

REVIEW

Creative Bird Photography

Bill Coster

New Holland Publishing, 2009, London. ISBN 9781847735096. 160pp., Hardback \$59.99.

Creative bird photography by Bill Coster, one of the UK's leading wildlife photographers, is aimed at bird photographers who seek to advance their work to a new level of originality and distinctiveness. The engaging photo adorning the cover is one that makes you pause, as a successful photograph must—an easily recognisable subject but a unique, 'creative' perspective.

Most of the book is devoted to introducing the reader to techniques and ideas that can help with creating unique images. Illustrated with Coster's magnificent photographs of birds from around the world, it achieves this beautifully. Example images are used generously to highlight different photographic techniques and photogenic bird behaviours. The chapter *Portraits* offers suggestions to help eliminate distracting backgrounds, and advice on how to incorporate reflections and elements of the surrounding environment to best effect. *Flight* introduces the reader to the basics of photographing birds in flight, then introduces concepts like capturing the decisive moments of take-off and landing, and mid-air behaviour that can raise an image from good to great. The *Life cycle* chapter works through several examples on photographing birds at different stages of their breeding cycle, while gently impressing upon the reader the need for caution and respect for the subject at this particularly sensitive time. Two chapters highlight aspects of the daily lives of birds, such as feeding, drinking, singing, fighting and preening—common behaviours, but often not easy to photograph well. A subsection devoted to penguins seems a bit incongruous, but it's easy to see why the author would want to include the wonderful photos of penguins in action.

The last 2 chapters stand out for introducing a number of concepts that new, and even many advanced bird photographers may not have considered. Readers are encouraged to move away from literal interpretations of their subjects and environments to the more abstract, to use intense pre-dawn colours, backlighting, silhouettes and motion blur, and to see beyond limitations imposed by the form of an entire bird and find interesting compositions in its parts. A theme evident throughout this book is that the 'rules' of photography can be broken, and experimentation can lead to new and interesting perspectives. I find

this and Coster's easy-to-read-style a refreshing contrast to some other well known photographers who proclaim that their way is the right and only way.

Coster doesn't attempt to tackle the technical aspects of photographic equipment in a substantial way, but does give a brief introduction to the basics of exposure and camera operation, followed by a chapter dedicated to digital cameras and equipment. Given that the main thrust of the book is creativity, the initial focus on equipment is almost superfluous. While a sound understanding of exposure theory is essential for a photographer to be in complete control of their work, Coster's explanation is not particularly clear and far from complete. This is a recipe for a false sense of confidence, with the associated pitfalls. Some useful points are raised in the section on equipment, but it is important to note that it is also peppered with misleading or simply incorrect statements that could have budding bird photographers confused or wasting money. No, more megapixels are not always better, smaller sensors don't give you more magnification, and shooting rate has nothing to do with the speed of moving data from sensor to memory card. The term 'burst rate' is not a *rate* at all in the context in which it is used, but is confused with the camera's buffer capacity. Advice to always use the fastest possible memory cards to get the best performance overlooks the fact that the vast majority of current cameras cannot utilise all that speed, and that the fastest cards may cost 2 or more times as much for zero gain. A good understanding of the mechanics of digital photography is certainly a great advantage to any photographer, but these are complex and rapidly evolving subjects that could have been omitted without affecting the aim of this book. Anyone with a serious desire to better understand this subject would do well to start with *Stephen Johnson on Digital Photography* (Johnson 2006).

Creative bird photography is a beautifully illustrated, easy to read book that offers something for novice and more proficient bird photographers alike. The price is comparable with other books of this type and, apart from the section on digital equipment, it is likely to remain a useful reference for many years to come.

LITERATURE CITED

Johnson, S 2006. *Stephen Johnson on digital photography*. California: O'Reilly.

NEIL FITZGERALD
Private Bag 3127
Hamilton