

**Creating Intimate Portraits in Nature**  
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Since the first day I picked up a camera and started photographing birds I felt compelled to create images that seem, and many times are, larger than life. I enjoy nothing more than capturing intimate portraits and close-ups of birds brimming with character and detail. Often it is only from this closer perspective that true colors, textures and patterns become more evident and appreciated.



Canon EOS 10D, 600/4 IS lens, 1.4XTC, two 25mm extension tubes, 1/200th @ f16, ISO 400

I love nothing more than to focus in on colorful patterns and textures like the fine details of this Pelican's facial features.

Over the years I have learned what to do, and what not to do, the hard way when creating intimate portraits of birds in their natural environment. Some of the basic guidelines I follow may help you in creating intimate images of your own.

### **EQUIPMENT CONSIDERATIONS**

While there may be times when you may get close enough to wild birds to allow the use of shorter focal lengths, generally a long telephoto lens is desired for its ability to obtain a large subject size while still keeping a reasonable physical distance from your subject. My favorite lens for creating bird close-ups is the Canon 600mm f/4 image stabilized lens with compatible Canon teleconverters and extension tubes. But even with this lens I still need a careful approach and relatively tolerant subjects. With unusually cooperative birds I may use a 300mm f/4 image stabilized lens, or even a 70-200mm f/2.8 image stabilized lens, but these are less often practical for shooting close-ups of birds. A sturdy tripod or other support, such as car window mount or ground support, is almost always needed to obtain critical sharpness, as exposure for close-ups and portraits typically call for smaller apertures resulting in slower shutter speeds. Camera and medium are largely unimportant, but shooting digital offers a little more flexibility, particularly with ISO settings, dynamic range, and instant feedback.

### **Technical considerations**

The technical considerations of doing close-up images are especially important; if something is not in focus that should be, or if something isn't exposed right, it can be glaringly obvious in the resulting photo. As always, knowing your limitations and living within them by way of compromise is key to technical proficiency in your photographic endeavors.

### **Using extension tubes and teleconverters**

The use of extension tubes allows you to focus closer than your lens would normally, making them especially useful for cooperative subjects. With a willing subject my preference is to get physically closer while using my lens alone without teleconverters, rather than shoot from a greater distance using teleconverters. This ensures optimal sharpness from the optics and reduces atmospheric effects by shortening the distance between camera and subject. It also reduces other effects often compounded by greater focal lengths such as camera shake and wind. Conversely, for a subject that is relatively far off the ground, the use of more focal length is a great way to reduce the apparent angle in the resulting image. More focal length may also be necessary if the subject is shy or otherwise difficult to get physically close to, as well as minimizing stress on a sensitive subject. The situation at hand will dictate the set-up!



Canon EOS 10D, 600/4 IS lens, stacked 2x and 1.4x teleconverters, 1/200th @ f13, ISO 400, flash.

This bird was sitting high atop a dead tree and she had one bad eye. By stacking teleconverters I was able to eliminate the distracting elements on the photo and wait for the decisive moment to click the shutter. Since the bird was pretty far off the ground, use of extreme focal length was a great way to reduce the apparent angle of the shot. Catching the bird with raised foot gives the image more impact.

### **Depth of field and critical focus**

When making close-up images don't forget to stop down for adequate depth of field. Use the camera's depth of field preview feature while manually focusing as you look through the viewfinder to find the optimal focus point, whereby everything you want in focus is in focus. Keep an eye on the background when stopping down to watch for distracting elements that may become more apparent.

### **Use flash for sharpness**

Flash helps in obtaining sharp images as it lessens the effects of camera shake with a fast burst of light. Sometimes to gain additional shutter speed I will underexpose the ambient light and use flash as the main light source. Keep in mind that this causes underexposure and a darkening of backgrounds and often works better with backgrounds that are lighter to begin with.

Note that while stopping down your aperture the flash range will be reduced accordingly, an issue especially when shooting at greater focal lengths. Use of a flash extender, such as the Visual Echoes "Better Beamer", can help extend flash range as well as increase burst duration when closer to the subject. The flash extender shouldn't be used at distances of less than ten feet or so.

## COMPOSITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Composition of close-ups is very delicate; a light shift in composition can change a photo from one that looks balanced and well-composed to one that looks awkward. Following a few basic guidelines can make compositions of close-ups become second nature. Practice by finding a subject that is cooperative enough to allow you time to carefully consider the overall composition, or better yet also allows the time to shoot a variety of compositions for review later. Often these will be common subjects, which are perfect for creating close-ups as well as a way to gain new appreciation for a subject which may otherwise be overlooked!



Canon EOS 10D, 600/4 IS lens, two 25mm extension tubes, 1/400th @ f18, ISO 400, flash.

This non-breeding Ring-billed Gull was nothing more than a nuisance to beachgoers at Cape May beach. To a bird photographer it's generally a pretty boring deal; not much going on with a gull standing on an empty beach. What to do... Get close!

The focus point in this photo ended up just behind the lores of the bird. Had I simply focused on the eye I would have wasted most of my depth of field behind the bird and ended up with an out of focus bill, ruining the shot.

### Balance

The overall arrangement of elements is critical to a pleasing and balanced composition. Much depends on how much of the subject you're including in your image. If it's a simple head shot, placing the bird's head or eye near a rule of thirds intersection often works well, but be sure to pay close attention to the entire frame, including what may creep into focus in the background. Eliminating any distracting elements from the image allows your eye to focus on and enjoy the fine features and intricate details.

Headshots typically contain some background around the head with the remainder of the subject cropped off at one corner of the frame. How you place the bird in the corner is not as critical to the overall compositional balance as where you place the head, bill, and eye within the frame. When shooting extreme close-ups of bird's faces placing the eye in one of the upper corners, with the tip of the bill leading into the opposite lower corner, can sometimes create a nice diagonal line to follow to the eye.

### Connection with the subject

While not an absolute requirement, it's usually preferred to have the subject looking in your direction. A slight head turn towards the camera can make all the difference in creating a photo that provides a connection with a viewer versus one that does not. There are rare times when a bird facing away might work for a specific desired effect, but it's the exception and not the rule.

## Dynamics

Capturing dynamics makes an image more interesting and pleasing to view. I consider there to be two aspects of dynamics in intimate portraits: behavioral dynamics and compositional dynamics. Behavioral dynamics are when your subject is doing something. This can be as simple as looking over a shoulder, preening, swimming, lifting a foot, or engaged in other behavior. An example of compositional dynamics is incorporating pleasingly flowing lines and curves in your image. Having one or the other makes an image more interesting, capturing both is a big plus!



Canon EOS 10D, 600/4 IS lens, 1.4x teleconverter, 1/200th @ f13, ISO 400, flash.

A slight over-the-shoulder look can add some pizzazz to an otherwise standard portrait. Of course finding a bird with bright contrasting colors, such as this Tufted Puffin at St. Paul Island, helps as well. Careful regulation of flash was necessary to get some detail in the black, while preserving the whites in the Puffin's face and tuft.

## Breathing room

Whether doing extreme close-ups or the more standard types of headshots, keeping some space in front of the bird with its eye above center is usually best. For headshots you want to be sure to leave enough negative space above the subject as well. Enough space should be left in front of the bill to keep the image from looking too cramped, although some tighter shots can still work. Don't forget to plan ahead for aspect ratios outside 35mm as well!

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Be conscious of your subject's welfare and stress level. Don't be tempted to get too close to nesting birds or baby birds; use longer focal lengths when photographing sensitive subjects. Most of all use common sense! Putting your subject in harm's way is not worth even the greatest of images.



Canon EOS 10D, 600/4 IS lens, stacked 2x and 1.4x teleconverters, 1/200th @ f16, ISO 400

Things you would otherwise miss can become the main focal point in a close up. Here, a mother Black-legged Kittiwake regurgitates much needed food for her chick. Using an extreme focal length allowed me to keep a safe distance and minimize disturbance to the sensitive nesting birds.

With some of these guidelines in mind, plus a little creativity and patience, you'll be well on your way to capturing the close-ups you desire. Just remember, there are no hard or fast rules, particularly when it comes to compositional and artistic aspects of your images. So don't be afraid to experiment and most of all have fun!



Greg Downing is a professional nature photographer specializing in birds. His images are known to many for their attention to detail and precise compositions. He has been published worldwide and owns and operates a successful photographic workshop and tour business, teaching bird photography, digital imaging and PhotoShop techniques. He is also the founder and publisher of NatureScapes.Net. For more information, visit Greg's personal website at [www.gdphotography.com](http://www.gdphotography.com).

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