

Nature Photography 101

How to get started

There is no greater feeling in world than capturing the perfect moment of a lifetime in a photograph. Pictures are memories and sharing them gives us great pleasure. So how can you increase your chances of getting that great shot? Photographer Kevin Karlson has developed a few guidelines to help you get the shot when shooting birds.



Wildlife photo blinds!

Photography opportunities are fantastic here at the Klamath Basin National Wildlife Complex. At any time of the year, one of our six established photo blinds can provide photographers those wildlife dream shots. We have two blinds overlooking wetlands on Lower Klamath Wildlife Refuge and four blinds on the Tule Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

Two are positioned near tall snags where raptors commonly roost and the others overlook wetlands. Use of these blinds is by reservation only. A \$25 annual pass is required for anyone using refuge photo blinds. Please call refuge headquarters (530-667-2231), or visit their website at www.fws.gov/klamathbasinrefuges/photoblind.html for information.



TOP and ABOVE: Photography blinds are available year round on the Klamath Basin National Wildlife Refuge Complex. Photographer: Dave Menke

- Be prepared – Know your equipment before going into the field. Familiarize yourself with the position of important ISO, Shutter Speed, F-Stop and Autofocus buttons so you can use them without having to search for them. Double check to make sure you have enough flash cards, and that your batteries are fully charged.
- Dress in muted clothing, with earth tones Best for blending in with the surrounding habitat. Bright colors give away your presence and cause birds to notice you at greater distances.
- Slowly enter the shooting scene and approach birds slowly. Before you arrived to shoot, the scene was quiet and undisturbed.
- Set your exposure and F-Stop settings prior to entering the shooting area. Check your light meter readings and balance your F-Stop settings and shutter speed before walking into the shooting area.
- Evaluate the shooting scene for the best possible backgrounds. Look at the shooting scene and choose the best possible backgrounds for photographing your subjects.
- BE READY FOR ACTION. Always be prepared for action or flight situations. Know what your camera settings should be (shutter speed at 1000th of a second or better/F-stop at F-8 if possible), and be ready to swing your camera into flight shooting mode in a second or two.
- Compose your photo with balance around your subject. Employ the rule of thirds (subject should be in the left or right third of the frame, not in the center) for most images, but feel free to break this rule if something in your viewfinder causes you to compose the photo differently.
- Shoot in Manual or AV Mode for perched or slowly moving subjects. To control your depth of field and balance your lighting, shoot either in Manual or AV modes, not in Program mode.
- Autofocus or no autofocus? If the subject is not moving, I prefer to shoot without autofocus enabled so I can fully control the depth of field in my scene, or on my subject. If you shoot with autofocus, set your main focus point on the eye or neck of the bird, and then recompose your scene by pressing the “auto-on” button or star (*) button near the rear top right of the camera. This allows you to recompose your scene without losing your chosen autofocus settings. Some cameras require a custom function to activate this setting.
- Set camera mode on High Speed Motor Drive and AI Servo shooting mode (Canon cameras). Make sure your camera is set on the high-speed motor drive to allow the most images per second, and on AI Servo in Canon cameras to allow for the most efficient performance of your autofocus tracking in motion situations. For Nikon cameras, this is the action setting. One Shot settings are fine if you know action is not a possibility.
- Metering choices. Most of the time, a balanced metering mode is best for a variety of situations.
- Focusing for flight. If you are shooting against a solid-colored sky without clouds, it is OK to use full-frame autofocus point selection, or the “ring of fire” (8-12 points of autofocus that favor the center point, but also meter about 25 percent around the center of the frame). When faced with a cloudy sky, choppy water background, or varied background of trees or other objects, always use the CENTER POINT focus setting. This single center focus point will prevent drifting of your autofocus onto varied backgrounds, and allow for accurate tracking of your subject.

Armed with these guidelines you are prepared to get the shot. So grab your camera, get out there and take great pictures.

Guidelines courtesy of Kevin T. Karlson, Cape May Court House, New Jersey, www.kevinkarlsonphotography.com