

Photographing Birds Up Close and Personal

Tim Stout
St. Charles, MO

Photographing songbirds and woodland birds up close provides an inspiring view of their bright colors, behavior, and intricate feather pattern; and can be done more easily than one might imagine. Getting in nearby can allow one to identify an individual bird, and to appreciate the intricate structure of the eye and beak. But how can this be done? Birds are so distant, so mobile, and so easily frightened away from the hopeful photographer.

Photography blinds allow one to encroach on the bird's behavioral zone of safety; thereby getting in very close. There are several concepts of photography blinds. Using your vehicle works very well if one drives slowly along a conservation or wildlife road that has trees, shrubs, or tall weeds very close to it. By previously preparing the camera for the settings needed before each of these areas, one can keep the camera ready in the left

*Female Eastern Bluebird
feeding Fledglings*



hand up near the (open) window. When a subject is spotted perching on a branch near the road, take the vehicle out of gear; turn off the engine, and coast gently to a stop directly across from the bird. Without making any fast moves, bring the right hand up to the camera and proceed to zoom and focus. Many times the bird will fly away but patience and persistence will bring success. It is helpful to cover the camera lens barrel with camouflage material; remove any shiny watches or bracelets; and even consider covering the door and window with "see through" hunter's camouflage netting by closing it in the door and cutting a long slit in the center for the camera lens. Birds often allow a closer approach in areas frequented by vehicles and humans, so the busier areas of conservation parks can be the best.

Another photography blind concept is to completely clothe oneself in camouflage, including head and face cover, and thin lightweight gloves, which can be purchased at most hunting stores. A turkey hunting chair to allow one to sit close to the ground helps decrease the photographer's perceived threat. The camera and tripod must also be covered in camouflage netting.



Homemade photography blind

A third blind concept is the full tent like structure similar to hunter's blinds. This can be homemade or commercial. A homemade blind can be created using two one half inch diameter common pvc pipes and covering the frame in dull earth colored fabric. A small camp chair and tripod complete the ensemble and you have home away from home.

A commercial hunting blind can be used rather than making a homemade one. The small chair blind is recommended because of its small size, light weight, portability, and included chair. It has an apparent advantage in that the tripod can sit back inside far enough that the camera barrel is more hidden inside the dark area and the bird is less likely to be frightened away when repositioning the camera angle. A "curtain" of the see through camouflage netting material hung down from the top by a Velcro™ attachment, or by sewing to a rib, can provide more seclusion since the small front zippered window is still too big to effectively hide the camera, tripod, and photographer for our purposes. As before, a vertical slit through this "curtain" allows just the camera lens to protrude, which again should be covered in camouflage. A simple rubber band can anchor one edge of an approximately eighteen inch square piece of the netting material at the end of the lens barrel and it is then draped back over the lens and photographers hands. A disadvantage to the commercial blind is that the covering is a bit reflective of light and a dull flat surface would be better. Perhaps a little flat spray paint suitable for fabric would resolve this.

While photographing from blinds allows one to get very close to birds, the question arises, how do we first find a subject to approach? It is perhaps best to drive slowly through conservation areas as when utilizing the *vehicle* blind concept described above, looking for bird activity. One can stop and observe for a while from a distance to see if a bird returns to its *favorite perch*, which is more common in the spring and summer when they are calling for mates, defending their territory, or nesting. Not all birds return to a specific perch all the time but many do. If one is walking a trail and observes bird activity, the prior mentioned full body camouflage blind technique can be used to sit and observe from a distance for thirty to sixty minutes to determine if any birds have a favorite perch nearby to which they consistently return. If so, then perhaps setting up the full tent like blind will be rewarding. It should be pointed out that in setting up the full tent like blind, it should first be set up thirty feet or so from the subject and each day afterward moved to half that distance so the subject is allowed to gradually adjust to the intrusion on its behavioral zone of safety. And it is helpful, though not always necessary,



Brown Thrasher adult



Female Dickcissel

Female Eastern Bluebird with nesting material



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to have an assistant who goes to the blind with the photographer but then leaves the area because most birds will assume the entire threat has left. If no assistant is available, one can arrive before sunrise to enter the blind with usual success. Finding birds is not hard if one takes time to observe closely and has the patience and is persistent. Sometimes returning two or three times to an area is required before a subject can be determined to be consistent in its perch behavior; and if the background, lighting, and surroundings are worthy of a good image.

Equipment best suited to this type of photography includes a telephoto lens of at least 300mm, which works very well from the full blind. A 1.5x teleconverter can prove beneficial in some

cases but it is always better when using a full tent like blind to just move it closer to the subject. A longer lens would be beneficial from the vehicle and full camouflage dress blind concepts. It is important to remember to use a tripod whenever possible.

Photography technique centers on camera settings that allow the fastest shutter speed and yet provide a reasonable depth of field. The most common settings used were: ISO 200 to 400, aperture f/8 to f/11, and shutter speeds 1/125 and faster. It is important to nearly fill the frame with the subject so that little cropping will be needed later. This is the secret to getting really sharp images. The next most important consideration is to constantly and continuously refocus because the birds are so active. When one gains confidence, the focusing should change to concentration on the eye and beak area. Only manual focusing is effective on these small birds. Full sun allows better shutter speed and is needed for the iridescence of some bird feathers to show best coloration but can result in harsh lighting on the subject. Flash can be used effectively for fill

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Male Eastern Bluebird in mating plumage



Small homemade photography blind

Photos © Tim Stout



Female Hairy Woodpecker

light and is also needed in shaded areas to acquire a fast enough shutter speed to give good sharpness to the subject. However, flash is generally avoided until several good images have been captured without it because the flash does often frighten away the bird. The use of the full tent like blind often allows one to be so close to the bird that the full zoom, even on a 300mm lens, is not needed. In those cases, backing off on the zoom can increase depth of field. However, one must remember that the background will therefore not be as blurred and may be more distracting. The most common distance used by the author from the camera to the subject has been seven feet but varies between five and ten feet. If the distance is greater than ten feet (when using a 300mm telephoto lens) a 1.5x teleconverter has been added when there was sufficient light.

A good way to get started in small bird photography is to simply place feeders in your back yard and set up a temporary cardboard box with a hole in it for the camera lens. A perch can be set up a foot or two from the feeder and a foot higher (birds prefer to land on higher objects). Before actually occupying the *box*, one can even temporarily replace the feeder with the perch.

Photographing birds up close and personal requires practice, patience, and persistence. But it is very rewarding to accept the challenge of *the hunt*; to learn the technique that gives good images; and to appreciate the world of nature on a new level that is awe inspiring. It is the author's hope that many readers will reach that love of nature that being up-close to birds can bring. ■



Male Goldfinch eating thistle



Male Red-bellied Woodpecker