

# On-Camera Flash For Bird Photography



By  
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Bird photography has been my passion for many years. In the days of Kodachrome 64, my bird photography was based on a cumbersome, studio-style flash setup at nests and similar locations. Flash helps capture wonderfully lit and sharp images with beautiful feather detail and a fine highlight in the eye; this is particularly true when the light is poor, when a bird is partially hidden in a bush or simply strongly back-lit. Since switching from film to digital, I have tried on-camera flash in the field but concluded that available speedlights, combined with a Fresnel lens flash amplifier, did not have the power to capture the images I was after. Recently, this conclusion took a change for the better when I was browsing the net and read an article by a wedding photographer extolling the virtues of a quite powerful and portable unit, the Godox AD200. This modestly priced and very well-built unit has a specified output of 200 watt-seconds and a corresponding guide number of 170 to 197 feet at an ISO of 100 (depending on flash head used). It has more than twice the power of my most powerful speedlight. Based on that article and some additional reading, I purchased an AD200 and a radio controller and began experimenting at my backyard bird feeder. The available power allowed me to obtain photographs that I had previously thought impossible. Once the wrinkles had been ironed out, I proceeded into the field with equal success. After



Photo 1

a short time, I added a second unit as it increased my reach by 40%; I also built a bracket to hold the two flash-heads. This article illustrates the flash hardware I am using as well as showing some of my results. The bird photographs are in two categories: firstly, the flashes provide the main light and the sun provides background illumination; secondly, the bird is back/side lit by the sun and fill is provided by the flashes.

## Equipment

The setup is based on two Godox AD200 units and a radio controller. These flashes have no hot shoe mount and therefore a controller is a necessity to achieve TTL flash. I built a flash bracket from a three foot piece of ¼ x 1 inch aluminum bar which I bent into a U shape. To this was added two small ball heads to hold the flashes; these ball heads came with an Arca Swiss clamp and plate. The Arca Swiss plates are attached to the flash units to allow easy mounting while the ball heads allow aiming of the flashes. At the bottom



Photo 2



Photo 3

of the U another Arca Swiss clamp is mounted which allows the bracket to be attached to the lens tripod-foot. The entire construction of the bracket, including the ball heads and clamps, cost less than \$50. The setup is shown in photos 1 and 2. Note that mounting the flash bracket on the lens tripod-foot allows the camera to be used in a landscape or portrait mode without repositioning the flashes. Mag Mod flash extenders are mounted on the flashes; these amplifiers claim a gain of 2 – 3 stops although I have not tested this claim. The red spot on the controller in *Photo 1* is used as an aiming aid by lining up the red spot with the nob on the lens hood; this provides rapid acquisition of the bird when using a long telephoto lens. I am very happy with this bracket/flash arrangement; the only downside is the weight. However, it is my opinion that the inconvenience is well worth the effort based on the quality of the obtained photographs.

### Main Light

When using the flashes as the main light, the first step is to set the background exposure. I use a shutter speed of 1/250 second, an aperture of f8 and select an ISO such that I am happy with the background; typically, the background is 1-3 stops underexposed. Then a test shot is taken without flash to satisfy myself that the background is

satisfactory. With these settings fixed, the camera exposure mode is set to spot metering, the flashes to TTL mode and the bird is photographed. The first several photographs are examined carefully to ensure the bird exposure is satisfactory. Fine tuning is often necessary using flash-exposure compensation, either up or down depending on the color of the bird. As noted, I spent time at the bird feeder in order to get this procedure working smoothly. *Photos 3* and *4* of a red-breasted nuthatch on a limb and a goldfinch feeding on a thistle are examples obtained while getting my procedure working. *Photo 5* of a female Mallard and her young and *Photo 6* of a Red-necked Grebe settling in on its' nest and eggs are field illustrations. This last photograph was taken at a distance of about 80 feet with a 600mm lens, so it also illustrates the range achievable.

### Fill Light

The use of Fill-flash is very effective when the subject is back/side lit. The idea is to have the back/side highlights on the bird about 1 stop over; this is accomplished using spot metering on the highlights. Shutter speed is 1/250 sec, aperture is f8 and ISO is chosen to obtain the correct highlight exposure. Then a series of photographs is taken without flash to assess the highlight area.

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Photo 4

Once I am happy with the highlights, the camera is set to spot metering, the flashes to TTL and a test shot is taken. If I am happy with the overall exposure of the bird, I proceed. Again, some fine tuning is often necessary; either with the highlights or with the fill light. The exposure of

the background is not controllable with only two light sources (the sun and the flash) so this may require a bit of moving around to make sure the background is satisfactory. I will use photographs of a Brown Thrasher to illustrate the process.

Photo 7 shows the bird without flash; note that the highlights on the left shoulder. The intent is to create a lighting situation that is typical of a formal portrait. Next the flash is turned on with the objective of obtaining the correct exposure on the rest of the bird. This yields Photo 8 which is one of many taken and which I feel is the most attractive pose. I particularly like the highlights on the shoulders, the back-lit tail, and the bright spot on the tip of the beak. A similar approach was



Photo 5



Photo 6



Photo 7—Brown Thrasher without Flash



Photo 8—Brown Thrasher with Flash



Photo 9

taken in the ‘portrait’ of the cormorant in *Photo 9*. In *Photo 10*, of a juvenile red-necked grebe, the exposure was set to avoid blowing the highlights while the flash was used to expose the bird proper.

### Concluding Remarks

This article has outlined the use of some quite powerful portable flashes for on-camera field-

photography of birds. A series of photographs have been used to illustrate the use of these flashes as either the main light or fill light; the process used to obtain the photographs has been outlined for both situations. It is hoped that this article will provide some guidance for other photographers who might wish to try a similar approach. ■

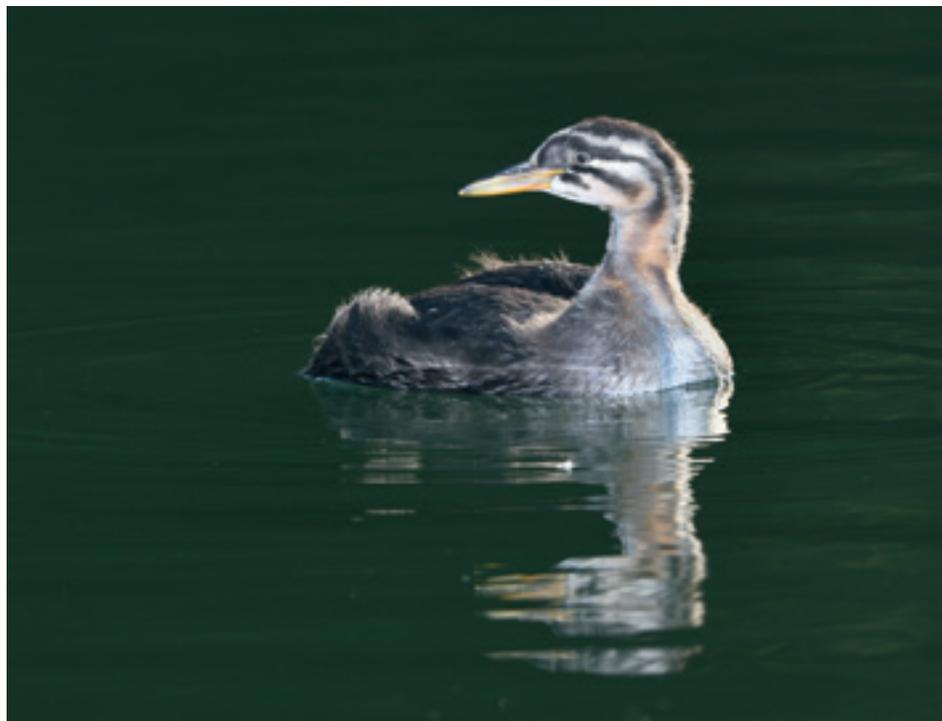


Photo 10