



Fly-By Shooting

Glide to success with birds on the wing

FIELD GUIDES to birds are often stuffed with illustrations produced by commercial illustrators. Why not a photo guide to our feathered friends? This concept flew through the mind of Minneapolis advertising pro Paul Nelson one afternoon, and the result is a

Paul Nelson caught this white-throated sparrow at a local bird-banding event.

growing catalog of images of dozens of species. Nelson makes his avian portraits, such as the white-throated sparrow above, near a feeder in his backyard or during bird-banding expeditions organized by local nature centers.

To capture birds in midair, Nelson recommends a high-speed flash- and camera-trigger system called the Cognisys StopShot

Cross Beam Kit (\$525, Cognisys-inc.com). The device emits crossed or parallel laser beams that you place in the path of your airborne subject. You manually prefocus at the point where the beams cross, and when your subject breaks the beams, the StopShot automatically fires camera and flash. For a clean white background, Nelson

recommends using a large softbox as your backdrop. You can fire that with the StopShot too. The Cognisys website explains in detail how to deploy the system.

For sharpness, Nelson suggests using your strobes at the lowest manual-power setting possible. This will produce extremely short flash durations of 1/10,000 sec (or shorter), which will ensure that

no motion blur will soften your subject. For this to work you'll need to shoot under relatively dim ambient light.

Sharpness is also maximized by the right camera and lens. Nelson selected his camera, the Nikon D800E, for its resolution and fast flash-sync of 1/250 sec. Also, he says, "my 85mm f/1.4 Zeiss lens is super crisp." —Peter Kolonia

For more of Paul Nelson's often humorous photographs, visit paulnelsonphoto.com.

THE GEAR



For this image Nelson used a Nikon D800E (A), 85mm f/1.4 Zeiss ZF.2 lens (B), and the Cognisys StopShot camera and flash trigger (C).

Step 1

Pick a good time to shoot.

"Migration times are best. Try spring, late summer, and early fall," Nelson says. There is a wider variety of species, and they're all looking for food and water sources, which you can supply. It helps if the day is not too windy, because softbox backgrounds can blow over.

Step 2

Gather your gear. Start with a triggering system, like the Cognisys StopShot. A large softbox will make a nice white background, whether it's fired or not. Your light source should be a short-flash-duration strobe; reflectors can add fill light as well as create surfaces that will help direct a bird toward the trigger's cross beam. A tripod is also a must.

Step 3

Find an ideal location. "I set up where sunlight can't hit lighting surfaces or my subject. To control ambient light, I use flags," Nelson says. Also, place your feeder near a branch or roost. Aim the trigger's cross beams just in front of that roost to capture the bird on its final approach to the feeder.

Step 4

Set exposure. For adequate depth of field you want a small aperture, but not so small that you have to bump up flash power, which will lengthen flash duration and possibly introduce motion blur. Once you've got the balance right, fire away.

Step 5

Fix in post. To get a clean white back there, Nelson knocks out the backgrounds in Adobe Photoshop CC. "I use various Channels-based masking techniques, usually allowing some of the transparency of the wings to be evident," he says.