

Singapore

A tropical micro-dot island with colorful birds and a macro wonder world

with Two Nature Photographers:
**Graeme Guy, EPSA and
Wee Han Yeo**

Glossy Starlings © Graeme Guy, EPSA



Dragonfly
© Wee Han Yeo

Nature photography (especially *Bird Photography* and *Macro Photography*) is alive and well in Singapore. The *Journal* shares here a bit about two avid shooters who served as president and vice president of a new nature group in that city.

Together with some background information on Singapore itself, Photographic Society of America (PSA) nature photographers will want to head to this exciting location armed with the information shared here by two nature specialists.

Bird Photography

Over 350 species of birds have been recorded in this small island and although highly urbanized, the excellent network of roads makes access to the major birding sites a breeze. Singapore offers good birding throughout the year but is best between August and April when the migrants, mostly from the Palearctic, are in, together with the resident birds. Oriental specialties such as *Red-crowned Barbets*, *Banded Woodpeckers*, *Asian Fairy-bluebirds*, *Greater Racket-tailed Drongos* and *Crimson Sunbirds* can be seen sharing the same habitat as migrants from Siberia like *Asian Brown Flycatchers*, *Arctic Warblers* and *Daurian Starlings*. Favorite locations are Bukit Timah Nature Reserve, Bukit Batok Nature Reserve, Singapore Botanic Gardens and Sungei



Olive-backed Sunbird © Graeme Guy, EPSA

Buloh Nature Reserve. The last-mentioned is a small version of Ding Darling Reserve in Florida where the migrant shorebirds congregate and the occasional crocodile or sea otter family may be observed. Another favorite spot for nature photography generally is the small offshore island called Pulau Ubin. This time-warped island can



Pygmy Grass Blue © Wee Han Yeo



Ruddy Kingfisher
© Graeme Guy, EPSA



Damselfly © Wee Han Yeo



Graeme Guy, EPSA



Wee Han Yeo



Oriental Pied Hornbill © Graeme Guy, EPSA

be accessed via bumboats (local boat) to Ubin Island and hunt for the local attractions like *Red Junglefowl*, *Stork-billed Kingfisher*, *Laced Woodpecker*, *Oriental Pied Hornbill*, *Straw-headed Bulbul*, *Mangrove Pitta* and *Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker*. Various terns (*Great Crested*, *Lesser Crested*, *Black-naped* and *White-winged*) and raptors hunting for fish can be seen on the way back to the mainland.

Like most serious local bird photographers **Graeme Guy, EPSA**, prefers “big glass” and a rapid-fire camera. He shoots mostly with an EOS1D Mark 2 camera, 500mm f4 lens, usually fitted with a 1.4x converter, a flash unit on an off-camera bracket and all mounted on a solid tripod via a Wimberley gimbal head. Shooting can be from a vehicle on reclaimed land or from a hide in tall grasses. The best shooting windows are two hours after dawn and two hours before dusk. In the in-between time the sun is pretty much overhead and conditions are hot and humid. Light is variable and there are not many blue-sky days.

Macro Photography

Although there are many colorful tropical flowers and exotic plants the most popular macro subjects are insects which are prolific on this tropical island. Nights and days have



Common Kingfisher © Graeme Guy, EPSA

Singapore is a very small island with a population of just over 4 million nestling on the southernmost tip of peninsula Malaysia. It first came to the attention of the rest of the world in the 14th century when explorers and mariners recorded a settlement on the island. Known initially as Temasek (Sea Town,) by the end of the 14th century was commonly known by the Sanskrit name of Singapura (Lion City). The title was possibly the first local case of wildlife being wrongly identified as there were tigers but not lions on the island. Between the 16th and early 19th centuries, Singapore was a part of the Sultanate of Johore. During the Malay-Portugal wars in 1613, Singapore was set ablaze by Portuguese troops. In 1819, Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, an official with the British East India Company, signed a treaty with the Sultan of Johore. He also established Singapore as a trading post and settlement, which saw instant growth and immigration from various ethnic groups. Singapore was later made a crown colony by Britain in 1867. After a series of colonial territorial expansions, the British Empire raised Singapore's status to that of an entrepot town, due to its strategic location along the busy shipping routes connecting Europe to China. The island was bombed and was occupied by Japanese forces during World War II and after the war the British returned but later slowly withdrew their rule and Singapore became part of Malaysia in 1963 until it became a sovereign, democratic and independent nation in August 1963.

Singapore is located 50 miles north of the equator and naturally has a tropical climate with no distinct seasons. Its climate is characterized by uniform temperature and pressure, high humidity and abundant rainfall. Temperatures range from 72°–93°F. On average, the relative humidity is around 90% in the morning and 60% in the afternoon. During prolonged heavy rain, relative humidity often reaches 100%. In size and geographical terms Singapore is only 266 square miles in area which is about quarter of the size of Rhode Island, one third the size of Lake Okeechobee, just smaller than New

York City but just larger than Lake Tahoe. Its highest peak is a very modest 538 ft.

Urbanization has eliminated many areas of primary rainforest that once existed, with the only remaining area of primary rainforest being Bukit Timah Nature Reserve. A variety of parks, however, are intensively maintained, such as the Singapore Botanic Gardens. Without natural freshwater rivers and lakes, the primary domestic source of water supply in Singapore is rainfall, collected in reservoirs or catchment areas which also provide a reservoir of flora and fauna.

Despite the high people-to-area ratio there is perhaps surprisingly a large green area with about 23% of Singapore's land area consisting of forest and nature reserves. The majority of the population is housed in high-rise apartment buildings which maximizes the open recreational areas.

About 15 years ago the number of serious nature photographers was few but high in accomplishment. The hot, humid conditions, the changeable weather, the difficult sun angle and location overcrowding make it difficult to shoot outdoors. Of the five major nature photography disciplines; landscape, avian, mammal, macro and underwater, only avian and macro thrive in Singapore. There are some excellent and keen underwater photographers but they must go to neighboring countries for their shooting opportunities. The lack of conspicuous geological features also limits landscape photography and there are a limited number of mammals. However, macro and avian photography really thrive. Since the start of the digital era there are more and more young folks getting involved in the two main disciplines of nature photography. Spotting big lenses used to be as rare as seeing a full lunar eclipse but these days there is a battalion of photographers armed with these "bazookas." There are not many areas suitable for photography from vehicles but that has not stopped the rapid appearance of well-equipped four-wheel drive vehicles seeking subjects in locations that used to be inaccessible or difficult.



Common Flameback Woodpecker © Graeme Guy, EPSA

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a narrow temperature range and insects are not subjected to low temperature, so there is never a down-time. Wind is the bane of macro photographers and Singapore has little wind and has many bright overcast days which also enhance macro images. Along with the favorable conditions there are some excellent macro photographers. These are epitomized by **Wee Han Yeo** a creative young photographer, who, inspired by John Shaw and Larry West finds unique ways of presenting his subjects. His usual locations include the local botanic gardens, forested areas and a small bushy vacant piece of land, half a mile from his home. The weeds and bushes provide a safe refuge for many insects though one needs a practiced eye to spot them, plus a stealthy and patient approach to photograph them.



Dew © Wee Han Yeo

The Singapore Botanic Gardens is another location that macro photographers frequent. The subjects there consist mainly of dragonflies, damselflies and amphibians such as Common Greenback frogs. For a quieter location Han heads for the forested areas around the central part of Singapore. Early mornings and late evenings are prime times for shooting, not just for the soft pleasing light but this is the time of day that any breezes are minimal. The lack of breeze equates to slower shutter speeds and smaller apertures that maximize depth-of-field. Macro is not unlike other forms of nature photography such as avian and landscape where patience is a virtue.

Han's equipment consists of an EOSD60 fitted with a Canon 180 macro lens with the dedicated teleconverters. These retain image quality with an increased working distance and magnification rate. Much of Han's macro work is done from a tripod. Using a tripod allows him to make precise changes in the composition and to take note of what is happening around the frame: whether the background has a hotspot or a distracting twig. Handholding is only done when he needs to stalk a skittish subject with the shutter speeds set higher to prevent motion blur. Fill flash is commonly used and the unit is mounted off-camera on a Wimberley Macro bracket which he has found to be extremely flexible and indispensable. A Canon MPE 65/2.8 macro lens is used for its extreme magnification rates and a MT-24EX macroflash unit mounted on the lens allows the much-needed



Rhinoceros Hornbill © Graeme Guy, EPSA

flexibility. Either setup is usually mounted on a Gitzo CF 1325 or a Gitzo 2220 Explorer tripod with an Arca-Swiss B1 head.

Han will work a subject thoroughly trying different compositions, magnifications and lighting variations. He is passionate about macro photography and his ability to experiment gives his macro subjects a unique look, although he admits that it can be both mentally and physically demanding but rewarding. 📷

Nature Photographic Society (Singapore) website:
www.naturephotosociety.org.sg



American Bull Frog © Wee Han Yeo

Exposure Chart for Bird Photography

Species	Camera	Lens	ISO	Shutter Speed	Aperture	Flash	Tripod
Common Kingfisher	Canon EOS1D2	Canon 500mm f4 IS L	400	1/125	10	Yes	Yes
Ruddy Kingfisher	Canon EOS1D2	Canon 500mm f4 IS L	400	1/125	14	Yes	Yes
Oriental Pied Hornbill (M)	Canon EOS1D2	Canon 500mm f4 IS L	400	1/100	10.0	Yes	Yes
Glossy Starlings	Canon EOS1D2	Canon 100-400mm	400	1/125	11	Yes	Yes
Rhinoceros Hornbill (F)	Canon EOS1D2	Canon 500mm f4 IS L	400	1/200	10	Yes	Yes
Olive-backed Sunbird (M)	Canon EOS1D2	Canon 500mm f4 IS L	400	1/125	10	Yes	Yes
Common Flameback Woodpecker (M)	Canon EOS1D2	Canon 500mm f4 IS L	400	1/125	11	Yes	Yes

Exposure Chart for Macro Images

Species	Camera	Lens	ISO	Shutter Speed	Aperture	Flash	Tripod
Dew	Canon 20D	180 L/2X TC	200	1/125	22.0	Yes	Yes
American Bull Frog	Canon D60	180 L/2X TC	200	1/60	10.0	No	Yes
Pygmy Grass Blue	Canon D60	MPE 65/2.8	200	1/200	8.0	Yes (2)	Yes
Dragonfly	Canon 20D	180 L/2X TC	200	1/4	22.0	No	Yes
Damselfly	Canon D60	180 L/2X TC	200	1/6	16.0	Yes	Yes