simplify the background
Bourne believes photographers should want to draw attention to the bird, not the background. “My backgrounds are clutter-free. That’s what I’m kind of known for: Just simple portraits. They almost look they could have been done in a studio, but they weren’t.”

“I tend to shoot at a very large aperture — a small number to get the background to go away, but that’s just my personal style. I don’t like cluttered backgrounds.”

So, keep in mind that when you use a larger aperture, you will produce smaller depth of field, blurring the
6. Head to the zoo

Zoos are great places for photography. Not only do they have captive exotic species, but wild birds often visit zoos, especially duck ponds or other bodies of water. “I recently shot photos at the Albuquerque Zoo, and 98 percent of the birds in their duck pond are free-flying,” Bourne says. “I love photographing in zoos, because if you’re trying to build your list, that’s a good way to go. Birds in zoos are typically tame or tamer.”

Aviaries are another option for finding great photo subjects. Top-flight aviaries in the United States include the National Aviary in Pittsburgh, the Bronx Zoo’s World of Birds, San Diego Wild Animal Park, and the Tracy Aviary in Salt Lake City. “Unless you want to go to Tanzania to find a Superb Starling, for example, the best place to find one is the San Diego Wild Animal Park,” Bourne says.

7. Use the right gear

Birds move around a lot, so if you aren’t using top-notch equipment, you’ll miss more shots than you take. Bourne is a big believer in Olympus cameras, lenses, and other gear. It’s not just the impressive capabilities of his camera but also the extensive lens selection that make the Olympus system the best choice for him. His go-to lenses are the M.Zuiko 40-150mm F2.8 PRO and 300mm F4.0 IS PRO. Speaking of the 40-150mm F2.8 PRO, Bourne says, “I’m in love with that range,” which, with the camera’s Micro Four Thirds sensor, gives him an equivalent of 80-300mm. Plus, his OM-D E-M1 Mark II and the M.Zuiko PRO lenses are weatherproof, so he doesn’t need to worry about outdoor elements when he’s using his gear.

If he needs extra telephoto reach, it’s the 300mm F4.0 IS PRO, equivalent to a 600mm super-telephoto lens. “That lens is amazing. I can’t say enough about it. It’s one of the most impressive lenses ever created,” he says. It’s exceedingly sharp, and Bourne notes its superior close-focusing capability. “A close-focusing distance of less than 5 feet — instead of 15 feet with lenses of equivalent focal length for DSLRs — means I can fill a frame with a bird’s eye if I want to, while remaining at a respectful distance.”
8. Learn as much as you can about birds
Finally, the caveat with all bird photography is to know bird behavior, Bourne explains. “If you don’t know how birds behave or how they live, you won’t even find the bird. If someone says, ‘I need a picture of a Harris’s Hawk,’ I have to know how to find one, and how to get a full-frame portrait of one. That doesn’t come from just being a great photographer. You have to study the behavior. You have to know what they’re going to do. To learn something about birds, read profiles of different birds in magazines like BirdWatching.”

In other words, think of bird photography like you’d think of taking photos of people. “If I’m paid to photograph a CEO of a company,” Bourne says, “I’m going to do some research to find out what his hobbies are, how long he’s worked there, what kind of product they make. I’m going to get to know him, so I have something to talk to him about when I’m making his portrait.

“It works with birds, too. I often talk to them and promise to make them famous. I don’t think they really respond to that, but they do let me take their picture.”

Matt Mendenhall is the editor of BirdWatching magazine and BirdWatchingDaily.com. Follow us on Facebook and Twitter.

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WHAT’S IN SCOTT’S BAG
Scott Bourne shoots with Olympus equipment. He says it’s extremely lightweight, easy to pack, and best of all, it produces photographs on par with more expensive gear. He notes that his work can be printed at dimensions of 6 feet by 9 feet.

“Iimage stabilization is built into the camera body, so you don’t need a tripod with Olympus gear,” he adds. “It’s much easier to carry around, and the image quality is stupendous. The tracking autofocus is another thing that bird photographers really need. You can’t fake it when you’re trying to photograph an eagle that switches its dive angle toward the water 90 degrees in one tenth of a millisecond. Autofocus has to be able to keep up.”

Here’s what Bourne carries into the field:
• OM-D E-M1 Mark II (2)
• M.Zuiko 40-150mm F2.8 PRO (80-300mm in 35mm equivalent)
• M.Zuiko 300mm F4.0 IS PRO (600mm in 35mm equivalent)
• M.Zuiko 12-100mm F4.0 IS PRO (24-200mm in 35mm equivalent)
• M.Zuiko 7-14mm F2.8 PRO (14-28mm in 35mm equivalent)
• MC-14 1.4x Teleconverter
• HLD-9 Power Battery Grip
• EE-1 Dot Sight
• FL-900R Flash

Learn more about Olympus at www.getolympus.com