

Dripping Water for Bird Photography

By John Gerlach

www.gerlachnaturephoto.com

Bird photographers regularly photograph birds frequenting feeders stocked with black oil sunflower seeds, cracked corn, Niger seed, and suet. Providing food to bring birds close for outstanding photos is successful for certain species. But most birds are not attracted to seeds and suet as they prefer dining on insects and berries. Consider my home in the mountains at 7000 feet near West Yellowstone, Montana. Seeds and suet attract evening, black-headed, and pine grosbeaks, lots of pine siskins, and dozens of Cassin's finches in June, but flycatchers, warblers, vireos, tanagers, kinglets, most sparrows, and many others do not eat these offerings. Several years ago, I noticed that many of the bird species that are not attracted to the food I provide are attracted to the water bath in my yard. For a decade, I photographed birds at the water bath, but many birds, especially warblers, vireos, and flycatchers did not use the water bath that was in my open yard. And bushes grew only ten feet away and I could see them hopping about in the branches, but still they did not come to the water.



Figure 1 A broad-tailed hummingbird stretches on the small branch placed above the drip pool to provide a convenient perch. This image is made with a Canon R5 using a 25mm extension tube on a Canon 600mm lens and the camera is set to 1.6x crop mode.

I own ten acres and the rest of my property borders the national forest, so my neighbors are all wildlife! I noticed a natural cavity in a large boulder in the small aspen forest that makes up most of my front yard. Since this natural rock depression holds water, I wondered if the rock cavity would attract birds if I brought water to it? To get a steady trickle of water to the rock cavity, I ran a 200-foot garden hose from my home, through the trees, and out to the rock. Then I bought a Rainbird adapter at a greenhouse with a shutoff valve to control the water flow. I hooked the adapter to the hose that converted the 3/4-inch diameter hose to a 1/4-inch plastic drip tube used by gardeners to water their plants. Since this 1/4-inch plastic tube is fitted with a shut-off valve, it is easy to adjust the rate of flow to control the dripping water. I completed my water drip by using a 10-foot stick to both support and suspend the end of the 1/4-inch plastic tubing about 3 feet above the natural cavity in the rock. A long stick to support the tube that drips the water was used first, but I upgraded this and now use a **Phottix Saldo 395 Studio Boom Light Stand**. This works much better as it is far more flexible in positioning the drip above the rock cavity. The stand also excels at putting an attractive perch for the birds above the drip pool. Just find a photogenic stick with lichens on it and tape it to the end of the boom arm and position over the drip pool.



Figure 2 A yellow warbler in autumn plumage takes a quick bath. The drip is most popular during the first three hours after sunrise and then bird activity tapers off considerably.

Would dripping water work to draw birds inside the dense aspen grove? I turned on the water, adjusted the dripping water to hit the pool of water that is about 8 x 11 inches and 1/4 inch deep once a second. This makes the water move as some suggest moving water tells the birds it is fresh. Actually, I doubt that is the reason dripping water attracts birds. Rather than the sight of moving water, the sound of the dripping water readily and quickly attracts them to the spot! If the birds had to rely on seeing the water, that would be difficult to impossible as the aspen forest is dense, so visibility is low with so many leaves

blocking the view of the drip. My water drip is the most productive for drawing birds to within easy photo range from early August through the end of September. Most small songbirds migrate or fly at night and land in the upper tree branches before morning. Over the last several years, I have noticed while sitting in my blind near the drip that typically there are few birds stirring in the low bushes at first light. Instead, often bird activity is slow at sunrise, but then rapidly picks up shortly after sunrise and often becomes a frenzy for a couple of hours before it tapers off again. Since I can easily view the aspen forest around the drip well, I notice activity becomes most noticeable high in the trees first. I suspect the migrating birds land in the tops of the trees during the night, then they hear the sound of dripping water at dawn and soon begin to work their way to lower and lower branches. Finally, they are quite close and clearly looking for the dripping water, but also alert for danger, so they are wary. While not all the birds come to the water, a great many of them do. Indeed, if a bird is already drinking the water or bathing in the pool, other birds quickly join the “pool party.”

Keep in mind where you live affects how well water attracts wildlife. I grew up in Michigan where lakes, rivers, and creeks abound. Although I did not try it in Michigan, my photographers friends tell me a water drip is not particularly successful for them. That makes sense when fresh water is readily available all over the place. But it certainly works in dry places or during dry seasons. While the mountains near West Yellowstone have plenty of water in winter and during spring snowmelt, late summer and early autumn is dry, as is most of the western states. That is why forest fires are such a problem in the western states. Where I live, there is no standing water within ¼-mile of my home. I live on a mountain slope where the sagebrush meets the aspen and conifer forest. This abrupt change of habitat is called an ecotone and it tends to be rich in wildlife. In early June, my woodland drip does not draw many subjects, but dry conditions and autumn migration bring numerous birds to my water drip – much to my delight!

I have come to learn what works best for luring birds where I live in the Idaho mountains using dripping water. The water bath must be shallow (1/2 inch or less), and the dripping water must make as much noise as possible to allow birds further away to hear it. The dense cover must be close to the water bath and the water should be close to the ground. I suspect that even in places where there are lots of ponds and creeks, dripping water provided with the above conditions will do well. For example, both the creek and the lake near my home lack the sort of bathing conditions that my water drip provides as the creek is too deep and so is the lake in nearly all spots. I will be trying a water drip in the bushes along the margin of the lake in 2023 and then I will know for sure what I believe is actually true. Also, some conditions do greatly affect birds visiting the water drip. If it rains during the night and the leaves are wet at dawn, birds visiting my drips drop to almost nothing as the birds can drink the water drops on the leaves and even rub the wet leaves to take their bath. I have learned on a wet morning that spending time in the blind at the water drip is largely a waste of time, but on dry mornings, it is often super productive.



Figure 3 Toward the end of August and especially in early September, Wilson's warblers begin appearing at my drip. Indeed, one morning at the end of August, a dozen Wilson's warblers were approaching the drip simultaneously! As the autumn season changes from early August to early October, the amount and variety of bird species continually changes.

An observation. I do have a creek $\frac{1}{4}$ mile away, but migrating songbirds readily use my water drip rather than go to the creek. I suspect that even in places where standing water is plentiful, a water drip could work well. Even in Michigan, I know of plenty of natural areas where no water is present for $\frac{1}{4}$ mile. Surely dripping water would work there too. While some have told me dripping water does not work there, I wonder if they put their drip in an open yard. I have a drip in my open yard too, and while it draws robins and other species that frequent my lawn, warblers, and other small songbirds that I see in the bushes within 15 feet of that drip seldom use it but flock to my woodland drip. I wonder if a drip in a woodland area with plenty of close cover next to it and designed to make lots of noise from dripping water would actually work quite well. I think it would. A perfect spot for a drip is along a brushy area that is open to the dawn sunshine, but close bushes within a foot or two of the drip both on the right and left side of the drip, and perhaps not much cover behind the drip to provide a more photogenic background with fewer distractions.



Figure 4 A very wet adult male western tanager enjoys its dawn bath. Some birds eagerly seek the chance to bathe, while others seem to have no interest. Most woodpeckers do not seem to care, but western tanagers cannot get enough bathing in.

Aside from the photography, the bird activity is wonderful to observe from close range and each morning is a surprise. One morning I may enjoy six western tanagers bathing in my drip, and the next morning there are no tanagers, but a dozen Wilson's warblers are the main attraction. And on most mornings, a hummingbird or two takes a bath in the pool. By the way, the natural rock cavity that is somewhat circular and about 11 x 8 inches was also six inches deep – far too deep for small hummingbirds, vireos, flycatchers, and warblers to bathe in. Therefore, I helped the birds out by filling the rock depression with small gravel and then put a little soft sand on top. Now the rock cavity when full of water is only ¼-inch deep. Extra water from the hose merely flows over and down the side of the rock, so the water depth is always perfect for small birds. The water drip also attracts some small mammals as I regularly photograph yellow-pine chipmunks and red squirrels drinking water, but I have also had mule deer, yellow-bellied marmots, and long-tailed weasels come to the drip.

There is a huge difference between the water drip in the woods and the one 25 yards away in my grass lawn. I get different species. Warblers, vireos, flycatchers, kinglets, and some sparrows are easily

photographed at my woodland drip, but I rarely see any of them at the open yard drip. The yard drip tends to attract robins and common flickers better. Overall, though, for photos, my woodland drip is far more productive than the nearby yard drip.



Figure 5 The tiny calliope hummingbird is soaking quietly. You would think hummingbirds would bathe later in the day when the air is warmer, but sunrise is their favorite time at my drip and the air is cool then.

Decoy Birds are Helpful

To further draw birds to the water drip, I put a feeder that hangs from aspen branches and stock them with black oil sunflower seeds. When I do this, I attract numerous evening grosbeaks and pine siskins, and both readily drink and bathe in the water at the drip. Starting out, I found these birds a joy to photograph, but there is a downside. Often I have so many siskins and grosbeaks coming to the seed feeders and then the water that they get in the way of the other birds I am especially keen to photograph. It is really tough to photograph well a gorgeous male western tanager when four evening grosbeaks are also fighting over the drip. So, sometimes I let the seed feeders go empty to reduce the chaos at the drip. On the other hand, the evening grosbeaks and pine siskins live on my property, so they get used to the drip and readily go to it. Their presence at the water drips encourages new birds on migration to also use the drip.

Another useful feeder is one that is specially made to hold niger seeds. Small finches love niger seeds, especially American goldfinches, and pine siskins, and both readily and frequently visit the water drip. They are fun to photograph, too, and the activity at the water drip draws in other species and helps to make them feel comfortable when at the drip.

Photo Strategies

I have thoroughly enjoyed photographing wildlife, especially birds, for over five decades. Techniques have come a long way from the Kodachrome 25 film I started with in 1970 to now all digital with ISO 1000 and more when needed. I like to photograph birds well. Therefore, I tend to use really good camera gear, but honestly, much less expensive camera gear does super well with birds, so do not feel like you cannot do this if the most expensive camera gear is not on your menu.

You Need a Blind

While birds that live on your property often get used to you and allow close approach, migrating birds new to the area are another matter. You need a good blind to conceal yourself and your photo gear. I own several commercial small hunting blinds that I use for photography, but these would not work in the woods but do fine on my lawn. Why not in the woods? My aspen woods are on a hillside so there is quite a slope, and it is full of large boulders. A blind with fixed sides that is designed for flat terrain does not work in that situation. I planned to build my own blind on the site, but even that is a problem as the hill is mostly rocks so pounding four stakes into the ground to support the blind would be a real job and likely not possible at all with all the large rocks. (See the blind in the next photo with rocks all around.)



Figure 6 Here is the blind. You see the drip pool in the lower left corner. Notice the stick I put above the pool for birds to perch on. They readily take the suggestion. Notice also the 1/4-inch tube that is connected to a regular hose and that is connected to my home about 200 feet away. The blind frame is construction scaffolding. I ran a wire around the top of the metal posts on each corner and then hung camo netting from the wire with clothes pins. It is a simple, stable, and effective blind. The scaffolding work well here because all four legs have leveling feet.

Finally, it dawned on me that I had the solution all along. I needed a blind frame that I could cover with camo netting to hide me, but it had to be sturdy so the wind would not tear or blow it down. That is when I remembered the construction scaffolding in my barn. Years ago, I bought two sections so I could photograph nesting birds up to 14 feet above the ground. While I do not do that anymore, I realized one section of the construction scaffolding would make a dandy blind frame, and each of the four metal

legs is an adjustable leveling leg and it worked perfectly in my rocky unlevel spot. The blind blends into the forest well when covered with camo material, and the birds do not notice me inside the blind, so they approach closely. Indeed, often they perch on branches only a few feet away from me or the blind itself.

Sharp Images

I always use a blind at my seed feeders and water drips. I am patient, so sitting quietly in a blind while waiting for the subject to approach is easy for me. Of course, most of the time I enjoy steady photo opportunities as bird activity is quite good! I use a Gitzo tripod with a Wimberley gimbal head mounted on top. The gimbal head lets me balance my camera and lens on the tripod. When balanced, I can let the pan and tilt controls be loose, so it is easy to **slowly** move the lens to compose the bird wherever it happens to be at. While birds are usually at the edge of the small water pool or bathing in the pool, sometimes they perch on aspen branches a few feet from the pool and the Wimberley head lets me photograph them at these locations. Notice I said move the lens slowly! Birds notice quick movements immediately. When in the blind, I do not make any noise and every movement I must make is super slow.

I normally photograph relatively still subjects as this is no time for flight shots, so I leave the image stabilizer on and set it to Mode 1. Since the lens is not perfectly still on a Wimberley head and I am touching the camera, there are vibrations, and those are minimized with image stabilization active. Currently, I am using a camera that offers In Body Image Stabilization or IBIS. And it works in conjunction with the image stabilization built in my lens too. If the light is sufficient, I use shutter speeds of 1/500 second or faster to capture super sharp images. However, I increase the shutter speed to 1/2000 second if birds are actively bathing as they move quick when bathing. Even that shutter speed is usually not fast enough for most bathing action.

When I can, I prefer to use an aperture of f/8 or f/11 to give me more depth of field than what you get shooting wide open at the biggest aperture such as f/4. And birds move quickly and unexpectedly, so I always shoot more images than I need. Even as the bird quickly looks up, then down, now right, and finally left. If you shoot enough, you will capture images where the head is still at the moment of exposure and therefore capture a sharper image. Obviously, if the bird is rapidly turning its head during the exposure, sharpness is diminished – usually the rapidly turning head is a blur.

Lens Choices

For bird photography where I stalk the bird on foot or from a floating blind that moves, I greatly prefer my Canon 600mm f/4 lens. It gives me a lot of reach that I describe as how big the subject is in the viewfinder and the angle of view is narrower than a shorter lens and this means the lens “sees” less background and therefore the background is less cluttered. But stationary blind photography where you cannot move closer or further away is not ideal for a prime lens where the focal length cannot be adjusted. If the bird is too small in the viewfinder, you can always crop the image and make it larger. But if the bird is too close and therefore too big for your prime (fixed focal length) lens, then you are too tight and perhaps cut part of the bird off in your photo. A good zoom lens gives you more flexibility. For example, I recently used my 600mm lens at my woodland water drip to photograph hummingbirds and kinglets, both small birds. The 600mm worked really well when I used a 25mm extension tube to allow the long lens to focus closer. But the fixed 600mm lens was simply too much lens for the evening

grosbeaks that visit the drip pool. There was no way to successfully photograph a tiny bird and a much larger one at the same distance with a prime lens.



Figure 7 The Canon RF 100-500mm lens on the Canon R5 mirrorless camera easily made this image. Due to the closeness of the drip to the blind (about six feet), I did not need to use the crop factor.

The next morning, I used the lens that works better for the drip photo opportunities. I selected my Canon RF 100-500mm f/7.1 zoom lens. Being able to zoom the lens from 100mm to 500mm is enormously useful when you might get a hummingbird at the drip, and then that is followed by a visit from a much larger American robin. And by using the 1.6x crop factor of my Canon R5 camera, essentially I also get the reach of 800mm when zoomed out to the 500mm setting. Having the ability to cover the field of view that you would get between 100mm and 800mm with one lens is enormously useful when your photo location is fixed, but the size of your subject and distance from you varies considerably.

On the other hand, I found the 600mm with the camera set to 1.6x crop factor gave me a fuller image of the subject when photographing the really tiny birds – hummingbirds and ruby-crowned kinglets. But, if I am set up for these small birds with the 600mm, I cannot photograph larger birds like the grosbeaks and robins. (I do wish Canon would build a 200-600mm f/5.6 lens that focuses as close as six feet as I would buy this lens immediately.)

Camera

I have used high-end Canon cameras for decades. They include the 1DX, 1DX II, 1DX III, and the 5D Mark 4. These cameras are super, but none were mirrorless cameras. Many of my workshop clients migrated to a mirrorless camera system, so I knew I had to get one to get up to speed on this new technology. In

October of 2020, I finally managed to get the new Canon R5 that is hugely popular and in high demand, so I was lucky to get it then. I did not know the advantages it offered, but now that I have taken over two million photos with it, I fully understand the enormous advantages for wildlife photography. I realize you probably do not have the Canon R5, but hopefully your current camera or future camera offers these features.

1. Eye Detection and Focus

The Canon R5 when set to this focus mode finds the eye of the subject and focuses precisely on the eye. The camera does this even when the animal is moving about in its environment. Never before has my focus been so consistent and precise. I do admit the eye focus is not perfect as the system has a difficult time finding the eye of large mammals with lots of hair around the eye and it fails with bathing birds as the eye moves quickly around the composition and then disappears when the bird dips its head under the water. But eye focus works most of the time and it is incredible. Everyone I know who uses a camera with eye focus technology loves it. It is a selling point, so you know future cameras will have improved eye focus!



Figure 8 Small birds at a drip are often quick! Eye focus helps me get sharp images when time is fleeting. Also, shooting images at 20 shots per second helps a lot too. It is amazing how much this Wilson's warbler moves in 1 second!

2. The full-frame sensor on the Canon R5 has 45MP

While you do not normally need that many pixels in your final image, the resolution of the full frame allows considerable cropping capability. More pixels mean more resolution, but it really only matters if you plan to crop the original image a lot or make huge prints. For use on the web, a small file of 1MP works fine. Even for prints, a 17MP file produces wonderful prints using 300dpi if the print is no larger than 13 x 20 inches.

3. The 1.6x crop mode

The Canon R5 offers several crop modes and I find the 1.6x crop mode quite useful in wildlife photography. Essentially, the 1.6x crop mode makes the field of view of the lens smaller and the lens acts like it is longer. In other words, using the 1.6x crop mode gives a 100-500mm zoom lens when zoomed out to 500mm the angle of view of an 800mm lens. $(1.6 \times 500) = 800\text{mm}$ lens. This 1.6x crop mode reduces the image file to 17MP, but that is plenty for most uses. Only if you wish to make prints larger than 13 x 20 inches does the smaller file size become a concern. A huge advantage for the 1.6x crop mode is the subject is larger in the viewfinder. It is easier to monitor how the subjects legs are positioned or head is turned so you shoot photos when the body posture is most favorable. Another huge advantage of shooting in the 1.6x crop mode is the file size is smaller so you are less likely to fill your camera's buffer and therefore can keep on shooting using a fast frame rate.

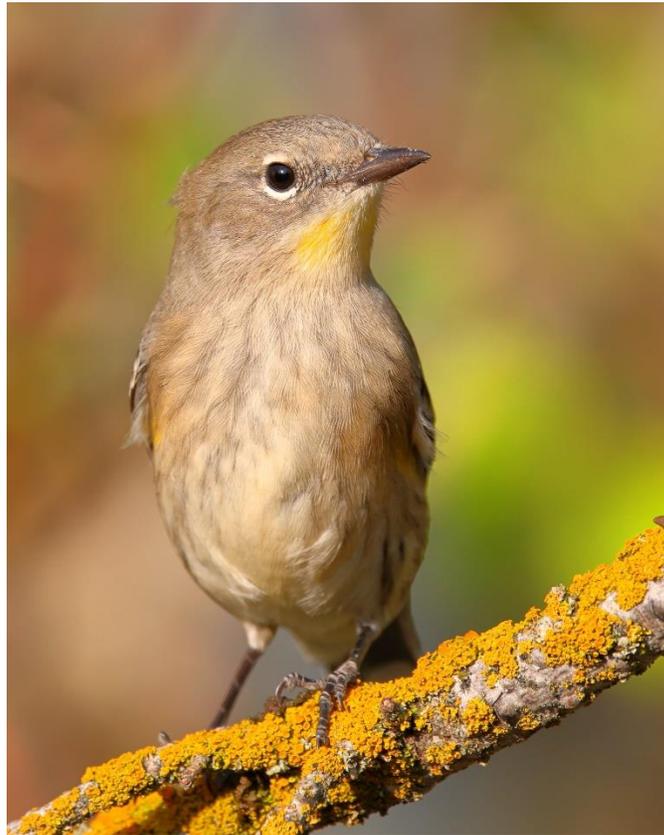


Figure 9 I often use the 1.6x crop mode to fill the viewfinder more fully. This lets me see the pose better and more importantly, the file size is small, so I never fill my camera buffer allowing me to shoot continuously when I need to. This is an Audubon's warbler-a subspecies of the yellow-rumped warbler.

4. Touch and Drag AF

This allows me to use my right thumb to drag the active AF point around the image by touching and sliding my thumb on the LCD display on the rear of the camera. While normally I rely on eye focus, for those animals where eye focus does not work, then moving the active AF point to coincide with the animals face using Touch and Drag is quick and precise.

5. Electronic shutter

Wildlife often react to the sound of the camera's shutter. Many birds fly away as soon as they hear the shutter. Always use the quietest shutter mode your camera offers. The Canon R5 has three shutter options that include mechanical, electronic first curtain, and electronic. For wildlife, I always use the electronic shutter because it not only is quiet, but it is completely silent and shoots at a fixed 20 shots per second. The camera is able to shoot this fast and silently because the sensor is turned on and off very rapidly to record individual images, but there are no moving mechanical parts to make noise. My ability to photograph nervous birds at my seed feeders and water features is markedly improved with the electronic shutter. Now, when I am perfectly quiet and hidden in my blind, and move my lens slowly to compose, I shoot thousands of bird photos and they never suspect I am there. It is amazing and enormously productive!!!!

You want a silent shutter for wildlife- especially birds!!!!!!

The Camera Setup

This is how I set my camera up for bird photography at my water drip in the woods.

Auto ISO

If sunrise is 6:30 am, I know the sun will not appear above the eastern mountains until 7am. I prefer the sun to shine on my subjects because more light makes it easier for me to stop the lens down (say f/7.1 to f/11) without forcing me to use ISOs that are higher than I prefer. Normally I like to keep the ISO at ISO 1000 or less, but I do use higher ISOs when I have no other choice. While higher ISOs have more image defects called noise, software can reduce their negative effects quite nicely, but not perfectly. Where my drip is located at the huge rock, since I could not move the rock, I had to trim several of the small aspen trees that grew east of my blind to allow the first rays of sunshine to light the drip. My chainsaw and a few carefully placed shots with my shotgun to trim high branches that cast a harmful shadow did the tree-trimming quite nicely. I only removed the branches that cast shadows on my drip during the first three hours of the morning.



Figure 10 Townsend's warbler is a delight to photograph. They are not common at my water drips, so when one appears, it is always a special moment for me. On a partly cloudy morning, the ambient light varies often and quickly. Auto ISO adjusts for the changing amount of ambient light. When you need auto exposure, Auto ISO is the way to do it, rather than aperture priority or shutter priority as each of those two once popular methods have serious shortcomings. For example, aperture-priority will let the shutter speed become too slow.

Because the morning light can vary considerably, I use Auto ISO. As the sun rises in the sky over the next couple of morning hours when photography is best, it is easier to let the camera automatically monitor the amount of ambient light that is available and set the exposure. Therefore, I manually set the shutter speed to 1/500 second and f/7.1 to begin and use smaller apertures to get more depth of field when the ambient light brightens as the sun rises. Auto ISO is wonderful because you get to manually set the aperture and the shutter speed and they stay the same unless you manually change one or both, but the ISO automatically adjusts for changes in ambient light. It is like having both aperture-priority and shutter-priority simultaneously. Keep in mind Auto ISO is an autoexposure method. To adjust the exposure, you must use the exposure compensation control found somewhere on your camera. To make things easy for me, rather than searching for this control in the camera menus, I assigned exposure compensation to the SET button on the rear of my camera when I used my older Canon cameras. I merely pressed the SET button in and rotated the top control dial to select the exposure compensation I needed to shoot terrific exposures. My new camera, the Canon R5, has a dial that is dedicated to exposure compensation, so now I just turn the dial to whatever exposure compensation I need.

Since I use the electronic shutter, my frame rate (images shot per second) is 20 and that is fixed. I do hope future cameras will allow me to set whatever frame rate I prefer as 20 shots per second is really too many for perched birds, but helpful when action is happening.

Metering Pattern

For most of my career as a professional nature photographer, I used the spot meter. However, around 2003 when I first began my digital camera journey, I began to use the histogram and highlight alert to set the optimum exposure and found evaluative metering works fine as it get you close and then a little exposure compensation makes things perfect. I have used Evaluative metering since that time, and it works amazingly well.

File Size

I shoot only large RAW files of 45MP that are 8192 x 5464 pixels in size in the full frame mode. When the subject is quite small, then I find the 1.6x crop mode gives me the reach I am looking for. While the file size is only 17MP, that is still plenty big enough to use in my teaching programs, online, and to make prints no larger than 13x20 inches without any loss of quality. Often photographers speak of the loss of resolution when using the crop mode, but that only happens if you are making large prints, something I seldom do anyway. Heck, for use on the Internet, even images shot with the 1.6x crop mode must be reduced in size.



Figure 11 I do not need a 45 MP file of this adult Audubon's warbler unless I wanted to make a print larger than 13 x 20 inches. Using the 1.6x crop in my Canon R5, I still get a 17MP file and that is plenty big enough for my needs.

Image stabilization and/or IBIS

I always have these turned on in wildlife photography. Even though I nearly always shoot on a tripod with a Wimberley gimbal head, the camera is not completely still because I have my hands on it, so these help reduce camera vibrations. IBIS stands for in the body image stabilization and works with all lenses to shoot sharper photos. Regular image stabilization is having the control in the lens. My Canon R5 works with both simultaneously giving me tremendous stabilization control resulting in sharper images. Though it depends on your camera gear, you may have more than one Image stabilization option. For example, my Canon RF 100-500mm lens offers Mode 1, 2, and 3. Mode 1 stabilizes the lens in both the vertical and horizontal direction. This is my preferred mode for still subjects. If photographing wildlife action, such as flying birds, then use Mode 2. This option stabilizes the lens in only one direction. If you are panning horizontally, then only the vertical direction is stabilized. In the unusual event of panning vertically, then the horizontal direction is stabilized. Mode 3 is similar to Mode 2, but image stabilization does not activate at all until you press the shutter button and then it stabilizes like Mode 2. Mode 3 helps me track moving subjects, so I use this one for all situations where I know I am likely to only be photographing action. At the drip though, Mode 1 is the best option.

Strategy in the Blind

I have a nice board seat with a pillow to sit on. It is fairly comfortable, and I use thick camo mesh on the front of the blind. Birds sometimes detect me moving through the mesh if I move quickly, so I move as little as possible and always slowly. Normally, my only movement occurs when I slowly move the lens to compose a subject on a perch away from my drip pool. Slow movements are the key to success. I like the thin camo mesh because that makes it easier to spot birds in the aspen forest and see when they are coming to the drip. I tend to watch the upper trees a lot because that is where I normally detect approaching subjects first. The birds photographed at the drip are mainly warblers, vireos, flycatchers, tanagers, and kinglets. These birds all migrate at night. Why at night? There are fewer nocturnal predators (no hawks for example as they are daytime birds) and many believe birds navigate by using the stars. Plus, night tends to have calmer weather and it is cooler so that helps birds that are working hard to fly from getting overheated. My prime time for drip photography is early August through mid-September and this coincides with the autumn songbird migration in my area near West Yellowstone, Montana. Each morning I have different birds at the drip, so no two mornings are alike. However, if you live at lower elevations, spring is also prime time for you.

Most of my morning subjects have been flying during the night. Normally they begin their nocturnal migration a couple hours after sunset and then they fly for several hours, but land before dawn. I notice bird activity in the upper portions of the aspen trees first because these nocturnal migrants who have been flying during the night landed there to rest. When they hear the dripping water after sunrise when they begin to stir, these thirsty travelers readily fly from branch to branch as they approach the water. My best photo opportunities tend to happen about ½ hour after sunrise and lasts for about 90 minutes. It is remarkable how an aspen woodlot can be devoid of birds around sunrise but throbbing with them an hour later.



Figure 12 A dusky flycatcher is a common drip visitor in August, but by September, few are present as most have flown south. Note: many believe that fall bird migration begins much later than it does. Trust me, fall migration is well underway for many species by early August!!!!



Figure 13 This calliope hummingbird was nervous about coming to the drip. It was on migration and had never seen the drip before, but it sure knew what the sound of water is all about. Unlike a photo blind where you are photographing birds that are used to the food or water attractant, your blind, the sounds of you moving in the blind or the camera noise, migrating birds are not so trusting. Migrating birds are not used to the blind and far more wary of everything. You must be extra quiet and well-hidden for a drip blind to work with migrating birds. That is why I always use the electronic shutter for bird photography as the

camera is completely silent. A camera where you hear the shutter will cost you more than half of your photo opportunities as the bird will flush with the first click and probably not return. My photos shots tally increased by at least 10x when I adopted the silent electronic shutter!

I know birds will approach the dripping water and tiny pool. Often they land on branches nearby. I suspended a photogenic perch horizontally over the water drip and slightly behind the pool. This way when the bird looks at the pool, it faces the camera as the pool is between the bird and me. When the bird is in a good photo spot – on a branch, standing on the rock, or in the pool, I photograph whenever its body posture becomes favorable. I tend to like side shots, but full-frontal shots work well at times too. Normally I do not photograph when the bird is looking away from me, or has its back turned to me, but capturing an image of the bird with its back to you but it is looking back over its shoulder in your direction is a fine pose too. Often when one bird is bathing in the pool, other birds rapidly move in on it. I use my right eye to compose the photo, but often while viewing the subject through the camera's viewfinder, I use my left eye to scan the scene to see if another more desirable species is present to photograph, or another bird has assumed an even better pose.

While the eye focus works super well on small birds at close range (6 - 10 feet away), it has problems when the bird quickly turns its head and eye autofocus particularly performs poorly when the bird bathes as it continually dunks its head under the water. This makes the camera autofocus on the back of the pool and then it takes time to find the eye again when it is visible. This is the time for back-button focusing – sort of. I keep my autofocus active on the shutter button and set the AF-On button on the rear of my camera to lock focus. Then when I have a bathing bird that continually dips its head in the pool, I focus on the head when it is up, press the AF-On button in to lock focus and hold the button down, and shoot away as the bird bathes. With the autofocus locked, as long as the bird remains in the same spot, I still have good focus on it no matter if the camera can see the eye to autofocus on or not. It is not perfect as the bird may move an inch closer or further away, but it helps me keep the focus close to perfect most of the time.

By the way, I just had four days of heavy rain. This morning I set up in my blind right after the last shower and the woods was soaked. As I expected on this late date in August, the woods was alive with birds. But since the woods was soaked, nearly all of the birds ignored my water set as there were plenty of places with standing water, so my photo opportunities were limited, even though plenty of birds that normally come to the drip were present. The only reliable group of birds I had were the hummingbirds as they came just as much as during dry conditions. I do know as soon as the woods dries out, the warblers and vireos will once again readily come to the drip.



Figure 14 A Lincoln's sparrow stopped by one morning to enjoy a long bath!

New Ideas that Proved to be Enormously Successful



Figure 15 This image shows you three different water setups to attract and photograph birds. I put them all together to give birds a choice. Here is what I found. The small depression at the far-left edge is the rock in my aspen woods with the natural cavity it. When I only used this cavity for my water drip, birds readily used it. Even birds that you associate with the treetops eagerly landed on the rock to use it. The flat stone to the right of it is my hummingbird bathing stone. I have a garden hose set to mist that sprays water up above the rock on the left side just out of this image and that keeps the rock damp. Hummingbirds love to perch on the rock, rub the wet stone, and take their bath. The small right pond on the right is my Jet Sled. The rear 1/3 is filled with gravel and the rest only has water so it is too deep for birds to bathe there, but they eagerly bathe in the far shallow side! I covered the rear end of the jet sled with flat rocks that I found locally to cover up the edges of the plastic sled. This works tremendously well, and it is super easy to do and not that expensive.

Home Run Idea #1 – Use a Jet Sled as a small pond for bird reflections



Figure 16 This is the far end of the Jet Sled after I made it look more natural. I also turned off the water using idea #2 to get a more distinct reflection of the white-crowned sparrow!



Figure 17 Most sporting goods stores such as Cabela's carry jet sleds in various sizes and colors. I will be buying 3 of these next spring!

The drip in my yard and the natural cavity drip in my aspen woodland are both too small to let me make super good bird photos with nice reflections. For reflections, you need a large pool of water! I was building a pool out of 2 x 4 boards and pond liner when it struck me that I might already have the perfect solution that was inexpensive and easy. I use plastic jet sleds to tow behind my snowmobile or behind me when moving stuff up to my home in the winter when my driveway is impassable. Towing much needed supplies such as food during a winter storm is sometimes necessary.

It dawned on me that perhaps I could use the jet sled as a small pond and modify it to make it suitable for birds bathing and getting their reflections. The sled I used was a Jet Sled Junior that was 10 inches deep, 25 inches wide, and 48 inches long. I put the jet sled in a spot where I wanted to attract birds and carefully leveled the sled using stones and a bubble level to make sure it was level. Since 10 inches is far too deep of water for most birds to bathe in, I filled the far 1/3 of the sled with gravel so it was only about 1/2 inch deep. The front two thirds remained ten inches deep as I wanted to discourage birds from

using that area. Filling only the back 1/3 of the jet sled worked perfectly as all the birds were attracted to the shallow water. To hide the edge of the jet sled, I laid fairly flat but colorful rocks around the back edge of the sled. The birds preferred perching on the rocks over the exposed plastic jet sled edges in the front – another plus! I positioned the drip over the back end of the jet sled so the dripping water from the ¼ inch drip line hit the water in the jet sled where the pool was shallow to again draw birds to the shallow end and this also worked quite well. With some four feet of water in front of the bird that was standing or bathing in the pool or perched on the rocks, I got really good reflections whenever no birds were moving about in the water. Of course, the dripping water caused the water in the jet sled to move and that ruined the reflections. But that led to another modification that has worked extremely well for me.

Home Run Idea #2

To stop the dripping water from ruining my bird reflections, I had to stop the drip when the subject was present at the water without scaring it away. I easily solved this by running my garden hose directly from the water faucet on my home to the blind I was hiding in. Then I put a Rainbird ¾-inch hose adapter on the end of the hose in my blind. The adapter converted the ¾-inch garden hose to a ¼-inch drip line made by Rainbird that is used primarily to water garden plants. I attached the ¼-inch drip line to the converter on the hose and then I cut the drip line a few inches away. Here I put a Rainbird shutoff valve in the drip line. It is super easy to do. Cut the ¼-inch drip line and push one end of the shutoff valve in the line and then the other end of the shutoff valve in the other cut ¼-inch line and now you have a shutoff valve to control the ¼ inch drip line. I turn the drip line fully on to make as much splashing noise as possible when I am seeking to attract a bird to the water pool. When a bird appears and is about to enter the water, I turn the shutoff valve to stop the water and the dripping stops right away. This does not frighten the bird and now the water is still and that produces an excellent reflection of the subject. Of course, once the bird is bathing in the pool of water, its motion stirs the water and the reflection disappears but anytime the subject pauses for a few seconds, the reflection returns! Being able to control the drip rate from inside the blind is enormously helpful!!!! It is one of the best ideas I have had for photographing birds at water drips. Rainbird carries many supplies that are useful for drip photography. Contact: www.rainbird.com

Home Run Idea #3

I noticed hummingbirds usually avoid my drip pool but are attracted to the dripping water. Often they land on a wet rock and rub the rock to get wet and then they take their bath. They are afraid the water pool is too deep for them, but water running over rock or even leaves seem to appeal to them much better. So.....I decided to add a connector to the end of the ¾ inch garden hose in my blind so I could run two drip lines from there. One drip line goes to my jet sled to fill it and keep making noise until a bird arrives when I turn the drip off. The second line is a short ¾ inch garden hose that runs from my blind to a flat rock out in front of me placed at the perfect distance for hummingbird photos. I put a normal water hose sprayer on the end of the hose, laid it on the ground so it shoots upward a little and set the flow to mist. When turned on it produces a fine spray that falls on my flat rock. Hummingbirds love to fly in and out of the spray and especially enjoy perching on the wet rocks with slowly flowing water to bathe in. This greatly increases my opportunities to photograph bathing hummingbirds and the falling spray looks nice too as it make the hummingbird appear that it is bathing in a light rain. And I also put a shutoff valve for ¾ inch garden hoses on this line too, so I can turn off the spray when I desire that

look. Once again, this has proven to be enormously successful for me. Not only do hummingbirds like the wet rock, but often the small birds I photographed are attracted to it as well.



Figure 18 This male broad-tailed hummingbird used the water pool in my natural rock cavity, but most hummingbirds refuse to land in the pool. Instead, they perched at the edge of the pool and rubbed their feathers on the wet rock where the water runs out of the pool. That led me to the idea of lightly spraying a flat rock to entice them to land and that works well!

Onward and Upward!

Many of these photo strategies I learned in August and September of 2022. While I learned a ton by observing how the wildlife interacted with my drips, I still have much to figure out. I will have at least five drips working all spring, summer, and fall in 2023. Each will be a unique setup, and some will be in new locations. While I answered many key questions I had at the beginning of my drip photography a few years ago, I now have numerous unanswered questions, so I will learn a lot more next year in 2023.

For example, I wonder if all the bird species that frequent my sagebrush fields will come to a drip if I put one out in the fields. These birds never come up to my home that is surrounded by forest, and I never see them at my woodland drips. Species include mountain bluebird, vesper sparrow, savannah sparrow, lark sparrow, eastern kingbird, killdeer, and quite a few others. While my woodland drip is among the aspens, I notice most birds are approaching the drip and seem to be coming from a dense group of chokecherries. Indeed, when small birds are feeding, I see them far more often in the chokecherry bushes than aspens. Perhaps a drip next to the chokecherries will be even more productive. I will work on getting better reflections and know dark rocks might work better to reveal the reflections. Also, my jet sled was four feet long and that worked fine for small birds, but some robins were a problem when they stood tall because I got a portion of the near side of the sled in my photo when trying to do the bird

and its reflection. My next sleds will be five feet long. I am also working on a way to put a filler in the far side of the sled, so it does not have to be filled with gravel, just the top portion of the filler. So much to try and learn about.....I just love it!



Figure 19 A male Wilson's warbler in my jet tub drip pool. I have the water dripping loudly from the 1/4-inch tube suspended above the spot where they bathe. When they enter the pool, I turn the drip off as the shutoff valve is right next to me in the blind. This is Home Run idea #2!



Figure 20 A young, white-crowned sparrow enjoys the drip pool that I created with the jet tub. And yes, I did move some autumn leaves into the scene.

The Yard and Woodland Drips – Seasonal Variations

I have a bird bath in my yard that draws birds well, but there is a difference between my woodland drip and the one in the yard. My yard drips attracts most of the resident birds that live around my home. American robins, pine siskins, Cassin's finches, evening grosbeaks, mountain and black-capped chickadees, and others all extensively use it. Now that I have the yard drip close to a conifer (the nearest branches are one foot away), I get some warblers, vireos, and flycatchers to visit at times. When the yard drip was twenty feet from the nearest cover, no warblers, vireos, or flycatchers ever went to it. These small birds like protective cover close to their water!

Oddly enough, my woodland drips get few visitors during spring, but in no means should you assume you will not attract spring migrating birds. I live high in the mountains at 7,000 feet and snow is still covering my property till late May or early June. By then, most spring migrants have already flown over to more northern areas, and they seldom stop where snow covers the ground. By flying a little further north than my home, the elevation is lower, and the temperatures are more inviting to the migrating birds. Only when the snow finally melts at my home do a few birds venture up the mountain to nest. Indeed, by early June, most birds have already begun nesting. My game camera on my woodland drip captures images of some birds, but not enough to warrant spending the time to photograph them. Instead, my yard drip gets nearly all the activity. During August and September, though, my woodland drip is far better for photography! Below are two images of my yard drip. Notice I put colorful gravel in the bottom of the water bath and relatively flat stones along the edge of the bath to hide the obvious manufactured edges of the bath. Birds love to perch on these stones. Since the bath is slightly elevated above the yard, I get super diffused background with no distractions.

In the second image, notice how close the conifer tree is to the bird bath on the right side. Birds fly to the dense center of the conifer and perch, then they slowly hop out to the outer branches and usually fly down to the drip and land on the stones. Sometimes they try several attempts before landing as birds are understandably nervous about any new water source as predators could be about. Over several visits, many birds get used to the water bath and land without hesitation. You can see in the second image I have placed a stick over the water bath to provide a perch for birds to use. Fortunately, they use it regularly.

When I photograph at this drip, I always use water to wash away any bird droppings or other dirt, and I always wet down my perch to saturate the colors in the stick for a better photo. Notice in this photo that I have suspended a hose over the bird bath to provide dripping water, but I have improved things. Now I run the hose into my Doghouse blind, attach an adapter to the hose, and run a ¼-inch drip tube to the bird bath and suspend that. I put a shutoff valve in the ¼-inch tubing to let me turn the dripping water off instantly while remaining hidden inside the blind. This is highly effective! Note that the bird bath is close to dense cover that birds readily use, I drip the water loudly, I use a good blind, and the background is quite suitable. All of these are important for successful bird photography. Also, remember I use the electronic shutter of my Canon R5 for silent shooting, so the birds never know I am there. Often birds perch on the rocks at the water bath or on the conifer twigs and that provides many wonderful photo opportunities. I like using water because birds approach it and often land in the open and then when they go to the water, they stay for some time. When using bird seed, often birds dash out, grab a seed, and take it into dense cover to eat it and hide it from other birds and that is not good for photos. Plus, too often seeds or fragments of seeds are stuck to the beak, never a problem with water as the lure. With water, birds of more species pose more often and for longer periods of time. Water is by far the most effective way I have used to photograph small birds.



Figure 21 Here is the link to the company that makes this Omega bird bath. <https://www.evanslawnornaments.com/exposed-aggregate-bird-baths/>

This Omega bird bath is not cheap (around \$400), and it is heavy and in two parts. The top part is wide and heavy. I think the birds like it because the top is wide at around 32 inches and the pool is shallow and the stone aggregate may seem more natural to them. Anyway, the birds in my yard loved it!!!! Two people should lift the parts. I am pretty strong, and the top especially is quite heavy!



Here is the list of birds that I have photographed at my Idaho drips.

Red-naped Sapsucker	Swainson's thrush
Hairy Woodpecker	American Robin
Northern Flicker	Gray Catbird
Calliope Hummingbird	Cedar Waxwing
Broad-tailed Hummingbird	Evening Grosbeak
Black-chinned Hummingbird	Cassin's Finch
Rufous Hummingbird	Pine Siskin
Olive-sided Flycatcher	American Goldfinch
Western Wood-Pewee	Chipping Sparrow
Dusky Flycatcher	Brewer's Sparrow
Warbling Vireo	Dark-eyed Junco
Cassin's Vireo	White-crowned Sparrow
Red-eyed Vireo	Lincoln's Sparrow
Black-capped Chickadee	Green-tailed Towhee
Mountain Chickadee	Red-winged Blackbird
Red-breasted Nuthatch	Brown-headed Cowbird
House Wren	Orange-crowned Warbler
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	Nashville Warbler
Hermit Thrush	MacGillivray's Warbler

Common Yellowthroat
American Redstart
Yellow Warbler
Yellow-rumped Warbler (Audubon's subspecies)

Townsend's Warbler
Wilson's Warbler
Western Tanager



Orange-crowned Warbler



White-crowned sparrow



Figure 22 I photographed this MacGillivray's warbler only because my trail camera took photos of it when it came to my yard drip each day around 4pm when I was never in the blind and never saw it come in. Thanks to the photos taken by the game camera, I entered the blind at little before 4pm, and sure enough, this bird came in to take its bath several minutes later, allowing me to shoot nearly 1000 images before it left. I seldom see this species as it is secretive and not common where I live, but the game camera told me when to be ready for it and now I have lots of pleasing images When not at my drips, I always

have a game camera on it to let me see the wildlife that is coming to the drips and when during those times when I am not present and that is most of the time..

Mammals Come to the Drip Too

While birds are the main subjects at the water drips, some mammals regularly come for a drink too. My most likely visitors of the furry kind are yellow-pine chipmunks, red squirrels, and long-tailed weasels. I also have had mule deer, white-tailed deer, raccoon, red fox, yellow-bellied marmot, white-footed mice, and woodland jumping mice. Fortunately, no bears have ever appeared at my water drips, but putting out birdseed such as sunflower seeds will certainly attract them, so I keep birdseed use to a minimum!



Figure 23 The water drip makes this long-tailed weasel a happy camper!