Become Invisible inside a Floating Blind

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I continually update this article and will add new photos as I shoot them. Anything in red is a recent update!

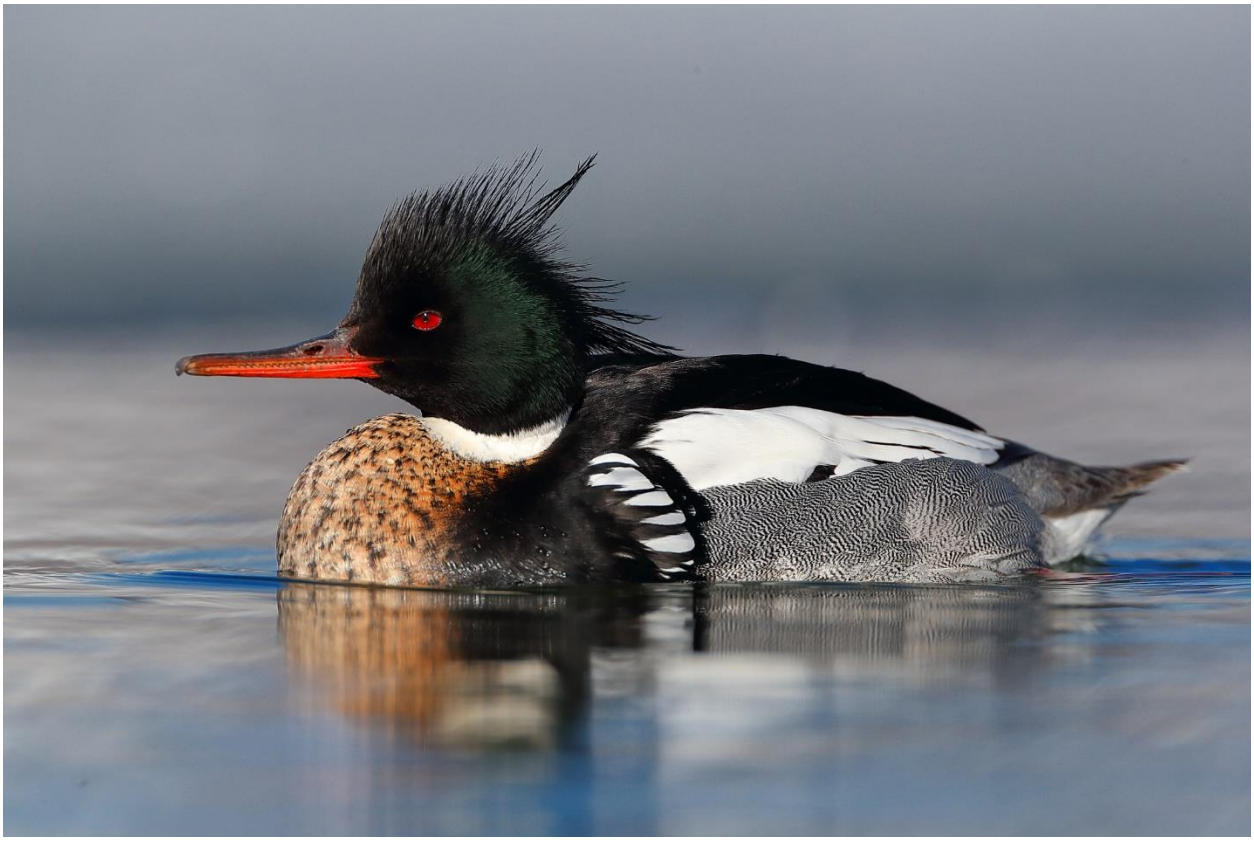

Figure 1 When the ice first begins to melt on Henry's Lake near my home, many ducks begin to populate what little open water is present. This produces super photo conditions. The ducks are confined to the small amount of open water, and since the surface area is small, waves and ripples are less of a problem, so the photography is better. Plus, many waterfowl favor the edge of the melting ice and follow it. Placing the floating blind near shore to allow the birds plenty of room to pass by often puts them within excellent full-frame photo distance. Canon 1DX Mark II, Canon 600mm with 1.4x teleconverter making it an 840mm lens, 1/2500 second, f/7.1, ISO 640, AF microadjustment +5, Exposure set manually to produce the first blinkies in the white feathers. A single active AF point is right on the eye of this merganser.

A few decades ago, a close friend who passionately photographs birds built a floating blind out of a 4 x 8-foot sheet of marine plywood. He cut the sheet in half to make two eight by two foot pieces, added float material, cut a hole in the center to accommodate the photographer, added support to the top to hold the camo covering, and nailed a solid piece of wood inside the bow of the blind to support the Wimberley gimbal head that holds the long lens.

And twenty years ago, my friend helped me build one. That means I was the brute labor – sanding, nailing, measuring, and cutting. I merely followed Al's instructions. He had the smarts to design it – not me! In a week I became the proud owner of a floating blind that I have used since 2000 to photograph wetland birds at remarkably close range. Using the blind profoundly changed how I approach bird photography while filling my life with wonderful wildlife adventures!

The floating blind offers numerous advantages.

1. The lens is close to the water. The low angle produces images with impact.
2. Most wild subjects allow close approach when inside the blind.
3. The floating blind supports both the weight of your photo gear and you (should it be necessary).
4. Because the blind supports your weight when you hold on to the blind or lay your arms on the floats, you do not sink into the muddy bottom of a lake or pond.
5. The camo fabric you hide under does warm up – not always good – but it keeps biting insects away from you.
6. The blind easily works in water from two to five feet deep. Your feet should touch the bottom for safety and to allow turning the blind quickly to pan with a subject. However, I frequently use the blind in one foot of water by sticking my legs directly behind me. This is often necessary when photographing shorebirds as they prefer wading the shallows.
7. Many subjects notice the blind approaching at first. The key is to move slow! And if the subject continues to keep its eyes on you, or slowly paddles away, then hold still for a period of time. Let the subject become used to the blind being nearby. Eventually, many birds completely accept its presence allowing you to photograph natural behavior. Whatever you do, do not move fast, do not talk, and do not chase your subject!
8. The floating blind is relaxing to be in! I find using it to be extremely low in physical effort.

Figure 2 Summer is a super time for the floating blind. Often mother birds pass by with their young in tow like this family of buffleheads. Multiple subjects require more depth of field to make them as sharp as possible. Canon 1DX Mark II, Canon 800mm, 1/500 second, f/14, at ISO 1000 with an AF microadjustment of -5. Notice I used more ISO than normal in bright sun and a slower shutter speed to get to f/14!

My original floating blind is eight-foot long and weighs about 50 pounds and I still use it when friends come to photograph with me. While I can carry it for a short distance, there are times when I need to hike up to ½ mile where carrying an unwieldly 50-pound blind is more than I want. Fortunately, I own

another commercially made floating hide from MR JanGear that is easy to carry long distances. This blind is light because the flotation tubes are filled with air (something I can carry a lot of and some people have told me I am full of hot air anyway), and the plastic frame is both strong and lightweight. I can easily carry it with one hand and hike three miles if necessary as it only weighs about six pounds.

Typically, when I suggest the floating blind as a terrific way to photograph wildlife, I get these objections right away. Let me address the fears now.

1. "How do you move the floating blind – paddle, motor, what?" The floating blind is **not** a boat. You **DO NOT** ride in it. Your camera and lens are mounted to the frame of the floating blind and you wear chest waders and walk under the camo cover to move the blind around. The floating blind floats your camera gear and the camo on top of it hides you and your gear.
2. "Bloodsuckers will devour you!" Remember, you are wearing chest waders. Things in the water are not a problem – not sure about gators, though.
3. "I am not risking my expensive gear in the water." Yes, it is possible to get your gear wet if you mess up big time. If you forget to lock the lens to the Wimberley mount, or drop it in the water while attaching the lens to the mount, or trip over your floating blind when you are entering or exiting it, then bad things can happen. You do need to pay attention to what you are doing – especially when getting ready to launch the blind or emerging from it. When in the blind where it is floating up to your waist, I do not know what you would have to do to get things wet. Imagine being in a big truck inner tube up to your chest. How do you flip it over?
4. "Waves and high wind will doom you." It would indeed be a horrible situation to be in the floating blind in water over your head where the wind and waves are giving you more excitement than you intended. The outcome could easily be terrible for your gear and could be fatal to you. But, no need to worry. Perfect floating blind conditions are early morning or late afternoon sunshine when there is no wind. In other words, you want perfectly calm water because subject reflections are much better. Plus, since your camera gear is attached to the floating blind, that means even ripples cause your camera gear to steadily bob up and down and that makes it tough to compose and shoot sharp images.

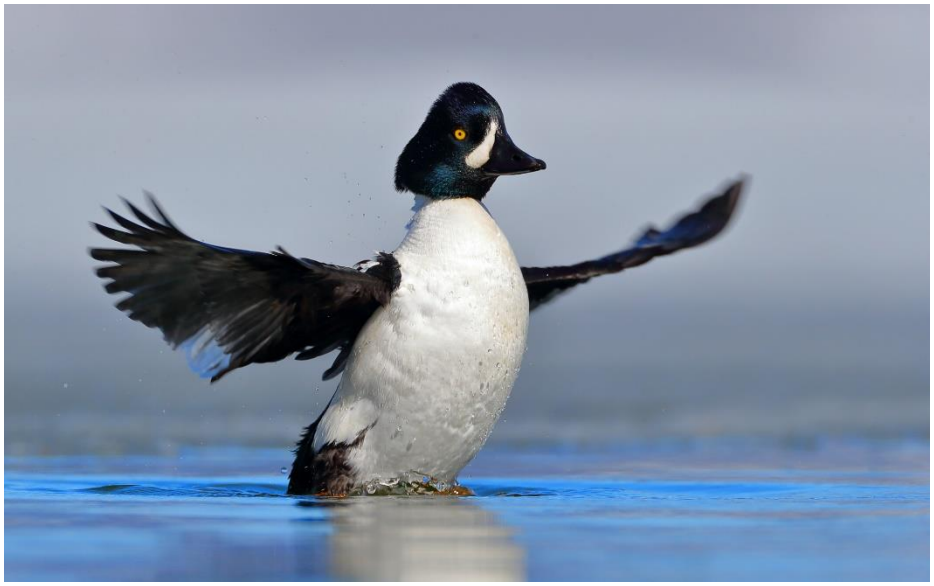

Figure 3

A Barrow's goldeneye dipped its head into the water a few times in quick succession. This is often a sign they will rise up and flap their wings, so I was shooting 14 images per second before it got up and that led me to this photo that is different from all the others I took of it. You must often be shooting before you see the peak action happen because it is so quick. Canon 1DX Mark II, Canon 600mm with 1.4x teleconverter making it an 840mm lens, 1/2000 second, f/7.1, ISO 640, AF microadjustment +5 Exposure set manually to produce the first blinkies in the white feathers. A single active AF point is on this goldeneye.

Therefore, do not worry about rough water for this reason. If it is windy and the water is rough, do not launch the blind. If the session begins with ideal conditions, and then wind suddenly blows up, and that means waves soon to follow, immediately head to the take-out point, or if that spot is far away (1/2 mile for example), walk directly to shore and then hike the shoreline using the shallow water to return to the take-out spot while towing the blind behind you. If the water is especially rough, detach the lens and camera from the blind and carry it while towing the lightweight blind to keep the gear further away from the waves.

I know I have spent at least 2000 hours in a floating blind, and I have yet to endure a difficult moment! Of course, I have worn chest waders since I was ten so walking in waders is second nature to me. I avoid water where I cannot touch the bottom because kicking my feet in chest waders to move forward only gets me up to a speed of about 100 yards every ten hours – I think. You do not go fast kicking your feet (but you could wear fins and do much better), so I just do not go places where I cannot touch the bottom of the pond or lake. Should I accidently step into a spot where I cannot touch the bottom, I immediately turn and kick my feet to return to where I can touch the bottom. And to be honest, that seldom happens because as I walk along hidden inside the floating blind, I never lift my trailing foot until my leading foot touches bottom!

5. I discovered during the summer of 2020 while using the Mr. JanGear floating blind that I had trouble swimming in it when I accidently stepped into water over my head. Although I was only a step away from water shallow enough to touch the bottom of the wetland, I could not make it by trying to swim the distance. In my homemade floating blind, swimming is not a problem because the small hole I am in lets me lean far forward so kicking my legs moves me forward.

With both of Mr. JanGear blinds (Version 1 and 2), the float tubes are further apart and that means you must hold your arms out to support yourself inside the blind and I found that it was impossible to lean forward and my body stayed perpendicular. That means kicking your feet is nothing more than a feeble attempt to launch yourself out of the water. The chest waders were simply too heavy for me to assume the correct position. Others with more experience are telling me a dry suit gives you much more freedom to actually swim and I have ordered the one made by Mr. JanGear. Another problem with chest waders is I get wet all the time. It is not that I am not careful about deep water, but I get wet due to the shallow water I often photograph in. Frequently, wildlife is feeding along the shore, resting on the shore, or perched in bushes along the lake margin. To approach them closely, I often lie down within the blind and inch my way toward shore in only a foot of water. When you lie down, that puts the top front portion of the waders right at the very surface of the water, and typically the top of the waders drop below the water and I do not notice it until a gallon of lake water is already working its way down the inside of my waders. Therefore, I am going to a dry suit that zips up to my neck and gives me more freedom for kicking and swimming should that become necessary. For safety, and without your camera gear, everyone should try swimming in a floating blind to see how well they do, or do not do. Make sure you have a friend with a boat to retrieve you!!!!

The Floating Blind Experience

Here is a typical morning for me in the blind. I enter the floating blind on a calm morning about 45 minutes before sunrise in a place where I know lots of wetland birds frequent. I move slowly – officially known by me as “no ripple speed” – to the area where I know the birds frequent and simply hold still while waiting for them to emerge from the shoreline vegetation where so many spend the night hidden in the weeds. At first, they notice me, but when I do nothing and don’t make any sounds, they begin to accept me and swim closer. Soon they are behaving naturally and feed, court, bathe, and maybe escort their ducklings. When the sun rises, then I instantly have splendid light and begin photographing. When possible, I like to work reflections into the composition. I always look for action – ducks bathing, ducklings diving, ducks flying into land on the water near me, and more.

Figure 4

I mount the plate higher than most in the Mr. JanGear floating blind. That means my camera is a little higher above the water. I do this because having the camera too close to the water when shooting level means the camera will have to be submerged (not a good idea!) when photographing subjects on the bank or perched in low bushes. I get many opportunities for photographing birds above the surface of the lake and my higher camera position allows me to photograph them because I can lower the camera without submerging it to shoot up! Canon 1DX Mark II, Canon 800mm lens, 1/1600 second, f/7.1, ISO 1000, AF microadjustment +5 Exposure set manually to produce the first blinkies in the brightest parts of the bird. A single active AF point is right on the eye of this sora rail.

After I have been still for a while, I slooooowwwwly begin to move by walking and gradually close the distance to the subject. Remember to use a no ripple speed! There are times when I must move away because the subject approaches too closely. It is amazing to easily move around a wild bird without alarming it. If I want a little different light on the subject, or a different background, or be closer or further away, I just move slowly. For most birds, they don't have a problem with that. Some are suspicious, though, and may slowly swim away. Very seldom does a bird flush to move away from me. Some individuals are more accepting than others, and some species are easily approached and other not. In Idaho, Great-blue herons are typically wary, and most lesser scaup or red-breasted mergansers do not care at all.

American avocets are a big favorite of mine and quick to take alarm if they see a person walking along the shore. But, in a floating blind, I once saw a small squadron of twenty avocets fly in, land in my corner of the lake, and I moved over to them. They never made a peep, and avocets are known for making loud alarm calls. Soon I was full frame on these avocets feeding, sleeping, bathing, and just being avocets. I could move around the flock with no worries whatever about spooking them. After I shot way too many images, I slowly moved away from them and then the breeze picked up and I continued down the shoreline to my parked truck, emerged from the blind only then, loaded everything up, and off I went for coffee! Notice that even when I finished photographing the avocets, I was careful to avoid frightening them. It is foolish and rude to simply emerge from the blind and scare the avocets when you are done photographing that morning. Better to avoid disturbing wildlife as much as possible, and certainly do not train them that "a dangerous human and ugly too" could be lurking within the floating blind. By the way, when photographing the same place time after time, resident birds of the wetlands become easier to photograph when they see the floating blind multiple times. I remember when I found my first pair of cinnamon teal and they did not let me photograph them the first time. They kept swimming just out of good camera range. The next time I could get closer to them and made some fine images. The third time I could be any distance from them, and they showed no concern whatever – even at "petting range."

Figure 5 Summer is a productive time in the floating blind. This young American wigeon is resting in a dense patch of aquatic flowers. The flowers hold it in place while it sleeps. Canon 1DX Mark II, Canon 800mm, 1/1000 second, f/11, ISO 1000, AF microadjustment -5. Exposure set manually to produce the first blinkies in the white flowers. A single active AF point is right on the eye of this wigeon.

The joy of all this is the setting and experience. Imagine fifty birds representing a dozen species, mirror images, golden sunshine on the birds, and you can move at will and photograph all. In two hours, I sometimes fill a 256GB card, and that is a lot of images. The floating blind is the best way I know to essentially become invisible out on the water! It is awesome!!!!!

Floating Blind Success

The key is you need a pond or lake where wildlife is plentiful. It helps if the edges of the wetland are less than four feet deep so you can easily move over a large area. Some places are better than others. For example, many lakes in the eastern United States do not have many summer birds on them, so they are poor choices. In the western states, many lakes and ponds are crowded with nesting or migrating birds. These are good prospects. The lake ½-mile from my home in Idaho is ideal for the floating blind. First, it is close to me so I can check the water from my deck at dawn with binoculars to see if the surface of the lake is calm. On the west side of the lake, the shoreline is completely natural vegetation and therefore loaded with wildlife. The lake is shallow along the western side allowing me to easily move about in the floating blind. That means I can cover a couple miles of shoreline in a morning session. My floating blind season begins in mid-April when the edges of the mostly frozen lake develop open water and ends in late November when the lake finally freezes over. Early spring is especially productive because the lake thaws along the shore first. Often there is a 500-yard strip of open water within 30 yards of the shore. Being in a motionless floating blind close to shore means the waterfowl swim along the edge of the ice (they prefer the ice/open water interface) and that brings them to full-frame photo distance as they move up and down the shoreline. During times like this, I have shot 10,000 images in a single afternoon! It is awesome beyond belief.

Figure 6 Wildlife frequently accept the presence of the floating blind making it possible to capture intimate images such as this lesser scaup duckling cleaning its feet. Without the floating blind, it would have been impossible to get within 75 yards of this alert duckling. Everything is out to eat them, so they are quick to become alarmed. Canon 1DX Mark II, Canon 600mm with 1.4x teleconverter making it an 840mm lens, 1/1250 second, f/7.1, ISO 1000, AF microadjustment +5 Exposure set manually to produce the first blinkies on the duckling. A single active AF point is right on the eye of this bird.

The period when ice is melting is exactly the opposite from summer photography. With open water along only the shore, I keep the floating blind close to shore, often in only 2 feet of water, and photograph ducks as they swim along the edge of the melting ice. When there is no ice on the lake, then usually I am out in the lake more and photographing birds as they hug the cattails in the marshy areas along the shoreline.

Photo Skills

Long Lens

Use a **long** lens! The more reach you have, the easier it is to approach within excellent photo range. I consider an 800mm mandatory. It could be my Canon 800mm f/5.6, or a 500mm lens on a camera with a 1.6x crop factor, or a 500mm with a 1.4x teleconverter (700mm close enough). Or it could be what I use now, a Canon 1DX Mark III with a Canon 600mm f/4 lens and a new Canon 1.4x teleconverter making it an 840mm lens. It is an awesome combination for wetland birds, and the close focusing ability of 14-feet makes it ideal for ducklings and small shorebirds!

Update to Long Lenses and my Canon R5 Mirrorless camera

In November of 2020, I bought my first mirrorless camera, the highly regarded Canon R5. I did not know at the time what mirrorless benefits were available, but now in April of 2021 I know the answer to that. The Canon R5 is awesome for wildlife photography!!!! There are so many reasons why I prefer this camera over the Canon 1DX Mark III that I could write a small book about it. A few key highlights I offer now. With the electronic shutter, the camera shoots at a set rate of 20 images per second. While I do not need that many fps for a duck resting quietly on the water, it is enormously helpful when photographing ducks doing something, like diving or preening or wing flapping on the water! So far I have not noticed a problem with rolling shutter, but I am looking for it.

Another feature that is awesome beyond anything I ever expected is the eye detection autofocus. Now when I photograph wildlife, I have eye detection autofocus active. I start the process by pointing my highlighted AF point right at the bird's eye, press the shutter down part way to initiate autofocus, and when the square turns red and becomes a little square right on the eye, that tells me the camera "sees" the eye. Then I continue to depress the shutter button a little and recompose and shoot when I see a good body posture present a fine opportunity or action happens. The camera automatically and continuously focuses on the eye no matter where it is in the image and no matter if the subject is coming closer to the camera or moving further away. This is so liberating!!!! I will never again shoot a camera that does not offer this incredibly useful focusing tool.

And this 45MP camera (Large RAW files) offers built-in crop modes. When I select the 1.6x crop, the camera uses a smaller part of the sensor – that is true – but the file size still is around 17MP and that is large enough for 99% of my needs. And I see the cropped image in the electronic viewfinder. That means I see the subject bigger in the viewfinder and this is important to me because then I can more easily judge the subject's body position, so I know when to shoot. And especially in a floating blind where keeping your distance from the subject is helpful because subject's are less likely to flee from you moving in on them while also showing natural behavior. The crop factor reduces the field of view (FOV), so it makes your lens act like a longer lens. For example, a 600mm lens when used with the camera set to 1.6x crop factor gives the appearance of a 960mm lens. (600mm x 1.6 = 960mm). Now the focal length does not magically increase to 960mm, as the lens remains a 600mm, but the reach you get to make the subject larger in the frame and in the viewfinder is that of a true 960mm lens. Yes, the RAW files are only about 17MP, but that works for me.

Formerly, I used the Canon 600mm and a 1.4x teleconverter to make the lens 840mm in focal length. Now with the 600mm by itself and the 1.6x crop factor, I have a FOV of 960mm! A few advantages of the 600mm and 1.6x crop factor come to mind. The 600mm f/4 lens remains f/4 in speed. With the 1.4x teleconverter, the lens slows down to f/5.6. The faster f/4 speed is sometimes useful early and late in the day when the light is dim or when high shutter speed must be used to stop action, such as diving ducklings. Images are sharper because the crop factor uses the center of the lens to form the image and that is sharper than the edges of the optical glass and also the slight unsharpness caused by adding a 1.4x teleconverter is also eliminated. Net result, I find you get sharper images by using the crop factor rather than using a teleconverter to enlarge the subject.

Batteries and Memory Cards for the Canon R5

Floating blinds on a calm morning can be enormously productive for photography. It is routine for me to shoot more than 2000 images in a couple of hours when lots of birds are present and the water is calm. It is true mirrorless cameras gobble camera batteries. After all, they are all electronic and everything they do requires battery power. The last thing you want is to run out of battery power (okay-a hole in your waders might be worse) when the action is happening, and photo conditions are ideal. Therefore, I have one fully charged battery in my camera and three more fully charged spares with me inside the floating blind. With four batteries, I never run out of power in a morning or afternoon session in the blind. After my

morning session in the floating blind, when I return home I immediately put batteries on the two chargers I have and recharge all batteries ASAP.

As for memory cards, again I do not want to run out of memory when I am in the blind. My Canon R5 takes two cards simultaneously. I have a 256GB card in one card slot and a 128GB card in the other. That is enough memory to store every image I shoot in a floating blind session.

And one more mirrorless advantage I really like. The Canon R5 does not require any AF microadjustment. Focusing is done right on the sensor plane, and when you use eye focus as I believe you should with a camera that offers it, focus is right on the eye!. I have done AF microadjusting for my DSLRs for quite a few years. I wrote extensively on it, developed some techniques for getting more reliable test results (like using flash to eliminate other sources of vibrations to test focus accuracy) and now I no longer need to do that. I love that!!!! Even though I became quite skilled at running AF microadjustment tests, I am thrilled I no longer have to do that with my Canon mirrorless cameras! Even though I consistently shot quite sharp images with DSLRs that were AF microadjusted to the lens being used, eye focus is better. It is amazing how reliable eye focus is when used properly in conjunction with solid photo techniques.

High Speed Shooting

Shoot as many images per second as possible to ensure capturing sharp images. It is also crucial for action sequences, like a duck rearing up to flap its wings. For this reason, I use the Canon 1DX Mark III as it shoots 16 images per second.

Figure 7 Shooting 14-images per second caught this adorable pose for me of this lesser scaup duckling taking a bath. Canon 1DX Mark II, Canon 600mm with 1.4x teleconverter making it an 840mm lens, 1/640 second, f/9, ISO 800, exposure set manually to produce the first blinkies in the duckling. A single active AF point is on the bird. I would love to tell you I saw this duckling rise and I am so quick I got the image, but it does not happen that way. This action happens so quick that if you see it happen, and then go to shoot, you are far too late. I was shooting at 14 images per second as the lesser scaup duckling swam toward me and it happened to rise as I was shooting! It pays to enjoy some good luck!

Image Stabilization

Turn Image stabilization on. Since I plan to pan with swimming birds, I use Mode 2 that only stabilizes in the direction opposite the direction I am panning. If I pan left to right, the image is stabilized in the vertical direction. I realize the lens is mounted to a Wimberley head and many preach turning image stabilization off on a tripod head, but the camera is not perfectly still because the water likely as some movement and hanging onto the camera causes small vibrations. I find image-stabilization is enormously helpful in the floating blind. Keep in mind image-stabilization does not help with subject motion where the best answer for that is a fast shutter speed in the range of 1/2000 second.

ISO

In the floating blind, the blind likely is bobbing a little, and I am holding on to the camera, and birds move. Using more shutter speed helps a bunch. I use ISO 1000 with my Canon 1DX Mark III and that gives me a lot of shutter speed. However, once the sun fully rises, often I can drop to ISO 640 and still maintain a shutter speed greater than 1/1000 second.

Shutter Speed

I do not like to let the shutter speed fall below 1/1000 second, but I sometimes do when the bird is quite still, and the water is perfectly smooth. Then I can get by with 1/250 and still make sharp images. Normally by planning well, bright sun makes it feasible to use more shutter speed, but calm and cloudy periods can happen where less shutter speed is necessary to avoid noisy ISOs.

F/stop

My lens is an f/4 lens, but I know lenses are sharper a little more stopped down, so I seek to use f/5.6 or f/8 in brighter light. If I must shoot wide open (f/4) to keep the shutter speed fast, then I have no choice. And when I am trying to get two or more subject sharply in focus, then I must stop down to f/11 or f/16 to improve my sharpness odds for multiple subjects. And two subjects still must be at almost the same distance from the camera or the depth of field does not cover both.

Viewfinder Level

Many cameras offer a way to activate a level that appears in the viewfinder. Be sure to do that! It makes keeping the bird level on the water so much easier.

Figure 8 After ice out, I normally keep the blind in deeper water and photograph toward the shore where subjects are most plentiful. Here is a great-blue heron with a "monster" fish dinner. Have you seen the fish yet? Look closer! With mostly ice-covered lakes, I do just the opposite. I stay near shore and photograph the birds as they swim and feed along the ice/water interface. Canon 1DX Mark II, Canon 800mm, 1/1600 second, f/9, ISO 640, AF microadjustment -5 Exposure set manually to produce the first blinkies in the white feathers. A single active AF point is right on the eye of this heron. Although great-blue herons are easily approached in Florida, they are wary in Idaho and most will not let me get close enough in the floating blind, but some do. And sometimes a single individual will "befriend" the floating blind and allow many photos to be made.

Exposure Mode

The conditions I choose when using the floating blind normally is steady sunshine where the ambient light varies little. Obviously, at sunrise, the light gradually becomes brighter for an hour or two as the sun rises above the horizon, but it is a gradual process that is easy to monitor. Therefore, I nearly always use full manual exposure and set my exposure to produce the first blinkies in the subject. Since I shoot RAW only, and the highlight alert is based on an embedded JPEG, I know the first blinkies do not mean some highlights are overexposed, only getting close to that point. Many water birds have white feathers, so the first blinkies tend to first appear in the white feathers.

However, when ambient light levels continually brighten and darken due to passing clouds or other factors, then an autoexposure mode is best. I highly suggest using Auto ISO along with manually setting both the aperture and shutter speed. Though aperture and shutter speed are set manually to whatever is desired, the Auto ISO option makes this an automatic exposure mode. When not using any exposure compensation, the camera automatically adjusts the ISO to produce a standard exposure where the scene averages out to about 18% reflectance. This often works well but would underexpose a white pelican on light water and overexpose a beaver in dark water as the camera tries to produce the standard exposure by adjusting the ISO. Therefore, I also use exposure compensation when using Auto ISO. By default my exposure compensation is buried in the camera menu, but I am able to reassign exposure compensation

to the SET button on my Canon cameras and now I can adjust the exposure compensation by pressing the SET button and rotating the main dial on the top of the camera – that works much better. Your camera may also allow a way to access exposure compensation quicker so look for it. The way exposure compensation works with Auto ISO and manual aperture and shutter speed is to adjust the ISO. For example, if the exposure reading is f/5.6 and 1/500 second with Auto ISO 1000 at zero exposure compensation, setting exposure compensation to +1 forces the camera to boost the exposure to ISO 2000. If you feel ISO 2000 is too noisy for your needs, then you must either open the lens more if possible, slow the shutter speed, or a combination of both.

Focus

Once I was a huge fan of back-button focusing, but not in a floating blind. My arms must be at an odd angle in the blind and that changes how my hands grip the camera. I keep the continuous autofocus set and on the shutter button. A half press of the shutter button activates continuous autofocus, and a full press shoots the image. I use a single active AF point, or sometimes a small group of five, and use a button on the rear of the camera to move my active AF point or points around to coincide with the bird's head. My right thumb moves the AF points around. If I used back-button focus, my right thumb would be forced to do double duty and move the AF points around and then press the AF-On button to initiate autofocus. (My right thumb is not so nimble at multi-tasking-sort of like my brain too.)

Many will tell you the beauty of back-button focusing is you point the AF point at the birds head, press in the AF-On button and the lens focuses on the head, let up on the AF-0N button to lock focus, recompose, shoot, and the focus remains where you had it. The problem with that is the duck swims a little closer or further away and you are no longer focused on the bird's head. For action photography, even with slow action, keeping the active AF point on the head and panning with the subjects while using continuous autofocus consistently produces sharp images for me.

Figure 9 Shorebirds are a joy to photograph, especially from a floating blind. Most like this spotted sandpiper are easy to approach. Of course, since shorebirds are waders, shallow water is the rule. I can use the blind in about 1 foot of water by lying

prone in the blind with my feet sticking out behind it and pushing forward or pulling back with my toes. Canon 1DX Mark II, Canon 600mm with 1.4x teleconverter making it an 840mm lens, 1/1000 second, f/8, ISO 800, AF microadjustment +5, exposure set manually to produce the first blinkies in the white feathers. A single active AF point is right on the eye of this sandpiper. I know it might seem like lying prone in the water with chest waders on and moving about with your toes sounds difficult, but I find this to be low energy and that is coming from someone who is approaching seventy!

AF Microadjustment

All my lens/camera combinations are AF Microadjusted. I have a detailed article on my web site blog about the process I use. I AF microadjusted numerous lens/camera combos and all have benefited from some other value than the default setting of zero. Presently, I use a -1 AF microadjustment for the Canon 600mm f/4 by itself (that is not much), and when using the 1.4x teleconverter with the lens, then I dial in a +5 correction. I get significantly sharper images by AF microadjusting my gear. Note: One advantage of mirrorless cameras is they don't seem to need any AF microadjustment since focus in done at the sensor plane. Keep in mind the AF microadjustment is for a lens/camera combination. Even if you use the same gear I do, you cannot assume my AF microadjustments work for you – they probably do not. And it is not a function of using new gear. In the manufacturing process, certain small tolerances are allowed, and this will likely make your autofocus a little less precise than it could be. AF microadjusting solves this problem.

Chest Waders and other Gear

You can get cold in the water even while wearing chest waders, especially early in the year. Here is what I do, and I frequently use my floating blind when the lake is mostly covered with ice. I wear sweatpants and then thermal pants over the sweatpants. The thermal pants reflect body heat back to me. I also wear warm socks and coat, a stocking hat, and then the waders. Naturally, my coat is tucked inside my waders. I could buy insulated waders like the kind duck hunters wear, but I find it is hard to find and repair holes in the waders. Instead, I use summer stocking foot waders and wader boots. I have owned many pairs of wader boots, and prefer boots not made for that purpose. I wear the brand name Muck boots. Mine are knee high and slip on and off. They do fill with water, but that is fine, because once a small amount of water seeps in, my body warms up the water and that keeps my dry feet that are protected inside my waders warmer! Real waders boot allow water to move in and out of the boot and that keeps your feet colder!

Good waders are a joy to have and use. Avoid buying used waders, as that almost certainly means they leak – that is why they are used and for sale!

Figure 10 Whenever you have two or more subjects, try to get them aligned to make them the same distance from you and favor more depth of field. Here I used f/11 and waited for them to align themselves as they swam about. This is a pair of Barrow's goldeneyes – male on the left and lady on the right! When I thought both were the same distance, I shot a lot, but found most of the time one was slightly in front of the other. Out of 300 images, I got five where both birds are sharply focused – and that is all I need! Canon 1DX Mark II, Canon 600mm with 1.4x teleconverter making it an 840mm lens, 1/2000 second, f/11, ISO 640, AF microadjustment +5 Exposure set manually to produce the first blinkies in the white feathers. A single active AF point is right on the eye of the male (left) Barrow's goldeneye.

The Floating Blind

There are sites on the web that show you how to build a floating blind. The sites I have viewed learned to build their blind from my buddy, Al. Directions are good. Any decent carpenter could build one. But, better yet, buy a commercially made floating photo hide (blind) made by Mr. JanGear. I have two and they are fabulous. They are lightweight and easy to use. I can carry them anywhere!

Advantages of the Mr. JanGear Floating Blind

1. Extremely light to carry. I have no problem carrying it with one hand for a long distance.
2. Enter the blind by walking into it from the rear. The one I first made required me to put the blind in the water, and then step into the hole in the center of it. Once I had both feet in the hole, then I had to take tiny steps toward deeper water to let the blind float up around my waist. It is easy to trip doing this and perhaps dunking your camera gear. And a bigger problem is having to step into the blind in deeper water. If the edge of the spot where you must enter the blind is already two-feet deep, that would be almost impossible to get into the blind. The MR JanGear blind is super easy to enter because you merely enter the blind through the open rear of the blind. This is easy to do even if the water is already four feet deep!
3. The commercial blind is strong, but extremely compact. It is easy to travel with and would be no problem taking it with you on an airplane.

Have a look at the Mr. JanGear floating hide, now it its second version! I have both versions and they work well for me.

https://mrjangear.com/shop/floating-hide-ii/

I realize a floating blind is not for everyone, but everyone I know who has tried it found the experience to be much easier to do and more productive photographically than they envisioned. It is wonderful to be among wild creatures who are behaving normally while shooting many images you will cherish forever, and it is so relaxing! Give it a try!

Figure 11 This is the Mr. JanGear version II floating blind. Dixie is showing you what the interior setup looks like without the blind cover. The Wimberley head is attached to a plastic board and works perfectly with this setup!

Figure 12 The camo cover is supported by two bendable rods that stick into tiny pockets on the float tubes.

The strong plastic support bracket is held against the two float tubes by inserting the deflated tubes into a couple loops attached to the frame and then inflating the tubes. Tube pressure holds everything together. The provided blind cover snaps to the tubes and two bendable support poles hold the blind up. The blind is quick to erect and extremely light to carry.

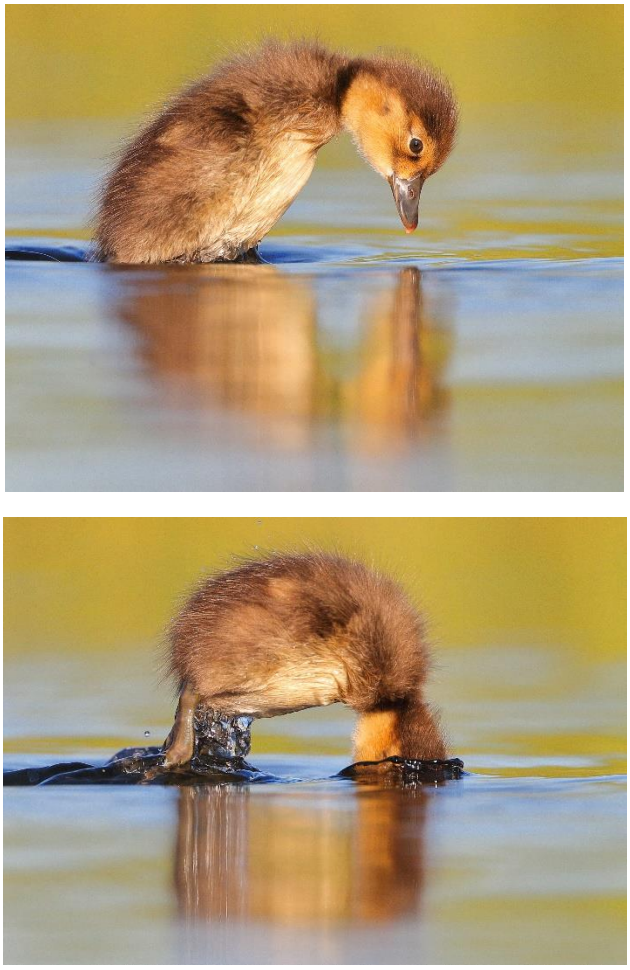

Figure 13 I knew I was approaching an area along the shoreline where five female lesser scaup have banded together and they had about three dozen ducklings with them. As these ducks approached my floating blind, they suddenly began diving over and over. I knew the ducklings were coming several minutes before they came within photo range, so I switched my camera ahead of time to Auto ISO and then increased the shutter speed to 1/4000 second. From experience, I knew 1/1000 second is not

nearly fast enough. Auto ISO is an automatic exposure mode, even though I manually set the shutter speed to 1/4000 second and the f/stop to f/6.3, the camera automatically increases the ISO. My exposure compensation was -.3 stop. Normally I do not use an autoexposure mode in the floating blind, but it can work if you regularly monitor the exposure it produces. The problem with autoexposure on the water is often your subject becomes smaller or larger in the viewfinder. If you are photographing a white duck that fill 1/5 of the image and the ideal exposure is set, should the duck swim closer and fill ½ of the image, the camera does its exposure calculations and underexposes the subject. Using manual exposure eliminates the problem that occurs when the percentage of tones the meter considers for setting the exposure changes significantly.

This series of a lesser scaup duckling diving is one I wanted so badly, and it was super difficult to get. Why? The ducklings rest most of the time, so no diving. When they do decide to dive, it is unexpected so you must be within good shooting distance when it happens. Fortunately, once one duckling dives, they all start doing it. They are exceeding active, swimming this way and that, and then diving with no warning. Most of the time when they dive you are not composing and focusing on the one that dives, and if you are, it is diving directly at you or away, and not from the side. Plus, there is no warning when one begins the dive. You must be photographing before the duckling begins to dive. If you see them begin to dive, you are already too late. You must be photographing before they begin. That means I have way too many images of a lesser scaup duckling floating on the water doing nothing. Thank goodness it cost nothing to shoot images once you have the gear!

The year before I captured this series, I tried to do them diving and shot at 1/1000 second. I soon found out that shutter speed does not freeze the action at all. Once I knew to use more shutter speed, they moved to another part of the lake where I could not photograph them. Although I prefer manual exposure, when I had the opportunity to photograph ducklings diving again, I switch to Auto ISO. Why? When the ducklings awoke from their nap and began to dive, I quickly changed my shutter speed from 1/1000 second to 1/4000 second. That froze this duckling diving, yes, the ISO was higher than I prefer, but I had no other choice and with some noise reduction, I feel the images look fine.

Figure 14 A juvenile black-crowned night heron in late summer just caught a blood sucker. I spotted this bird hunting along the edge of a lake in the first morning light. Slowly I moved the floating blind to within excellent photo range and enjoyed spending the next 30 minutes with it before the heron walked into the bushes. Canon 1DX Mark II, Canon 600mm and 1.4x tele-extender, ISO 1000, f/6.3, 1/1000 second shutter speed, and +5 AF microadjustment. By now you know I put the single active AF point on the face of the heron, and manually set the exposure to produces the first blinkies in the light portions of this image. I compose

the image first, then I use a button on the rear of my camera to move the active AF point over to coincide with the eye of this heron when I have the composition I desire.

Figure 15 I hope I did not put you to sleep with this detailed article, like this young bufflehead that briefly woke up from its nap. The floating blind is a super way to closely approach wildlife. You will certainly see behavior that makes you appreciate the experience even more. Please be careful out there. Although I consider using the floating blind is a super safe way to photograph, I realize some photographers are not as careful as they should be. Anything done in the water can be dangerous. Starting out, avoid deep water. If your feet do not touch the bottom, it is too deep. Being in a floating blind in water over your head is dangerous, especially if the wind is blowing you about. Be safe and enjoy!

Figure 16 Two canvasbacks ducklings are enjoying the warmth of the sun just as it rises above the horizon. I enter the water before sunrise, get in position, and typically photograph for the first couple hours of the morning when the light is best, and hopefully the water is calm.

Figure 17 This red-breasted merganser swam right past me and provided me the chance to capture a nice portrait of it.

Figure 18 I often use the Mr. JanGear blind in shallow water. Here I am in about one foot of water. That means I am lying in the mud inside the floating blind and inching my way forward. This belted kingfisher accepted me quite readily but lying in the mud with chest waders on meant water entered by waders from the front and eventually soaked me thoroughly. Indeed, I get wet most of the time I use the floating blind due to shallow water, not deep water. In 2021, I will be using Mr. Jan Gear's dry suit that zips up to my neck and that will keep me dry! Also, many think having their camera as close to the water as possible is desirable. I do not agree with that. Indeed, I have put a wood spacer in my floating blind under my Wimberley mount to get the camera up a couple more inches so it is easier for me to look through the viewfinder, and when I must shoot up like I did with this kingfisher, I do not dunk my camera!

Figure 19 As I look ahead in the floating blind, I try to notice any birds flying toward me, such as this American White Pelican that flew toward me from a mile away and decided to land nearby. Even within the confines of a floating blind, sometimes it is possible to make flight shots.

Figure 20 This lesser scaup duckling is completely unafraid of my floating blind. Often it swam within inches of me, far too close to photograph.