



How to photograph... **Wildfowl**



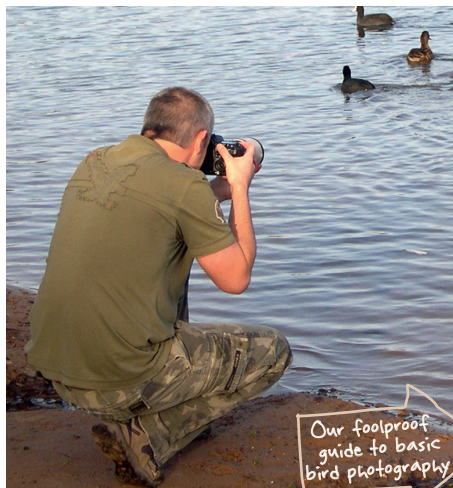
In the first of a new series, bird photographer Mike Atkinson picks some of the easier subjects to get you started in bird photography

If you've ever fancied having a go at photographing birds, there's no better way to get started than to point your camera at ducks, geese and swans. They're big, tame and slow compared to most birds, as well as photogenic.

Their size and approachability make it possible to fill your frame without having to use a long telephoto lens, and their relatively slow movements give you the chance to set up pleasing compositions.

To get started, head for your nearest duck pond, wildfowl reserve or zoo.

For this article, we visited Martin Mere WWT near Southport and photographed their captive Red-crested Pochards.



Our foolproof guide to basic bird photography

GEAR YOU'LL NEED

You can take photos of wildfowl with any camera, including compacts, although these need a decent zoom ratio to get in close. Alternatively, you can buy telephoto adapters for many compacts or you can shoot through your spotting scope (the 'digiscoping' technique). Digital is a much better option than film, as you can afford to take plenty of shots and choose the best rather than waste film. The ideal gear is a Digital SLR camera with a lens of 300mm or more.



DSLR cameras

More advanced equipment, giving you far more control over your pictures, as used by professionals

Compact cameras

The kind of point-and-shoot camera you'd use for family holidays or parties

SETTING UP

■ To start with, we won't worry too much about your camera settings: we'll cover these later in the series. If your camera has a focus setting, set it to Auto and get some practice taking photos while thinking about lighting, composition and what the bird is doing.

■ As with all bird photography, you will stand a much better chance of getting sharp photos and vibrant colours if you choose a sunny day.

■ The sun will be at its brightest in the middle of the day, but this can give harsh lighting, especially in summer. Photos taken with the sun low in the sky after dawn or before dusk look much more pleasing.

■ Choose a sunlit location where you can get close to the birds at water level. A calm day is ideal because their feathers will look less ruffled and the water will give better reflections.

■ Finally, if you're going to photograph non-captive birds, remember to take some bread with you!

■ Mike runs Bird Photography Workshops and provides one-to-one tuition. For full details and for a set of more advanced tutorials, visit his website at <http://mikeatkinson.net>

GETTING THE SHOT

Assess the situation

To start with, walk round the pond/lake until the sun is behind you (for better colours and fewer exposure problems). Attract the birds with bread if necessary.



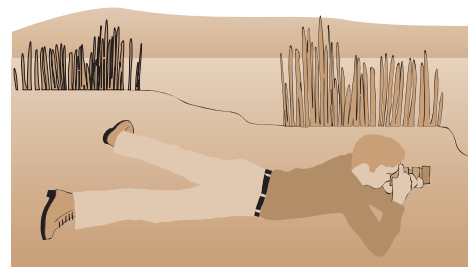
Assume the position

Don't shoot from a standing position: get down as close as you can to eye level with the bird to get the most engaging images.



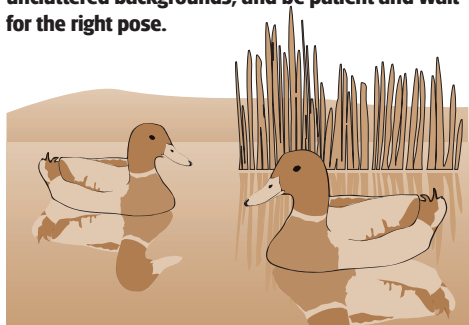
Get comfy

If possible, get your camera right down to ground level. Here, a foam mat and beanbag make photographing easier and more comfortable.



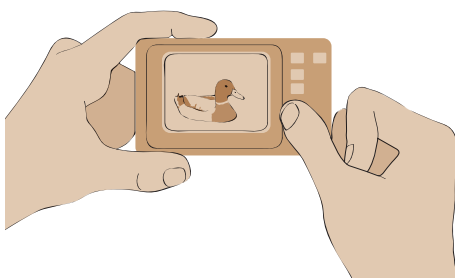
Pick your shot

For now, try to photograph single birds against uncluttered backgrounds, and be patient and wait for the right pose.



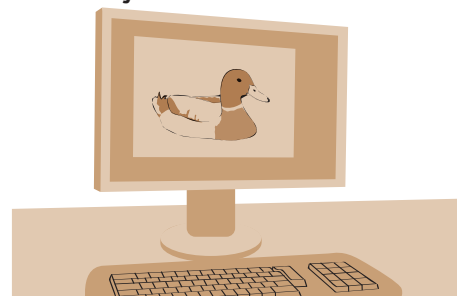
Filter your results

After each batch of shots, check the results on your camera screen for exposure, sharpness and composition.

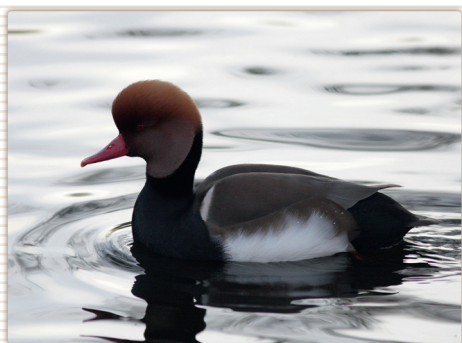


Sit back and enjoy

When you've finished, you should review all the shots on your computer and take note of what to do differently next time.

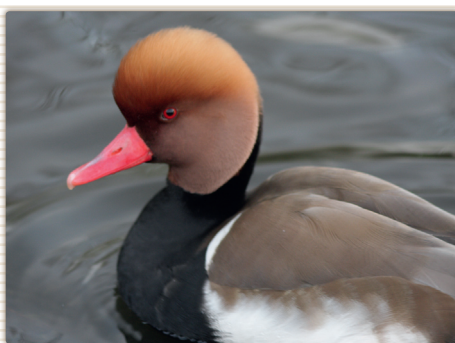


TROUBLESHOOTING



Too dark?

Here, shooting towards the light has meant that no detail is visible in the bird. Silhouettes can work well, but not with this image: it is neither a silhouette nor a well-lit portrait.



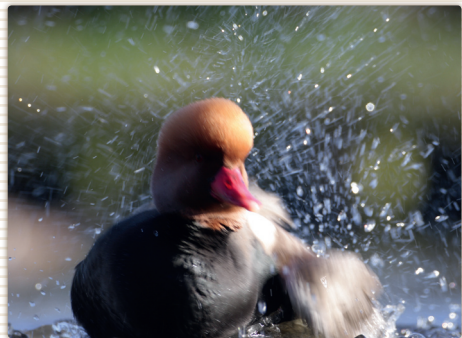
Wrong angle?

This shot is taken from too high an angle and cuts off part of the bird. A close-up such as a head-and-shoulders shot is fine, but just cutting off the tail looks wrong.



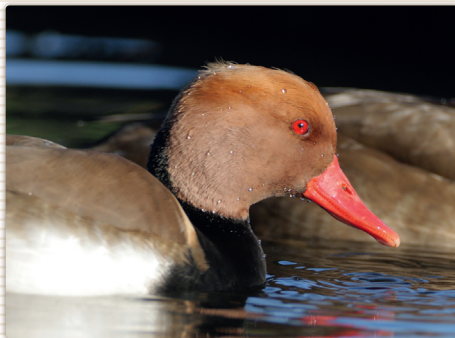
Washed out?

Good low angle, but the side-lighting is too harsh and the bird's white flanks are over-exposed. In the coming months, we'll show you how to adjust exposure compensation during your shoot.



Blurry?

The shutter speed is not fast enough to freeze the bird – we'll explore this in future issues. Again, some blur can look good, but this is too much. Also, there is no eye visible.



Too cluttered?

The lighting here is much better, but the other bird in the background is distracting. Next time, be more patient and wait for your target bird to drift away from the pack a bit more.



Too cramped?

Good background. Almost there, but the head is not at a good angle. Also, the composition looks cramped: if you include the whole bird, give it some 'space' in the frame.

THE FINAL SHOT



Direct sunlight creates saturated colours and provides a 'catchlight' in the bird's eye

Blurred background in a complimentary colour helps to make the bird stand out

Fine detail in the eye, bill and feathers give a tactile, realistic feel

Ripples on the surface of the water and the bands of light they reflect on to the bird add an aesthetic feel

Vertical cropping works well with the format of the close-up, and the low angle and good eye contact give a sense of intimacy

Water droplets on the bird's head add interest, indicating that the bird is actively feeding

Next month we'll look at photographing the birds in your garden