



How to photograph... Garden birds

In the second of our new series, bird photographer Mike Atkinson shows you the easiest way to develop your photographic skills



THE birds in your garden are ideal subjects on which to develop your photography skills. If you use them to practise your focusing, exposure, timing and composition, these will become second nature and you'll later be able to make the most of any opportunities to photograph rarer species out in the field.

Garden birds provide you with a range of target sizes, from bulky Woodpigeons right down to our smallest birds. Some, like Coal Tits, will test your reflexes, whilst others such as finches may stay in one spot long enough for you to set up a good composition.

Best of all, you can use birdtables and feeders to bring the birds within photographic range and to control the entire set-up (lighting, distance, perches, and so on). If you don't have a garden in which you can set up feeders, you should be able to find some at local parks or reserves, or you can even establish your own feeding station in a public area, eg. by regularly placing bird food on a tree stump.

ESSENTIAL GEAR

FEEDERS AND PERCHES: Any kind of bird feeder can be used, but your photos will look better if the birds are on a natural-looking perch. A small log with holes or crevices to hold food is ideal for this purpose.

HIDE: Some garden birds, such as Robins, will be happy with you being outside in the garden.

Others will be comfortable with you taking photos through an open door or window in your house/shed (avoid taking photos through window glass, as this can give reflections, distortion or 'mistiness'). But if you want the best range of species and control over setup, you could buy or make a simple hide.

Mike runs bird photography workshops and provides one-to-one tuition. For full details, visit his website at mikeatkinson.net

SETTING UP THE SHOT

Pick the best time

For the best results from your bird photography, aim to take your photos at either end of the day: the birds will be more likely to visit your garden's feeders at these times and the softer light will be much more pleasing.

Get the light right

Once you've got your times worked out, set up your feeders so that they are in parts of the garden that will be in direct sunlight at either end of the day and so that you will be able to take your photographs with the sun behind you.

First practice shots

Practise taking some shots of birds on your bird table or hanging feeders, or catch them perching on adjacent branches. It is important to always have your camera at eye level with the birds you are photographing.

Get the natural look

To get both control and a natural look, use food to get the birds to land on an old log (just sit this on your birdtable). Avoid having man-made objects in the shot, to get a more satisfying end result from your photos.

Turn over for photo advice

Getting the focus right



If you can, set your camera so that it focuses on whatever is at a fixed point within the frame, rather than, for example, on whatever is nearest (the log in this case). As a rule, line up the focus point on the bird's eye. If your camera can only focus using the centre point of the frame, use that to focus on the eye and then crop the image later on your computer to get a good composition.



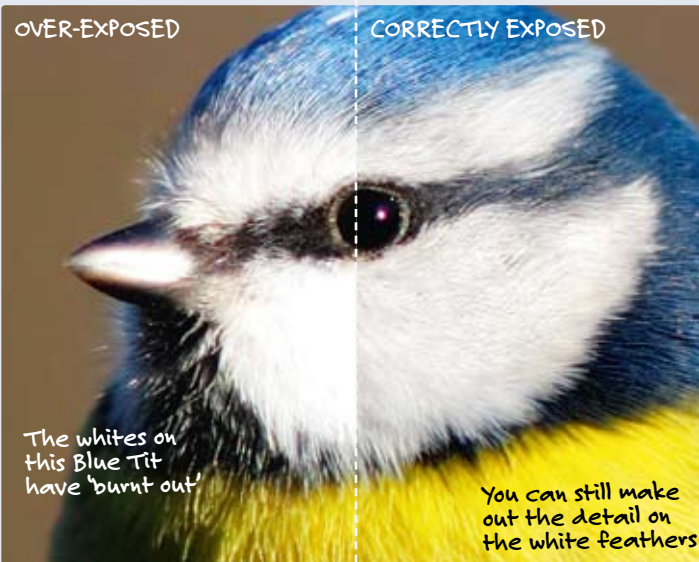
Freezing movement



Here, the bird is in sharp focus, but the shutter speed was not fast enough to freeze its movement. Either increase the shutter speed (see below) or catch the bird when it stops for a moment. If your photos show blur in one direction, this will be due to either 'camera shake' or movement of the bird – or both. Camera shake can be reduced by better camera support (such as a tripod or beanbag) or by using an 'image stabilised' camera or lens, but this won't help you to freeze the bird itself.

ISO explained
Kingsley Singleton of *Digital Photo* magazine says: "The ISO setting controls how sensitive your camera's sensor is to light, just like old-fashioned 'speeds' of film. Low sensitivities, like ISO 50 will have the effect of slowing your shutter speed (not good for fast moving birds), while high sensitivities have the opposite effect. There is a trade-off though, and it comes in the form of digital noise. This grain-like effect increases as you raise the ISO and can affect sharpness and colours at higher levels."

Exposing correctly



In this photo the tit's face has been over-exposed, or 'burnt out'. You need to deliberately under-expose photos like this one, to retain detail in the light areas. Reviewing your images during the shoot can avoid disappointment back home: some adjustments can be made on your computer, slightly dark images can be lightened easily, but 'blown highlights' like this can't always be recovered.

Under-exposing
One way to under-expose your images is to use your camera's exposure compensation setting, if it has one. The button will most likely have a +/- symbol on it. Check your camera manual for full instructions, but basically it allows you to over or under-expose the shot by varying degrees.

Increase the shutter speed

The blur caused by either camera shake or bird movement can be reduced by using a faster shutter speed, because the shutter is open for less time to take the shot. A basic way to increase the shutter speed is to select the Sport mode available on most digital compact and SLR cameras. You may also be able to select a higher 'ISO sensitivity' (see right). If you are using a more advanced camera, select Aperture Priority mode, marked A or Av, and a wide aperture (e.g. f/4). This ensures the fastest possible shutter speed is set for any given light level.



THE FINAL SHOT



Shallow 'depth of field', with a blurred foreground and background, helps to make the bird stand out

An attractive pose with a 'head-turn' slightly towards the camera adds to the appeal of the bird

The reflection of the sun in the bird's eye - called a 'catch light' - adds life to the image

The outline of the dark log creates interesting lines and shapes against the light background

The old log creates a much more natural image than a bird table

Waiting for the right pose



Almost there, but the pose is uninteresting and the eye is part-closed. It's just a case of waiting for the exact moment when everything comes together... Just keep trying - patience is one of the most important skills for the bird photographer.

EXPERT TIP
Turn your camera flash off. Flash gives an artificial look to your photos and may scare the birds away

Next Month:
Photographing waders