

BIRD PHOTOGRAPHY
By Norman Fischer

Bird banders really have an inside track in wild bird photography. Just watch one of your non-banding friends try to frame a male scarlet tanager with a telephoto lens. Watch him squirm and fret for two hectic minutes. Then at the exact second your friend grabs for the cable release the tanager decides to go for a bug on the limb above. The photographer gets a lot of practice in using certain parts of his vocabulary, but very few good pictures.

It is different when YOU photograph a scarlet tanager. The tanager is in your hand. All you need is the equipment and the know-how and your tanager will bring forth a chorus of "ohs" and "ahs" at bird clubs for years.

But what equipment do you need? How can you transform a roll of color film into a stack of neatly mounted first quality slides? Some of the most frequently asked questions by banders visiting the Washington Crossing Park Bird Banding Station are questions about bird photography. We'll run through some of them here on the chance that the answers gained through experience might be helpful.

What kind of camera do you use?

A Praktika (also called Rival Reflex, Praktiflex, Astraflex 35) with an f 2.8 Zeiss Tessar lens with pre-set diaphragm.

How much does this outfit cost?

About \$60.00, if bought from Peerless, Hamilton House, or several of the other large photo shops. See ads in Photography, U. S. Camera or Modern Photography magazines.

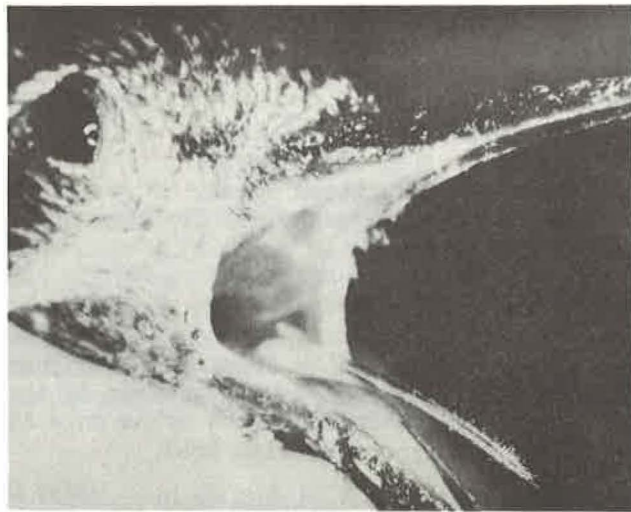
What is the advantage of this type of camera?

Any single-lens reflex makes it easy for you to frame and focus your subject, even at extreme close-up ranges. You get what you see in the ground glass screen of the finder. The relatively low price helps make it possible to spend more on the accessories you will also need.

What accessories?

For the close-ups you need a set of extension tubes or a bellows to space your lens farther away from the body of your camera. To be sure of good lighting you should have an electronic flash (strobe) gun with a ring flash unit.

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Above - This shows the action-stopping effect of the strobe flash - flash duration is 1/1000 of a second. Also shows the reptilian derivation of avian split tongues.

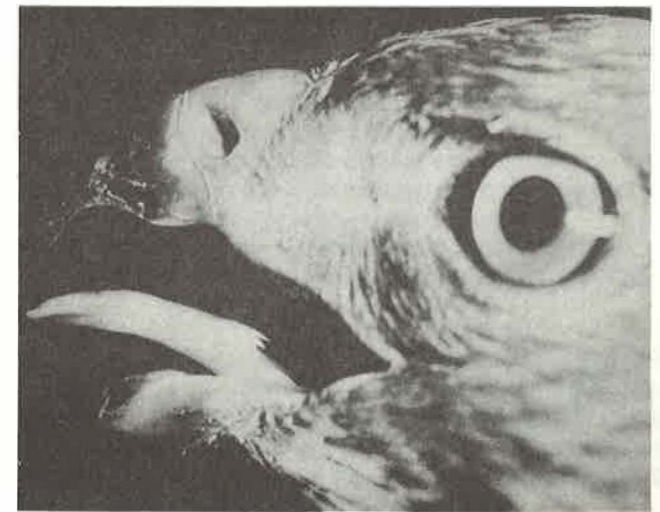
Below - Bristly tongue of a Sapsucker.



Above - An unrefrigerated honeybee, using same photo equipment.

Below - Dr. and Mrs. Fluck and Ed Noll cautiously band an American Egret. Same photo equipment used here as described in text.

All photos by Norman Fischer ★



Above - Advanced case of foot pox on a Bluebird.

Below - Broad-winged Hawk. This and other photos shown are black-and-white prints made from 35 mm. Kodachrome slides.

All that sounds too complicated for me. What is this strobe and ring flash business?

Modern strobe lights are not too different from ordinary flash guns, except that you don't have to change bulbs for each shot. You'll get about 10,000 flashes from the bulb you buy. The ring flash is simply a circular tube which screws or slips on to the end of your lens and plugs into the power case of the strobe unit. It's the only gadget which gives the even lighting you need for good close-ups.

How much does all this cost?

Set of extension tubes, \$7.00 (see Spiratone ad). Bellows, \$15.00. Basic strobe unit, \$45.00. Ring flash, \$35.00. Mighty-lite or Heiland strobes are recommended.

Is it safe to buy those things by mail?

We have seen some attempts at unsatisfactory substitutions by a few of the large stores. If possible, bring a knowledgeable friend to help you do the shopping in person; if not, you have ten to thirty days to try out the equipment and return it without charge if it isn't just what you want.

How do you hold your birds still?

For close-ups of tongues, eyes, feet or feathers, we hold the bird carefully in one hand while taking the picture with the other. Incidentally, we never hold the bird by gripping its legs between two fingers. This is very dangerous to the bird and results in awkward poses anyway. * For most pictures we don't hold the birds at all!

This sounds impossible. How do you take a photograph of a wild bird without holding it?

By doing photography in a totally dark room -- a trick learned from EBBA's President. Set your camera on a tripod and focus it on a twig beforehand. Bring your bird in, turn out all lights, and set it on the twig. Generally it will sit perfectly still and you can get three or four shots in a row. It is advisable to take at least two, since the bird looks more alert after the first flash.

Which color films do you like best?

Whenever possible, we use Kodachrome. If additional film speed is needed, as happens only in the case of the most extreme close-ups, the new Super Anscochrome is ideal.

Can this same outfit be used for flower and insect photography?

Absolutely. You may find it helpful to put the insects in a refrigerator for a while to slow them down a bit.

Suppose I can afford to spend more money than you have suggested. Is there something better I should buy?

There is indeed, and I wish we could! The first item would be a lens with an automatic diaphragm rather than the pre-set one. This would make it possible to take a picture instantaneously when it is composed in the finder, instead of losing perhaps one second in turning the diaphragm ring. Most of our spoiled pictures happened when a hand-held bird changed its position during that second. Also desirable would be a strobe light of higher power or shorter flash duration (to stop all movement), and a wide-angle lens for easier extreme close-up work.

What would be the ideal bird bander's camera, regardless of expense?

There isn't any, for no one make will do everything you want it to do without accessories, but the nearest thing to it is the Swiss-made Alpa Model 7, with an f 1.8 Kern Switar lens with automatic diaphragm. You can do the very highest quality professional work with this, but it costs about \$470.00. However, some of our slides have been bought by magazines for as much as \$50.00. If you have the time you may be able to make the equipment pay for itself.

Can I write to you for more detailed information?

Glad to have you. Just send questions to Norman Fisher, Washington Crossing Park, Washington Crossing, Pennsylvania. We're no Don Bleitz, but will do our best to help. When you think of all the good we can do for birds simply by showing slides to school groups, it's obvious that this is a field we should all get into. Good luck!

* Mr. Fisher is right about holding birds by their thighs gripped between your fingers. In practically all song birds the acetabulum or hip socket is extremely shallow, while wing development is very good. Consequently a sudden jerk as might be occasioned by the flash could result in a hip dislocation. This could easily go unnoticed by the holder. Three birds with dislocated hips -- one a blue jay with both hips dislocated -- have been brought to Washington Crossing Park. All, this bander believes, were injured in this manner. Don't judge by this common way of handling canaries, for they are cage birds with poor wing development and few are hurt. When necessary to hold a bird by its legs while removing it from a mist net, the usual grip should be taken again as soon as the wings are free. -- PHF
