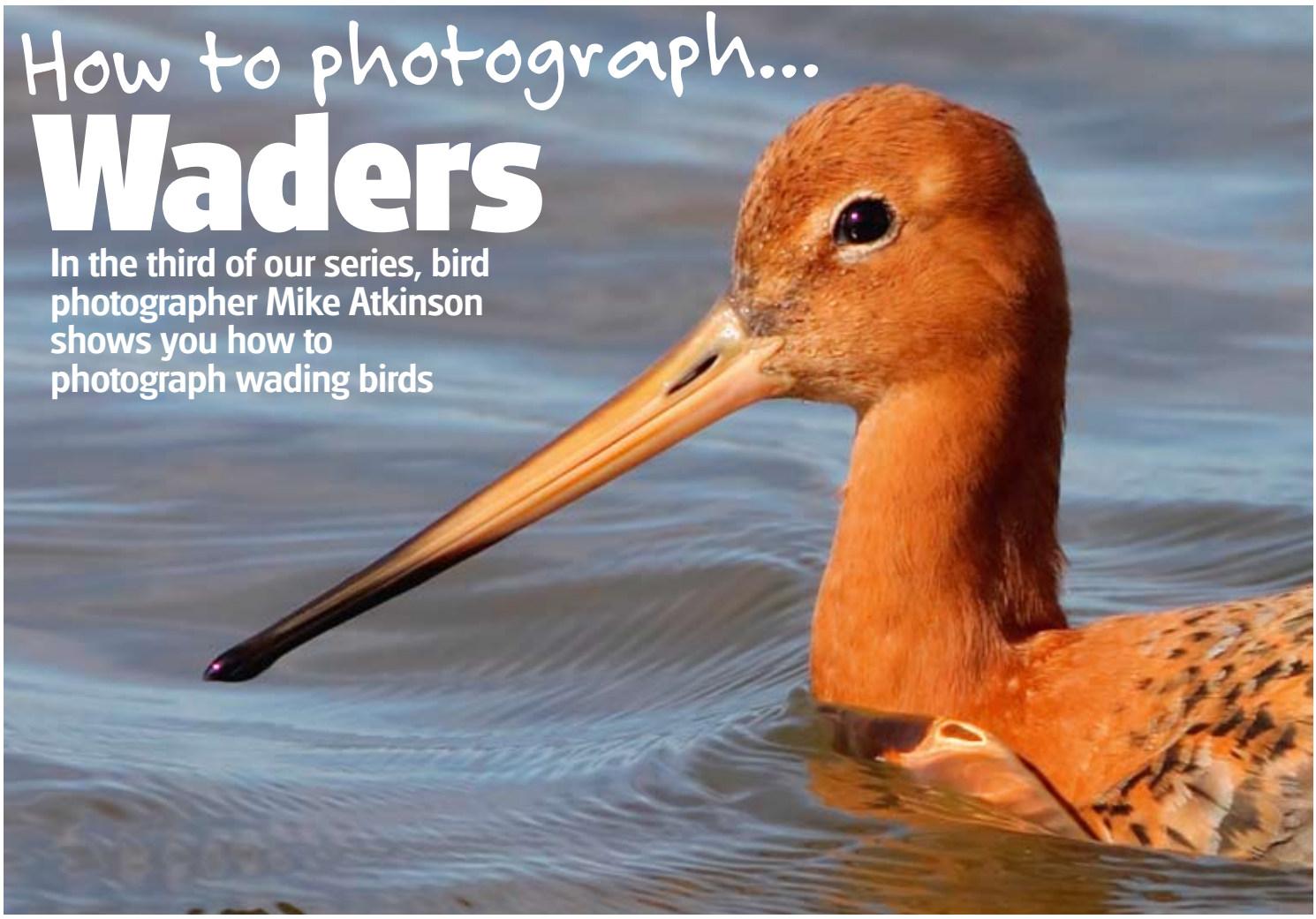
How to photograph...
Waders



In the third of our series, bird photographer Mike Atkinson shows you how to photograph wading birds

OUR larger waders are good-sized, attractive birds, and so are popular subjects for bird photographers.

You can see waders just by heading to the nearest estuary, but they will almost certainly be too far away to photograph well. With a bit of research, though, you should be able to find a place and time at which rising tides bring them close enough to get decent photos.

Alternatively, there are many reserves – both coastal and inland – at which waders will approach hides to within a few metres. Take a look at *Go Birding*, starting on page 51, for a few ideas.

If you want to capture more distant birds, check out your options in our Essential Gear guide on the right.

Compared with our earlier assignments, you will have less control over the angles from which you can shoot these birds. You will therefore need to choose a location and time at which the birds will be well-lit. As previously, the ideal is to have the sun low in the sky and behind you as you shoot. Late afternoon would therefore be best for an east-facing hide.

■ Mike runs bird photography workshops and provides one-to-one tuition. For full details, visit his website at mikeatkinson.net

ESSENTIAL GEAR

TELEPHOTO LENSES: The birds you're photographing are more likely to stay put and behave naturally if you can take your photos from further away. The traditional solution to this is to fit a long telephoto lens to an SLR camera. Additional magnifying lenses called teleconverters can be fitted between the main lens and the camera body, to allow photography from even further away. Digital SLRs and telephoto lenses are still the best way of getting high quality bird images, but you can try digiscoping if you don't have the budget for both.

DIGISCOPING KIT: Spotting scopes can give such fine views of even distant birds that it is natural to try to capture these using a camera. The advent of compact digital cameras made this much easier and gave anyone who owned one of these, and a scope, the ability to take bird photos for free. These days, it's possible to buy well-matched scopes, cameras and adapters that overcome most of the 'fiddliness' of early setups and deliver excellent results. A sturdy tripod is essential to minimise blur caused by equipment vibrations.

SETTING UP THE SHOT

Turn over for photo advice

Use your car as a hide

AT some locations, you may be able to shoot through your car window. Birds feel less threatened by cars – even with lenses poking out of them – than they do by a recognisable human figure.

Use available cover

IF you can't get close using your car, you may be able to use a natural screen such as rocks or vegetation. At high-tide roosts, get into position beforehand and the birds will often come right to you as the water rises.

Go for the easy option

FOR a more predictable (and more comfortable) option, shoot from an established reserve hide. If possible, visit at off-peak times so that you don't have the commotion and vibrations created by the crowds.

Firm support

IF you're digiscoping, mount your gear on a sturdy tripod or hide-clamp; if not, you can get a good combination of flexibility and support by resting your camera on a beanbag.

Image size and quality

SINCE waders can be difficult to approach closely, you will want to make sure your camera captures as much detail as possible. Be aware that some cameras aren't automatically set to their highest quality settings and need these to be set manually each time the battery is removed/discharged. Check that image size and quality are set to Fine/Large or as the highest Megapixel count. Your camera may also have an option to shoot in 'RAW' format. This gives more flexibility to tweak photos on your computer, but may be best avoided if you're just starting out, as the images will require post-processing.

ISO sensitivity

MOST digital cameras let you choose from a range of ISO Sensitivity settings, typically from 100 to 1600 or higher. Low settings give the highest image quality, but need more light to achieve correctly exposed images. Higher ISO settings let you use faster shutter speeds (e.g. to freeze feeding waders), but increase the amount of 'digital noise' in the image. This shows up as a mixture of graininess and 'splodges' of colour. Be wary of 'Auto ISO' settings that automatically increase ISO sensitivity at lower light levels: these can sometimes set extreme values when they are not necessary.

Basic composition: position and size of bird

A GOOD way to improve your image composition is to use the rule of thirds. Imagine the frame divided into three, both horizontally and vertically, as we've done in the photo on the right. Aligning any lines in the image with these grid lines will help your image look more pleasing.

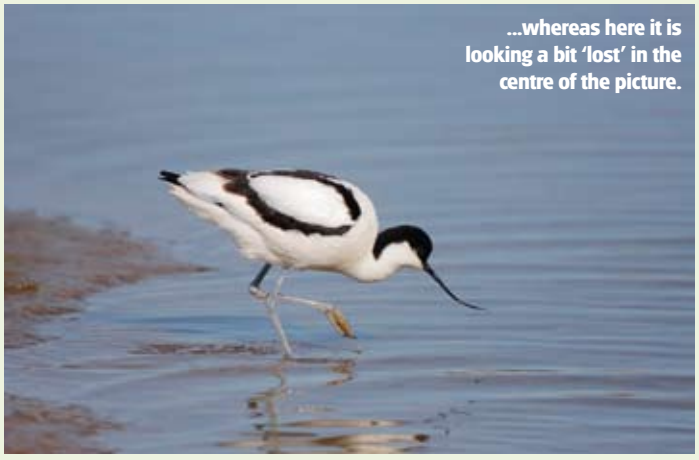
Also, placing key image elements – such as the bird's head – at the intersection points of the grid lines will give these more emphasis and add impact to your image.

Always remember the rule of thirds when you're framing your subject – bird or otherwise

You also need to be aware of the size of the bird in the frame. If it is too large it can look 'cramped'. Conversely, if you have too much space around the bird it may start to look 'lost'. The size of the bird within the frame can be varied by changing the distance at which the shot is taken or the zoom (focal length) setting of the lens.

If you do end up with a badly composed photo, then you could use the cropping feature in your image editing tool to improve both the position and the size of the bird (but beware of making too small a crop or image quality will suffer). However, it is still best to try and get as many of the different composition elements as possible right in the first place.

The Avocet here looks penned in by the edges of the frame...



...whereas here it is looking a bit 'lost' in the centre of the picture.

THE FINAL SHOT