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PHOTOGRAPHY

Bird Photography

Randy C. Anderson

A journal of my experiences and travels



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Male Northern Cardinal



A female Northern Cardinal in early fall



Birds Are My Passion

I have a life-long obsession for birds. I study them and make photos almost every day...

By
Randy C. Anderson

Birds have been a passion of mine most of my life. I always enjoyed watching the birds come to our feeders and birdbaths my mother tended to. I learned the names of the common birds in our area, and could identify them by sight and knew most of their calls as well. At that time, I was not a “serious” birder by any means, but I did keep a checklist of the birds I saw. Over the years, my life- list steadily grew.

As the years passed, I became more serious about my birding. Luckily, my wife enjoys birding as well. We have devoted much time and effort into our passion of studying birds. We have learned much from other birders we have met, and all of that knowledge has helped me in my bird photography. Because we love the outdoors, we venture into

the field to do much of our birding. Going to new locations always promised the possibility of new bird species for us to see. We traveled a lot in the early years, and were rewarded with new birds some times, but many times we did not see any new species. Photographing birds was not too successful back then ether.

We made a special trip to look for Yellow Warblers one weekend, struck out completely, until we got home – I looked out the window to check the bird feeders in the backyard, and there in the Mulberry tree



by the birdbath was a male Yellow Warbler working his way down to the birdbath — unbelievable! Of course, the cameras were still in the car. We decided at that point to spend more time observing our feeders and



birdbaths in our own backyard. That turned out to be a great decision.

That spring we decided to landscape the yard in favor of the birds. We added more feeders, birdbaths, and nest boxes. It worked. Honestly, it had probably always been working on a smaller scale, and going unnoticed by us — all that traveling was keeping us away from our own yard. We learned what worked as we went along, finding foods the birds seemed to prefer, and where best to place the feeders. We kept notes, and tracked our efforts. We were astounded when we saw birds at the feeder we thought we would never see in our yard. Migrant birds became more frequent, and several times unusual species would appear after a severe storm had passed the night before.

We still ventured out in the field, but we had so many birds coming to us, we tended to stay at home. I could photograph birds in my own backyard and get much better results because I could work much closer to my subjects. While the photographic situation was much better at home, it still had some problems. It was impossible to shoot out a window because there were heavy screens and panes in the way. The windows were small, old, covered with storm windows, and a little too high for eye level shots. I would “hide” in the garden

shed, which worked, but had a very limited view of the entire yard. In those days, I was shooting film and mistakes were costly. Still, I kept after it. I vowed that if I ever had the chance to create a perfect environment for attracting



birds and photographing them, I would do just that.

I got my chance in 2015 when we retired to Bixby, Oklahoma. Our daughter and son-in-law had been saying they wanted us to live with them since before they were married. They were not joking. When they moved a third time in the Tulsa area they kept us in mind during their house hunting. When they found what was the “perfect” home for all of us, they emailed us photos. We loved the yard! The house is on a corner lot, has lots of mature trees, and large windows. The yard was already landscaped, but we have added a perennial butterfly garden, and herbs such as Fennel and Dill. The kids decided to replace all of the windows a year after we moved in, and asked us if we had any type of windows in mind — really? Hmmm, a large vertical window that

opened easily from either side would be great (my dream window)! I could not only quietly slide them open to shoot unimpeded I could also shoot through them in inclement weather!

Now I love photographing the birds (and other wildlife) at home even more. With a very large yard full of Oak, Ash, Pecan, and Redbud trees – thirty-seven trees to be exact, many birds are naturally attracted to the yard. Our neighborhood was built in mixed woodlands near the Arkansas River. Evidently, the builder kept most of the trees that were present, building around them instead of knocking them down. Bravo to him. So there are many mature trees around the yard and neighborhood. We also have a few ornamental trees, shrubs, ground cover, perennial native plants, several feeding stations, nest boxes, and watering stations. All of this is very attractive to birds and other wildlife, as you would expect.

As of this writing, we have observed (and photographed) sixty-seven species of birds in the yard as well as opossums, raccoons, squirrels, rabbits, lizards, snakes, tree frogs, toads, and many insects. Let me say this up front – we live in the city, not the country. We are not on a large acreage, but a city neighborhood. When we moved to this location I did not know what to expect when it came to the resident and migratory birds that we would have.

My “studio” is divided into two distinct areas so the birds will not feel pressured at any given time. We provide food and water all year, changing some of the offerings on a seasonal basis. Black oil sun-



flower seeds are always present, as are nuts, and suet cakes. My number one food for all birds for all seasons is Bluebird Nuggets. Everything eats these tasty little morsels!

The Bluebird Nuggets give me a perfect food to use in the studio. They are easy to hide in small holes, cracks, or crevices, and on the bark of tree branches and limbs, I provide as perches. These perches are placed in the perfect spot for me to use as a prop for bird photos. They are at the right distance, at the right height, and in the right light. These strategic branch placements also allow me to control the background giving me a clean non-distracting background that has a soft, buttery blur to it. The colors change depending on the season, the lighting conditions, and whether or not my neighbor across the street have their trash cans at the curb for pickup. While I add no backdrops or other artificial items in the background, I do decorate some of the branches with lichen, moss, or fungi if it is not already on the branch.

How do I use these limbs? It is simple really. I buy Christmas tree stands at yard sales and put good size limbs in them. This allows me to position the branch right where I want it. I then drill one-inch holes on one side of the branch in a high and low position. I cram a few of the Bluebird Nuggets into these holes as well as in any naturally occurring cracks and crevices. The birds enjoy looking for these treats and will spend time doing just that – giving me ample time to take their portraits. If there is not a snag at the top of the branch, I will create one. Warblers, jays, creepers, sparrows, and even Robins have joined five species of woodpeckers on this set up. A branch around



two to three inches in diameter that forks near the top, and is around four feet tall is ideal. When you first put one out it does not take long for the birds to get used to it and start using it.

I have a flat feeder, squirrel proof feeder, suet log, tube feeder(s), and two birdbaths in one area right outside the living room windows. My branch is positioned between all of that. Birds will land on it as a natural perch before or after visiting one of the other feeders, and will sometimes preen on it after bathing. My first branch lasted me a couple of years, then the opossums, squirrels, and raccoons wore it out. They like those nuggets too! I am looking for a replacement branch hoping to find one soon.

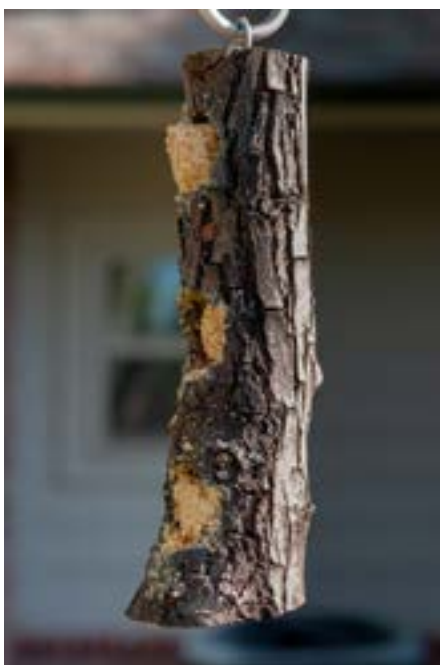
Two Bluebird nest boxes are in the backyard, and we have had two pairs of Bluebirds raise multiple broods each year. Their natural behavior raising young, while enjoyable to witness, is a challenge to capture. I shoot from a further distance to eliminate any pressure on the parents. If I detect any nervousness or alarm, I stop shooting. There is no need to jeopardize a nest for a few photos. The difficulties when shooting at the nest boxes are increased because the parents move like rockets when going to and from the box. When shooting birds of any kind you need to use a shutter speed of at least 1/1000 of a second (I prefer 1/1500 and higher). I like to use the lowest ISO possible (to eliminate digital noise) but that is not possible most of the time (the boxes are in the shade). I do not use flash on nesting birds. The flash does not seem to bother them, but it can attract the attention of other birds – such as Sharpshinned hawks, Brown-headed Cowbirds, and Blue Jays.

I usually start shooting with the following settings and then make any adjustments necessary for the exposure I am after {ISO 800, f4, Shutter Speed 1/2000 second}. I always want to stop action, keep

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then make any adjustments necessary for the exposure I am after {ISO 800, f4, Shutter Speed 1/2000 second}. I always want to stop action, keep the eyes tack sharp, and have a reasonably good composition before any necessary cropping in post-production. Any wildlife photographers that say they never crop their images are not being honest. Sometimes the action occurs too quickly and unexpectedly to allow making a composition exactly as you want it. Some cropping in post-production is usually necessary.

An important consideration to keep in mind if you decide you want a bird “studio” in your yard is cleanliness. Even if you are just feeding the birds, feeders, bird baths and fountains all need to be

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An important consideration to keep in mind if you decide you want a bird “studio” in your yard is cleanliness. Even if you are just feeding the birds, feeders, bird baths and fountains all need to be cleaned regularly. Spilled seed, seed hulls, bird droppings, and other materials need to be cleaned up as well. I use a shop vacuum to easily



suck up this debris. I have dedicated brushes for scrubbing out birdbaths and brushing out feeders. If you do not keep the area clean, diseases can spread from an infected bird to healthy ones. All those sunflower hulls and spilled seed is not only unsightly, it can attract mice and rats that you probably do not want around. Always keep the health of the birds in mind. Fresh water and fresh food equals more birds. Here is my summary of the benefits of a bird studio in your own yard:

1. Birding is fun for the entire family
2. You control the background, lighting and shooting position
3. You do not have to travel to see birds
4. You can shoot in just about any weather conditions
5. You can easily use fill-flash to open shadows
6. Shooting tethered is possible
7. You can easily use multiple cameras
8. You have all the comforts of home

If you do decide to set up a studio of your own, keep the welfare of the birds in mind above all else, especially if you put up birdhouses and nest boxes. Keep them safe from predators such as squirrels raccoons, and snakes by using deterrents such as pole guards. Think about where you will set them up, do not make it easy for anything to raid a nest. One of the best things you can do is provide a clean, reliable source of water all year. This really helps the birds out.

PEARLS OF WISDOM?

Never Stop Learning!

We have all heard it before, but it seems to me that less and less of us are continuing to keep learning, and get the benefits of doing so.

What are these benefits? Continually learning new things keeps our minds sharper, keeps us active, makes us more relevant in a changing world, and keeps our passions alive.

It has been scientifically shown that the more active our brains are, the less likely we may be to have problems such as dementia. Learning stimulates the brain, keeping it healthier. Learning is different than just keeping your brain active by say, reading. While reading is a

part of learning, reading now does not offer the same stimulation to the brain as does learning a new concept.

As a photographer and graphic designer the software I use is always being updated with new features and capabilities. By learning these, it keeps me up to date, and relevant to the photographic community. Besides, I love being a photographer! I get to travel, meet new people, and experience other cultures.



Brown Thrasher

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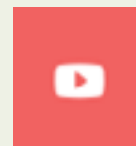
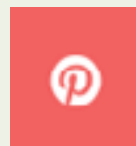
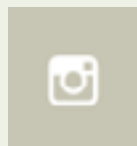
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Parting Shot



The Northern Cardinal seems to be everyone's favorite – including me. This male is one of our resident birds that I enjoy photographing.