The Birds of South Texas

By John Gerlach and Dixie Calderone

Figure 1 A pair of Northern cardinals at the Laguna Seca Ranch.

McAllen, TX is known for its superb birdwatching. An enormous number of bird species pass through southern Texas along the Gulf coast on migration and hundreds of species remain to nest. What is especially interesting for birders and bird photographers are all the bird species that range no further north than South Texas since most of them live below the border in Mexico, but many range a little over the Texas state line.

Although the coastline with the Gulf of Mexico is not far away, the interior lands are mostly dry and brushy. This makes it ideal nesting conditions for numerous small birds and the many Texas specialties found here. These special birds include green jay, great kiskadee, black-crested titmouse, painted bunting, chachalaca, pyrrhuloxia, white-tipped dove, Altamira oriole, golden-fronted woodpecker, and many others.

Ranching is a tough business, especially in south Texas where hot temperatures and unreliable rain add even more uncertainty to the ranching occupation. Several ranches are now earning some serious money from bird photographers. These ranches have built elaborate hides dug into the ground that can seat several photographers simultaneously. A small cement pond disguised with sand and attractive

stones holds scarce water the birds use for drinking and bathing. With birdseed provided automatically at regular intervals and fresh water, birds swarm into the area to enjoy the water and food. And when I say swarm, I really mean it. Most of the time more than twenty birds that represent over a dozen species can be photographed simultaneously. Imagine having a dozen bright red cardinals to photograph at the same time!

Figure 2 The common ground dove poses briefly at an elevated feeder perch. Elevating the setup produces a cleaner natural background.

My photo group I led spent five days at the Laguna Seca Ranch a little north of Pharr, TX. Gene who owns the ranch was there to give us considerable help. And at the beginning of our February workshop, a severe cold front clobbered South Texas. Though we avoided the snow and ice that brought most of Texas to a standstill, cold temperatures were endured for a few days. Sitting in a blind for three hours in 25-degree temps did cool you down, but bird activity remained awesome and that warmed us up.

Our biggest problem? Dealing with all the images everyone shot each day. Having enough in-camera memory cards and fully charged batteries to shoot more several thousand images in one day is not something most of us expect to deal with. And then after a full day of photography, everyone returns to their room to download all their images, recharge camera batteries, and reformat their memory cards. That takes a lot of time away from getting rest – but it was worth it. Indeed, some clients pulled an all-nighter to be ready for the next morning.

All of us used different lenses, but the popular camera in the February workshop was the new Canon R5 as 60% of us used that camera. My preferred lens was the Canon 600mm f/4 III with an adapter to use it on the mirrorless Canon R5. At times I also used a 1.4x teleconverter on the 600mm to make it have an 840mm focal length. I used this combo for tiny birds, like Lincoln's sparrows and orange-crowned warblers. For Northern cardinals, pyrrhuloxias, and green jays, the 600mm lens was plenty of lens and sometimes too much. The new Canon 100-500mm lens I own was also quite effective in the blinds.

Figure 3 A crested caracara flies into the set. When photographing flying birds, use fast shutter speed around 1/2000 second and turn image stabilization off.

It is important to have the lens and camera ready to use at a moments notice, so we all used Wimberley gimbal tripod heads on sturdy Gitzo tripods. The Wimberley gimbal head keeps the camera ready to use at all times and makes it easy to compose the subject quickly. The Canon R5 excels at bird photography because it offers eye focus. This means when the bird's eye is facing the camera, most of the time all I had to do was compose the bird and let the camera find the eye and focus on it. This works better than you might think. I do have the Touch and Drag feature set on my camera so I can drag the active AF point toward the middle of the frame, then point the active AF point at the birds head. Typically, the camera detects the eye quite rapidly and then focuses on the eye. Once the camera focuses on the eye, then I recompose the bird in a pleasing way and the focus stays on the eye because the camera selects whatever focus point coincides with the eye. It is amazing to watch this happen. In the past with cameras that offered no eye focus, I had to continually compose the bird, then move the active AF point over to its head, and fire away – and that takes time to do. Now the camera tracks the eye of the bird and I mostly concentrate on composition! This makes things far easier and faster. Sharper images are more consistently the result with this new eye detection and focus technology.

I find when the light is dimmer than I prefer, I still had to stop down the lens to at least f/7.1. The maximum aperture on my Canon 600mm is f/4, and with the 1.4x teleconverter, it is f/5.6 as the 1.4x converter costs 1 stop of light. But when shooting with the maximum aperture, even when focused on the eye, too much of the bird is not in focus. By stopping down at least one more stop and two stops if possible, the depth of field covers the birds face and neck better. Of course, if you shoot less tight on the bird, and then crop the image, you also get more DOF on the bird since depth of field is controlled

by aperture and the image magnification. A less magnified subject at any aperture means more of the subject is in sharp focus.

Exposure is easy too, especially with the live histogram you can activate and see in the Canon's R5 viewfinder. I continue to use two exposure methods that depends on the light. If the light is constant or changes in intensity little over a period of time, then I use full manual exposure. This means I manually choose the aperture, shutter speed, and ISO. Typically, in steady light, I set the minimum shutter speed that I feel I can get sharp images when shooting on a tripod and I also stop down to around f/8 for single birds and go to f/11 or f/16 should I be trying to get two or more birds in sharp focus. To reach my preferred exposure, I adjust the ISO to move the rightmost data of the live histogram over to the right wall of the histogram. I let it touch the right wall as I shoot only large RAW files. Since both the histogram and the highlight alert are based on an embedded JPEG in the raw file, and not the raw data, touching the right histogram wall a little or getting to the first blinkies does not mean the highlights are blown out in the raw file, only in an 8-bit JPEG file that covers less of the dynamic range. Once I take a shot, I play the image back to check for the blinkies or flashing highlights. If no blinkies, I add another 1/3-stop of light, shoot again, and check for the blinkies. If I now have a few flashing blinkies in the image that I play back, I go with that exposure for my raw images. Of course, it there are many blinkies, I reduce the exposure by 1/3-stop, shoot another image, play it back to make sure I have only a few blinkies. I know this sounds like a lot, but I assure you once you get used to determining the exposure this way, it is quite fast and easy.

Figure 4 The male pyrrhuloxia is my favorite bird to photograph in south Texas. I cannot photograph it enough!

The second way I figure my exposure is an automatic method called Auto ISO. With this method, I set the aperture and shutter speed I prefer to use, and let the camera set the ISO to produce the standard exposure. Of course, since I agree with the ETTR (expose to the right) method of exposure that collects more image data and reduces the noise in the dark portions of the image, nearly always I must use some positive exposure compensation. Typically, I use +1 exposure compensation, but it can vary with the reflectance of the subject and its surroundings and the contrast in the light. My Canon R5 has a menu to set exposure compensation, but I find that it takes too long to dig through menus. So, to make things easier for me, I went to the Custom Functions menu and programmed my SET button to control exposure compensation. To set exposure compensation, I no longer must search through menus. Instead, I press the SET button in and rotate the top vertical dial to set the preferred exposure compensation. This has worked well for me for many years.

Figure 5 The golden-fronted woodpecker is readily attracted to a mixture of suet, peanut butter, and cornmeal.

I have used either Auto ISO for light situations that change frequently or full manual for steady light for the last 1 million wildlife images I have shot. And I see no reason to change. I have never been a fan of aperture-priority in my forty-year career as a professional photographer and abandoned shutter-priority when Auto ISO with exposure compensation became available. The enormous problem with aperture-priority is the shutter speed too easily gets too slow and the wildlife subject is not sharp due to the slow shutter speed. With shutter-priority, the aperture varies, and the image can become dark if the lens cannot open up enough to produce a favorable exposure. Auto ISO is like having aperture-priority and shutter-priority simultaneously! The ISO varies as needed. Naturally, the ISO might rise too much and introduce too much noise, but it is easy to notice the high ISO selected by the camera and quickly take countermeasures to lower it by opening up the lens or slowing down the shutter speed or a little of both. Also, I never limit the ISO. While I try to avoid ISOs above 2000, I do use higher ISOs when I really have no other choice due to insufficient light. I would rather capture a sharp image that has high ISO noise than an image with less noise but no sharpness.

Figure 6 I set my autofocus points to a group of nine and quickly composed the cardinal as it fluttered about the cacti. This is not easy and most of the time there is another bird in the way, or the bird is not in sharp focus, but if I shoot enough, I capture a gem once in a while!

Let me speak about aperture-priority one more time. I realize it was enormously popular with photographers years ago and remains so with some today. I cannot see a reason to use aperture-priority, especially for wildlife photography today if you have Auto ISO as a choice on your camera and most cameras today offer Auto ISO. Having the shutter speed slow too much was an enormous problem for photographers on the dozens of African wildlife photo tours I led over many decades. Auto ISO worked far better. I know some insist on using aperture-priority, but I cannot fathom why they persist. Some even limit their shutter speed to not go slower than 1/focal length of the lens. If the camera must go to a slower shutter speed, then it automatically increases the ISO. That sounds like a plausible way to beat the "too slow of a shutter speed syndrome." But even that does not work for me. There are times when I have no choice but to use a shutter speed much slower than I would like, and I still capture pleasing images. An extreme example for me was photographing a male lion in Kenya 20 minutes before sunrise on a bean bag with a 600mm lens. It is dark 20 minutes before sunrise, so I rested the lens on the bean bag, hoped everyone in the safari vehicle would not move, used the touch shutter on my Canon 5D Mark IV, shot wide open at f/4, dropped the shutter speed all the way down to ¼ second, and I still had ISO 1000. I shot 35 images using the best technique I know, and as expected with ¼ second, most were terribly soft, but I did get two sharp images and I only needed one. So, when you must use a shutter speed that really is too slow, shoot many more images than normal and sometimes things work out anyway. The last thing I want my camera to do is restrict the shutter speeds I can select.

Figure 7 It is amazing how many Lincoln's sparrows winter in south Texas. I know them by finding them where they nest in the high mountains around my home near West Yellowstone.

For sharpness, I favor more shutter speed when I can, let the camera focus on the subjects eye, and keep IS active on my Wimberley head. While often the advice is to turn IS off on a tripod, that is not true if you are holding onto the camera while using the tripod since you are moving the camera a little and image stabilization helps to minimize camera shake, but it does nothing for subject movement.

One of the keys to capturing pleasing bird images is to shoot lots of images. When I tell some on photo forums I shot 10,000 images in a single day, some assume I am a sloppy shooter that relies on numbers of images to get the occasional pleasing photo. Nothing could be further from the truth! I am extremely deliberate, precise, and selective in what I photograph. If I see an obvious problem, I do not shoot. But I have to shoot a lot, especially with small birds, because they move exceedingly fast. Even at 12 shots per second of a cardinal perched on a branch, every shot is likely to vary a little from the others. And if you see a small bird assume a wonderful pose, if you have to focus on it and the press the shutter button, most likely you already missed the opportunity. Indeed, many of my finest poses I capture I never see happen. That makes sorting through all the images even more interesting because you will find wonderful images you did not even know you had.

Figure 8 This orange-crowned warbler visits the small pond at the Laguna Seca Ranch. For small birds like this one, I use a Canon 600mm lens with a 1.4x teleconverter to capture a large image of the tiny bird.

As for processing images, let me state now I am no computer whiz as most of the time the computer beats the heck out of me. My skills are mostly with knowing wildlife quite well and knowing my camera super well. I process my Canon images with Canon's own free software called Canon Digital Photo Professional and always use the latest version of this software. I find it terrific for sorting through my initial images and then spending one minute to process the image. For bird images where many are similar and problems like subject movement or poor focus are easy to detect, it takes me about one second per image to decide to keep it or delete it. And I tend to delete most. If I keep 150 out of 1000 images, that is a lot for me. I feel if I capture an exception pose, why keep the merely good images since I will always use the absolute best and none of the rest. Even keeping 150/1000 I feel is probably too many. If I keep 300 images out of 40,000, you know they are images I consider to be well done and often unique from all the others due to an exceptional pose.

Finally, I found Texas bird photographing to be both thrilling and educational. I learned my new mirrorless Canon R5 better, saw and photographed some new bird species, and loved the warm weather, especially knowing at home near Yellowstone the temperature remains below zero!

Here are the websites to the two ranches we photographed on. There are other wildlife photography ranches too, but since we have no experience with them, we cannot tell you anything about them from first-hand experience.

Laguna Seca Ranch https://www.lagunasecaranch.com

Martin Refuge https://martinrefuge.com

The Laguna Seca Ranch raptor blinds and songbird hides are both excellent. The raptor blind at the Martin Refuge is superb and the number and variety of raptors coming into the blind is excellent. At the Martin Ranch, we photographed Harris hawk, Crested caracara, turkey vulture, and black vulture at close range. Both ranches are worth visiting as they are quite different and offer a wonderful photo experience..

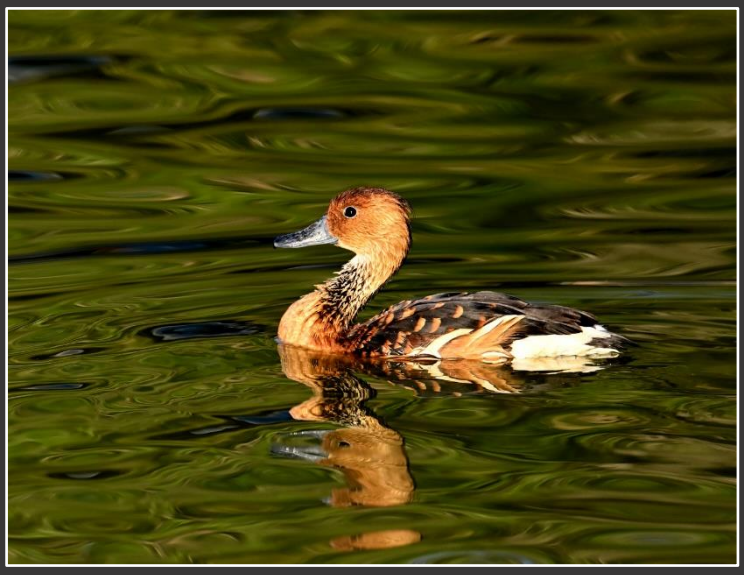
Figure 9 A black-crested titmouse at the waterhole.

Figure 10 Green jay, Northern Cardinal, Clay-colored sparrow, and female red-winged blackbird

Figure 11 The curve-billed thrasher is readily attracted to suet that is hidden from the camera by putting the suet in a hole in the backside of the plant. Below is a field sparrow.

Figure 12 At the Martin Refuge, a chachalaca walks past our photo position. The eye detection worked super well for this bird.

Figure 13 The Harris hawk is a handsome bird!



Whooping crane at Rockport Texas. Green jay at Laguna Seca. Chipping sparrow and Fulvous whistling duck!