

More than...

30 Tips For Better Bird Photography

By Scott Bourne



Ornithologist/Photographer

My Office...



Executive Summary

1. Learn everything you can about birds
2. Stay on sun angle
3. Remember wind controls everything birds do so if you know where the wind is and if it's in your favor you win.
4. Keep your backgrounds clean
5. Practice patience



Research

Study Birds...

- Learn As Much As You Can About Your Subject
- Predicting Bird Behavior Makes Bird Photography Much Easier
- The More You Know About Birds, The Better Bird Photographer You Will Be



Find The Birds

Learn What Kind Of Habitat Birds Like

- Food
- Water
- Cover

These are the three basic things birds need to be happy. If you can find a place with all three, you are guaranteed to find birds.



A majority of the world's population, lives within 100 miles of an urban green space, park or zoo. In the US, most of us live within 100 miles of a National Wildlife Refuge, National Park, National Forest or National Seashore.

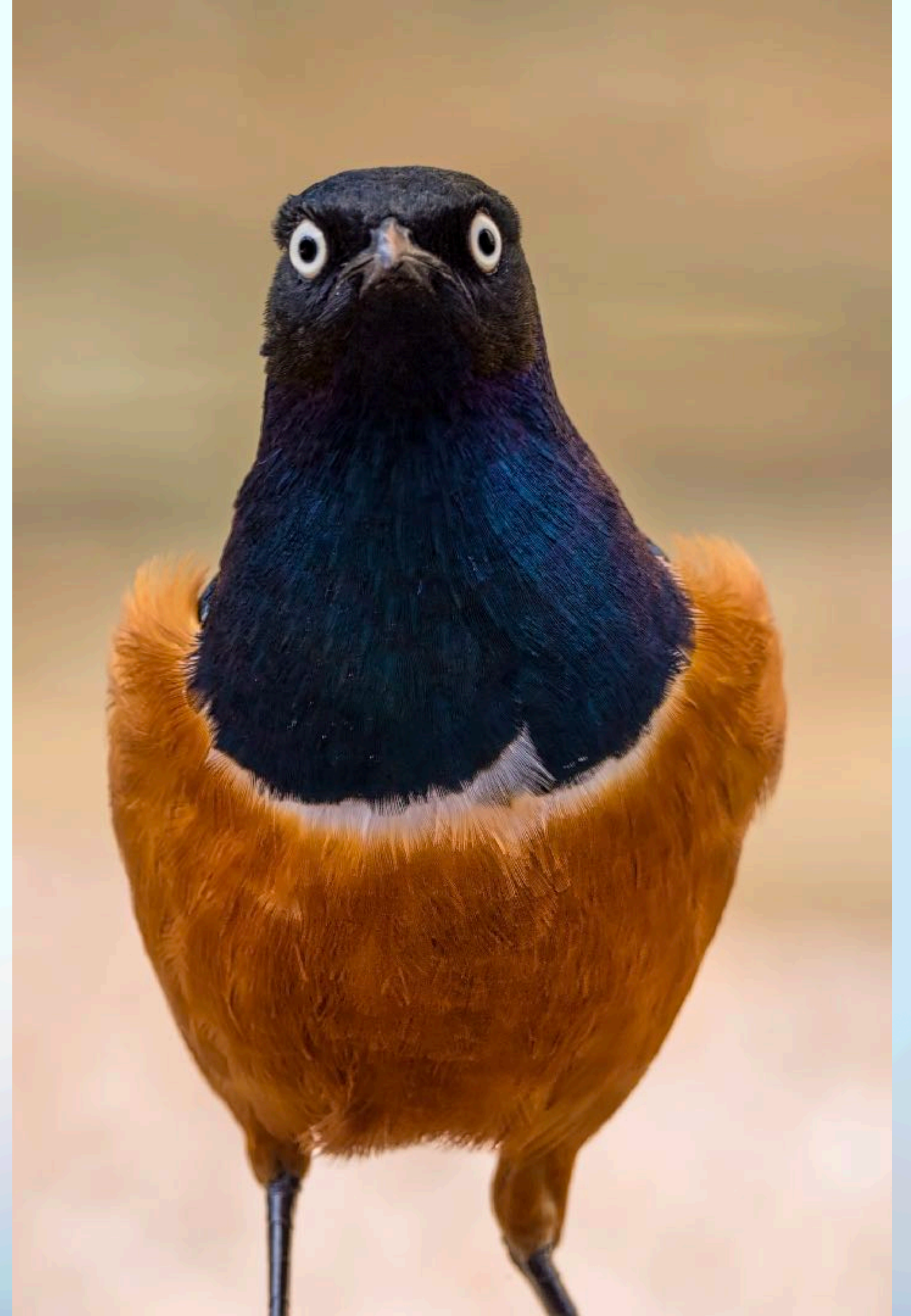


Try Zoos, National Parks, Botanical Gardens,
National Wildlife Refuges,
Wildlife Rescue Centers,
Local Parks.

Favorite Locations

Worldwide

- Ottenby Bird Observatory, Sweden
- Point Pelee National Park, Ontario, Canada
- Western Treatment Plant, Melbourne, Australia
- El Karama, Kenya:
- Lake Kerkini, Greece
- Reserva Ecológica Costanera Sur, Argentina
- Rietvlei Nature Reserve, Gauteng, South Africa
- Changaram Wetlands (Ezhupunna), Kerala, India
- Pipeline Road (Camino del Oleoducto), Panama
- Reserva Ecologica Rio Blanco, Colombia



Favorite Locations

USA

- Bosque del Apache, National Wildlife Refuge - NM
- Riparian Preserve at Water Ranch - AZ
- Alligator Farm - FL
- Rio Grande Valley - TX
- Cook Inlet - AK
- Sonora Desert Museum - AZ
- Cape May - NJ
- Hawk Mountain Sanctuary - PA
- Magee Marsh Wildlife Area - OH
- LaJolla Cove - CA



Spend Time Observing

Most Birdwatchers Can Become Great Bird Photographers

Birds Often Repeat Their Behavior

Birds will usually show you where they plan to be and which way they will fly to get there. If you're observant, you can be ready to catch them in the act.

Watch for perches, nests and flight patterns.





Field Tips

Most Important

Keep the sun at your back...

- Always photograph birds front-lit
- ALWAYS applies unless you're making silhouettes or want backlit subjects
- Side-lighting creates ugly shadows
- Keep your shadow pointed directly at the bird





Backlit Example

You want backlighting

- Backlighting creates dramatic portraits
- Backlighting should be illustrated with rim-light
- Make sure light source is directly behind the bird



Silhouette Example

Adds drama

- Expose for the background
- Don't forget to still work for a sharp subject
- Tilt your camera up slightly to make the sky dominant



Wind Controls Everything

Know The Wind

If it's behind you, stick around!

- Birds fly, land and perch into the wind
- If the wind is in your face it means that the bird is flying away from you and all you're getting is bird-butt (time to go to breakfast...)
- If the wind is at your back, plan on skipping breakfast



Background!

Background, Background

- After sun direction and wind direction - backgrounds are the most important part of a good bird photo
- Find the background first - and THEN find the bird
- Eliminate background clutter by using a telephoto lens, or by getting close to the subject and shooting wide open.



Hide!

Birds React To Movement

- Try using a photo blind (called a hide in Europe)
- It's not that the birds don't know you are there
- It's trying to mask movement since movement causes birds to startle and flee





Tech Tips

Understand DOF

You DO NOT need f/0.95 to get a smooth background

- This image (made on a lowly Canon EOS-1D Mk II N with a 600mm lens and 1.4 TC) that I bought 20 years ago!) was made at f/8!!! Look at how thin the DOF is!
- Get close to reduce DOF & put distance between your subject & the background to create a smoother background.
- This works EVERY SINGLE TIME - PERIOD, no matter the camera or the lens. Give it a try.
- As subject matter to camera distance decreases, so does depth-of-field.



Camera Settings

Read your manual...

- Know your gear. Learn about your camera's features and settings before you're out in the field.
- Remember that when photographing larger birds, you need more depth-of-field. Stop down one or two stops to make sure you get the entire bird in the plane of focus. The closer you are to the bird, the more this matters.
- Use a minimum shutter speed of 1/1000th of a second to capture birds in flight - with bald eagles or other raptors consider 1/2000th of a second a minimum if you want to freeze action wingtip-to-wingtip. 1/5000 for smaller birds.



Computational Settings

AI autofocus edge...

- Many cameras now offer the ability to “pre-capture” the frames immediately preceding the press of a shutter.
- **Olympus** pioneered this tech with a feature called “Pro-Capture.” It is like a photography time machine and captures frames both before and after the shutter press.
- It’s also available on other cameras such as **Nikon**, which calls it Pre-Release Burst.
- It’s available on **Sony**, which calls it Pre-Capture.
- It’s available on **Canon**, which calls it RAW Burst Mode
- NOTE: Usually only available on top-end or flagship models.



Stabilization

Body/Lens/Both

- If your camera body and/or lens allow for image stabilization, in most cases turn it on unless you're working from a tripod.
- Image stabilization is particularly helpful with hand-held, birds in flight images or with fast-moving birds.
- Stabilization only impacts the camera, not the subject - to freeze the subject you need a high shutter speed.



Misc List Of Tips/Tricks

Misc. Tips #1

- Gesture is often the deciding factor in whether or not you capture a wow moment. Stay attuned to gesture and be ready to make a picture when that special moment occurs.
- Try to get the bird's wings are up or down - not pancake flat.
- Use the weather. Pray for snow. Snow makes bird photography a whole bunch more interesting. You can use it to make pictures more interactive.



Misc. Tips #2

- Make sure there's a catch light in the bird's eye. Otherwise it looks like taxidermy.
- Have patience. Stick with an area and don't give up. Eventually lots of birds will become used to your presence and will let you approach.
- Use the rule of thirds, watch out for merges and intruders in the frame. Look for balance.



Misc. Tips #3

- Birds scare easily. Keep yourself low to the ground and don't move too suddenly. Have patience. Stick with an area and don't give up. Eventually lots of birds will become used to your presence and will let you approach.
- Tell a story. Try to capture the bird in its native habitat doing the kinds of things that species is known for.
- Use repetition/iteration to tell a story.



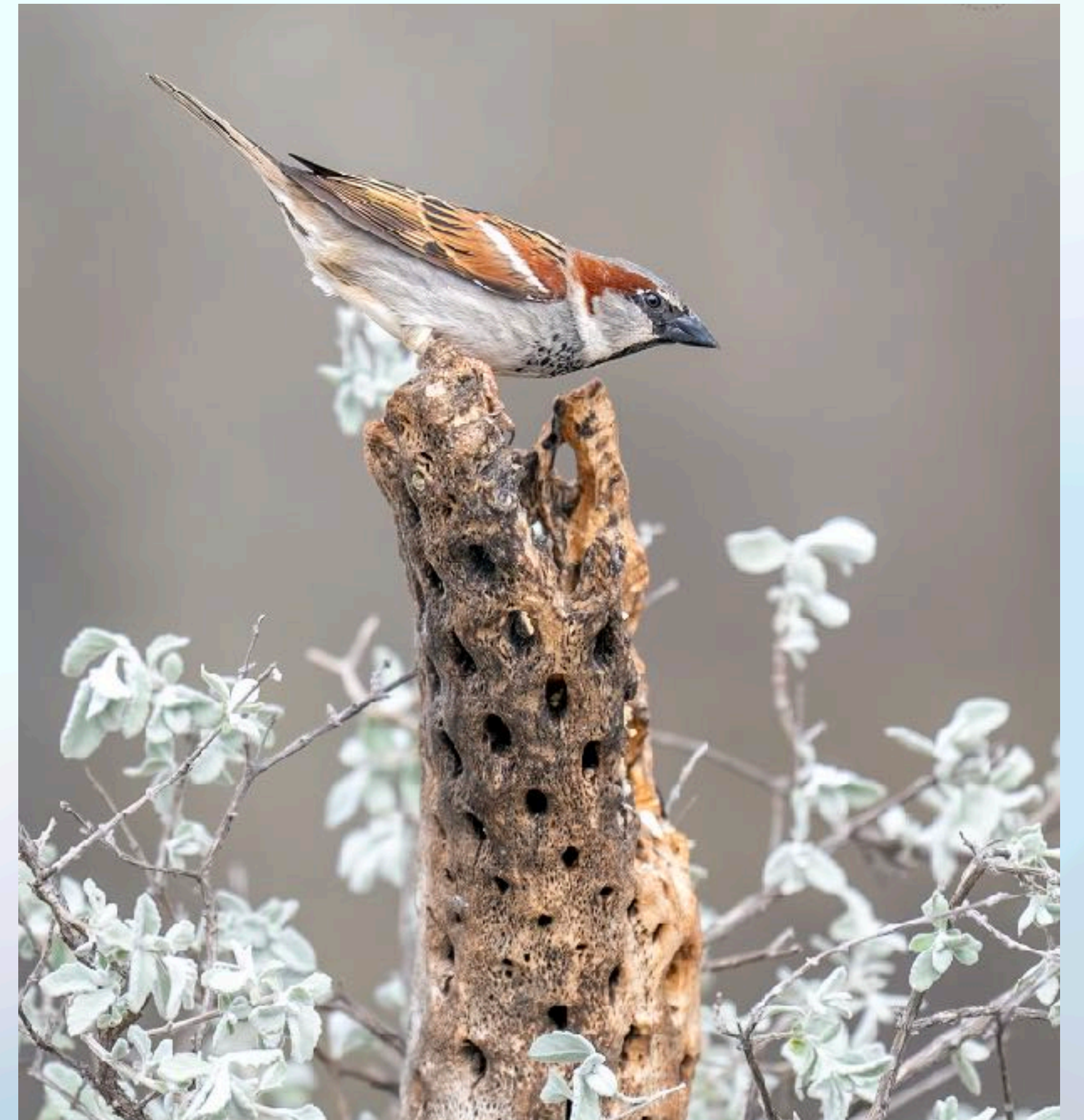
Misc. Tips #4

- Get creative. Use post-processing tools to make your photos into something special. I often use Topaz Impression II or Nik Collection 6 to create special effects in my avian art pictures.
- Fill the frame but protect the edges in case the animal can quickly move outside the frame.
- Avoid photographing birds in the open during mid-day. The light is too harsh then.



Misc. Tips #5

- Photograph the birds at eye level.
- Focus on the bird's closest eye.
- Practice at zoos and in your own backyard before spending money on a birding trip.
- When photographing birds like bald eagles that are both black and white, do not use AUTO settings - instead use M mode and expose to hold the highlights.



Bonus Tip #1

Composition trick

- Use a distinct foreground and background in your image while placing the bird in between the two.
- This trick creates the illusion of depth/layering.
- Remember, we work in a 2-D medium but we live in a 3-D world. Adding depth to your images makes them more life-like and engaging.



Bonus Tip #2

Composition trick

- It's what happens between the notes that makes sound into music. In #photography it's knowing what NOT to include in the photograph that makes it into art.
- When in doubt - leave it out.



The background features a soft, abstract design. The upper portion is a solid, pale cyan color. Below this, a series of overlapping, wavy bands in various pastel shades (including light blue, mint green, pale yellow, and soft pink) create a sense of depth and movement, resembling a stylized horizon or a gentle breeze. The word "Gear" is centered in the middle of the image, rendered in a clean, dark grey, sans-serif typeface.

Gear



Which Camera?

Which lens?

- You can use almost any camera with a long lens for bird photography. Features like interchangeable lenses, fast frame advance, good autofocus, wide dynamic range and either camera or lens stabilization - will really help you improve your chances of success.
- The longest, fastest lens you can afford will be your bird photography lens.
- Choose a longer, slow lens over a shorter, fast lens. For most serious bird photography quality 500mm or 600mm f/4 telephoto lenses are your best bet.
- Consider rentals if you rarely photograph avian subjects.



Support Gear

Yes you may need a tripod...

- If you're using very long lenses, you will want a sturdy tripod, possibly a gimbal head and perhaps a monopod for short trips or places where tripods aren't allowed.
- Tripods are needed for two reasons - to give your arms a rest and to minimize camera shake. At 600mm and beyond the slightest shake will show up as a blurry photo.



Misc. Gear

Nice to haves...

- Birds are afraid of movement. Using a bag blind gives you the chance to hide in plain sight.
- Finding birds often starts with finding nests and a good pair of binoculars helps accomplish that task.



What's In My Bag?

This is what I actually use...

- I like Micro Four Thirds gear for bird photography because it's smaller, lighter and less expensive than full-frame counterparts.
- 2x crop factor is a feature (not a bug) when it comes to field of view.
- MFT computational photography features tend to outshine their FF brethren.



What's In My Bag Part1

Cameras/Lenses/Binoculars

- Two OM-Systems OM-1 camera bodies
- M.Zuiko Digital ED 40-150mm F2.8 PRO
- M.Zuiko Digital ED 300mm F4 IS PRO
- M.Zuiko Digital ED 150-400mm F4.5 TC1.25x IS PRO
- Fujinon 10x42 Hyper Clarity Binoculars



What's In My Bag Part2

Camera Support

- Robus RC-8860 Vantage Series 5 Carbon Fiber Tripod
- Robus RCM-633 6-Section Carbon Fiber Monopod
- Benro GH5C Carbon Fiber Gimbal Head



What IS My Bag?

Transport/Carry-on/Field

- Pelican 1510TP (Trekpak)
- Think Tank Photo Airport TakeOff V2.0
- Peak Design Everyday Sling
6L and 10L Versions



Gear Is Good - Vision Is Better
Less Is More...



We're not photographers - we are high priests/priestesses of memory protection. We protect memories for our clients, we protect the memories of our subjects and maybe most importantly, we protect memories for ourselves.

One More Thing:

PATIENCE

Is the best tool in a bird photographer's tool bag.



Thanks For Your Attention
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