

# Handheld Bird Photography Techniques

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*Figure 1 This green heron used this perch most of the time. It was next to the visitor center and to the left of the walkway. The green heron was quite close to folks passing by but paid little attention to them. Using the railing to brace my Canon R5 with the Canon RF 100-500mm lens, I shot many sharp images even in the overcast morning light. Using Auto ISO let the camera select ISO 400, while I manually selected 1/250 second and f/8 using a + 2/3 EC or exposure compensation. Due to the light gray water behind the heron, the overall scene was brighter than neutral, so a + 2/3 stop exposure compensation was necessary to brighten the image.*

On a cloudy morning in late February, we visited the World Birding Center on South Padre Island, Texas. The center opens at 8 am, but we did not enter until 9 because we were busy photographing birds at the tiny ponds next to the parking lot. We easily photographed a great kiskadee, many black-bellied whistling ducks, and a cooperative green heron hunting for a fishy breakfast. Once we paid our admission fees, we had access to 3300 linear feet of

elevated boardwalk through the wetlands that was home to numerous birds and many of the birds were conveniently close to us. The boardwalk had a railing that provided a solid place to rest our cameras on for sharper images. Two drawbacks were people walking past shook the boardwalk and because the boardwalk was elevated, most photos required shooting down on the subject more than we prefer. Still, it was a wonderful experience

photographing a variety of wetland birds at close range!

Since we wanted mobility, we shot bird photos in a way that is not typical for us. We did not use or take our tripods as space is somewhat limited on the boardwalk and other folks need room to pass by. Instead, we opted to shoot handheld, but still used the best handheld shooting techniques we know, and we are astounded by how well IBIS (in the camera body image stabilization) helps us get sharp images handheld. We covered the entire boardwalk several times during the day, and enjoyed different shooting opportunities each time, so it turned out to be a super productive day for photos and a lot of fun with the numerous birds we found.

John kept his camera gear to a minimum and Dixie did the same with her Nikon Z9. John took the Canon R5 with the RF 100-500mm lens, 4 fully charged batteries, and two 256GB memory cards in the camera.



*Figure 2 A young white ibis is taking a bath and naturally a little scratching felt good to the bird. Exposure using the evaluative mode and Auto ISO. The camera selected ISO 1600 and I manually picked f/8 and 1/1000 second. The faster shutter speed helped to freeze the motion of the bird as it bathed.*

The morning started out cloudy but soon the clouds thinned and thickened and that made the ambient light continually change brightness

levels. While we prefer to use full manual exposure, since the ambient light levels continuously changed due to the clouds, that forced us to use the only autoexposure mode we like today and that is Auto ISO with both the aperture and shutter speed set manually. We let the ISO float up and down to accommodate changing ambient light levels while the desired aperture and shutter speed are locked in with the manual setting. It is like having aperture and shutter priority simultaneously. Of course, nearly all exposures need to be compensated for in some way. The exposure compensation control is conveniently found on the dial that surrounds the MODE button on the Canon R5. Turn it counterclockwise to add exposure compensation and clockwise to darken the image.

To help produce sharp images, we did four more things. First, since we shot everything handheld and most birds were still, image stabilization was turned on and set to Mode 1, so it stabilized the image in all directions. If we were panning with flying birds, then another mode would be necessary. Second, we usually rested the lens on the boardwalk railing and more often on the more solid post supporting the boardwalk to steady the camera. Since the entire boardwalk had a railing, this was easy to do. Seldom does John actually shoot photos by handholding camera gear (that is changing though) without using any solid support. Third, the quality of high ISOs keeps improving. Even we are surprised how good image quality is even if we use ISO 2000 or ISO 4000. With the Canon R5, even ISO 8000 is not too bad when noise reduction in the Canon DPP4 software is used. Therefore, we used higher ISOs and we once did. And fourth, we favor using fast shutter speeds of 1/500 second and faster if the light allows.



*Figure 3 The roseate spoonbill is my favorite large wading bird in North America. While the small group I found mostly slept, this one did wake up for a brief time to do a little feeding and scratching. Exposure Auto ISO 1000, 1/1000 second shutter speed, and f/8 using EC + 2/3 stop.*

In most cases where the bird's eye is clearly discernable, we use eye focus with our cameras. John sets the camera to continuous autofocus, eye focus, and also to detect Animals. A single AF point appears in the electronic viewfinder, he points the AF point at the bird's eye, half-presses the shutter button and when the focus point turns into a tiny square around the bird's eye indicated the lens is focused on the eye, he optimally composes the bird and shoots away. If the bird moves, the camera usually keeps the lens focused right on the eye, so both cameras (Canon R5 and Nikon Z9) produce mostly perfectly focused images. And the beauty of eye focus is the camera requires no AF

microadjustment as the focus mechanism is at the sensor plane! We were particularly good at AF microadjusting cameras and lenses in the past, but we are thrilled that no longer is that boring process necessary. For this reason alone, John has not used any of his DSLRs since buying the Canon R5 in November of 2020.

The Canon R5 mirrorless camera offers three shutter modes: mechanical, electronic first curtain, and electronic. John does not use the mechanical option and frequently uses electronic for nervous birds as the camera is completely silent in the electronic mode. However, the birds are used to people walking by them on the boardwalk, so no worries about scaring them with shutter sounds. John opted to not use the electronic shutter because it shoots 20 images per second and there is no way to slow it down. When you are photographing perched birds or those who are walking slowly in a marsh, you get too many images at 20 images per second. Even the 12 images per second I was getting with the electronic first-curtain choice was more than I really wanted. But I prefer to shoot more than I need to catch fleeting poses that happen so fast that if I see it happen, and have to press the shutter button, I miss the pose.



*Figure 4 A great white egret along the boardwalk. 1/500 second at f/13 with ISO 400 and a negative exposure compensation of -1/3.*

Our shooting strategy for wildlife is completely different than when we make landscape or closeup images. For both landscapes and closeups, we are extremely precise and never overshoot. Nearly every image shot is a keeper as we are quite selective in what we photograph. With wildlife where we like to catch nice poses that happen unexpectedly and fast, we shoot many images and often John is shooting 20 images per second hoping for the subject to flap its wings, turn its head to a nice angle, launch into flight, and other behaviors. Since this often happens quickly, the camera must be shooting before the behavior happens, not start shooting once the pose appears. That means plenty of images are essentially identical, but they are easy enough to quickly delete. Some call this “spray and pray” shooting, and in many ways that is correct, as we are praying the subject assumes an attractive pose – however fleeting it may be while shooting images. Many of our best clients use this strategy too and they are producing incredible action shots and winning awards with their images. For wildlife photos, we tend to shoot lots of images and delete most of them. It would be enormously desirable if Canon and Nikon would add a way to hold the shutter button down with a half-press, and photos continuously shot, but automatically deleted after a couple of seconds unless the photographer pushes the shutter button all the way down. This would make it much easier to catch peak action like an eagle taking flight without filling camera cards with an eagle who remains perched instead of flying.

How does John select the keepers from 5000 birds images in a reasonable time? He uses Canon DPP4 to view the images and set the Thumbnails to size 4 or a little smaller with 3. This puts five images across his laptop computer screen. It works even better with a larger monitor. John looks at 5 images simultaneously for about 2 seconds and presses the down arrow to move through the

images to the next five. When a desirable pose is found, it is enlarged to 100% to check for sharpness. If the image is sharp, then it is given a rating of 1, 2, or 3. Most images get a 1, some with a little bit extra get a 2, and images John really likes to get the 3 and these are usually a unique pose that is not similar to any others. Once all the images are examined, they are all resorted by its rating. This resorting puts all of the rated images at the top of the stack and all the unrated images follow them. Now it is easy to select all the unrated images and delete them. It takes about 90 minutes to pass through 5,000 images and less than 2% get a rating and are kept.



*Figure 5 This great kiskadee was with another and they greeted us right in the parking lot of the Bird Center. Auto ISO selected ISO 2000 with a +1/3 EC, along with f/9, and 1/500 second shutter speed.*

Exposure is super easy using the “blinkies method.” We only shoot large RAW images and always use the evaluative metering pattern. The histogram and the highlight alert are both based on an embedded JPEG in the RAW file. Therefore, when the rightmost data of the

histogram touches the right wall of the histogram, or when the first blinkies appear in a highlight, the RAW data is not yet overexposed since those are based on the JPEG which covers a smaller dynamic range than the RAW file. We have a live histogram turned on that appears both on the camera's LCD and in the electronic viewfinder, so we adjust the exposure compensation control to move the rightmost histogram data over to the right histogram wall, take a shot, and play it back to see if any flashing highlights (blinkies) appear. If no blinkies, another 1/3-stop of exposure is added with the exposure compensation control and another test image is shot. If some blinkies appear when the image is played back, then we go with that exposure compensation selection, but do check it from time to time, especially if you go from a white great egret subject to a dark, black-bellied whistling duck or if you photograph the same bird that is moving and the tones of the background change. It would be wonderful if our cameras would show us the blinkies without having to shoot a test image or automatically adjust the exposure to produce the first blinking highlights.



*Figure 6 A brown pelican flew past us when we were at the far end of the boardwalk along the bay. Canon R5 with the RF 100-500mm. ISO 2000, f/7.1, 1/1600 second shutter speed, and + 1 2/3 EC for the Auto ISO. The light gray water tended to cause the camera to severely underexpose the birds, so a lot of positive exposure compensation is needed.*

Nearly every photo benefits with some exposure compensation. Because we use an exposure method called ETTR (Expose to the Right) to capture the most image data without overexposing important highlights, we normally need some positive exposure compensation, especially if there is a lot of light-toned water or cloudy skies in the image or the subject is white. But do not assume anything. Use the exposure aids – histogram and highlight alert- to guide you. You might think photographing a great egret always requires positive exposure compensation due to the brilliant white feathers, but in many cases at the birding center negative exposure compensation had to be used! Why? While it is true cameras tend to underexpose white subjects, if the white egret only fills ¼ of the image area and the rest is dark green vegetation, the much higher percentage of dark vegetations actually causes overexposed white feathers in the egret unless negative exposure compensation is used. Once again, set the exposure compensation to whatever is required to produce the first blinkies in the egret's white feathers.

It helps to work with the photo conditions you get. While we love early dawn sunshine on calm blue water for reflections, sometimes you must go with cloudy skies and light gray water. Years ago, I would not photograph a bird if the background was essentially devoid of color – white clouds or gray water are two examples. But eventually I learned that a colorful subject against a light colorless background works quite nicely as the background in no way competes with the subject, allowing the subjects shape and colors to dominate the image.

Shooting many photos while you carefully work through all the options provided by modern cameras is an excellent way to improve as a photographer. By the way, make sure you keep your photo gear up to date. Always use the latest firmware for your camera and lenses.

Photographing at places like the bird center on South Padre Island is a super spot to do it as you get continuous opportunities to shoot. Try using your camera in new ways, shoot a lot, and carefully check your images for sharpness, exposure, and composition. Check this bird-rich



*Figure 7 We do not normally shoot straight down on a bird, but in this case it makes an interesting angle for this patiently hunting green heron. From the boardwalk using the Canon R5 with 100-500mm lens. Exposure was Auto ISO 6400, f/14, 1/250 second, with EC +1 stop. Whenever possible, I rested the camera on the boardwalk's railing to steady the lens and get sharper images. I find making the camera as still as possible, even when handholding, is absolutely crucial for best results. Sadly, rarely do I see another photographer who is shooting handheld brace their lens for sharp results, even when a solid object is readily available. That is a huge mistake!!!!*

site out for yourself by visiting their web site at: [www.theworldbirdingcenter.com](http://www.theworldbirdingcenter.com) For you northern folks, if you do not mind shortening your winter season, come on down to South Texas during the winter season! You will love it!

Many other instructional wildlife photography articles are posted on our website at [www.gerlachnaturephoto.com](http://www.gerlachnaturephoto.com)!



*Figure 8 Green herons were quite abundant at the Bird Center in February along the boardwalk. You had to look closely, though, as they are small and do not move much when hunting. This one took a break from hunting to give me a distinctive look!*