

Camera and Lens Preferences – Simon Pelling

Photographers are spoilt for choice with today's cameras and lenses. There are high quality options for just about every type of photography, and healthy competition between brands for your dollar. Of course, it's possible to buy the *wrong* camera and lens, in the sense that it is not up to the job you want to do, but it's difficult to buy a *bad* interchangeable lens camera. I think it's fair to say that pretty much all current DSLRs and mirrorless cameras on the market are very capable photographic tools. Provided you invest in the right lenses, there is no reason why you can't take decent bird photographs with practice and persistence regardless of whether you buy Nikon, Canon, Sony, Olympus, Panasonic, Fujifilm or any of the other current brands, or whether you invest in full-frame, APS-C or Micro Four Thirds systems.

As a follow-up to my article in the December 2018 newsletter on purchasing a camera and lens, I thought it would be interesting to ask some of my fellow Birdlife Photography Committee members what cameras and lenses they preferred for bird photography, and why.

This is intended to be a fairly light-hearted anecdotal article. I have largely included the comments of Committee members as provided to me, with minimal editing, mainly to reduce length. However, to be clear, nothing in this article is intended to mean that as a Committee we endorse particular systems or brands, even though it will be evident that there is a lot of common ground. I hope you find these stories interesting.

Graham Cam, Committee President

My photographic journey commenced in the film era with a Pentax Spotmatic II followed by two Nikon FE II cameras combined with inexpensive, low-quality, third party telephoto-lenses. When digital camera bodies became available, I purchased a Nikon D300 12MP crop sensor camera, which could fire at 10 frames per second. Price, the benefit of the 1.5 crop factor to facilitate a larger image of the bird in the frame, and a fast frame rate for action photography were the key benefits for this purchase. As camera sensors improved, I added full frame camera bodies to my gear sack. Upon retirement, with more disposable income, I took that initial 'leap of faith' and purchased my first pro-telephoto lens; a Nikkor AFS 600mm, f4 with vibration reduction. This lens coupled to the D300 was my 'go to' combo for serious bird photography.

Recently, I upgraded to the newest AFS 600mm with fluorite glass elements, which makes the lens lighter for carrying on excursions. Both lenses are fantastic for bird photography and I still use both. They are heavy but the image quality and f4 light gathering capability negates weight as far as I am concerned. For much of the time, I use these telephotos on either a tripod or monopod, and a monopod with lens VR activated (IS for Canon users) produces tack sharp images. A monopod with a quick release mechanism is my trusted companion these days, whether in Australia or on overseas excursions.

Why a monopod you ask? It's lighter and more convenient to carry than a tripod and having that vertical stability means that I only have to concentrate on horizontal movement of the lens. A trick for more experienced photographers is to practice using a Wimberley head on a monopod – yes, I definitely said – “a Wimberley head on a monopod”. Why you ask? A

Wimberley head enables 3D movement of your lens. Normally, a monopod or tripod has a ball head or equivalent which is locked in place for stability. A Wimberley head enables the lens and camera to be positioned so that it is perfectly balanced for vertical and horizontal movements. Horizontal movement is achieved either by rotating the Wimberley head or rotating the monopod. My monopod has a large round foot with a socket joint to allow rotation. Want to know more about Wimberley heads – go to the Wimberley website: <https://www.tripodhead.com/>

As to my preference for a crop sensor versus full frame camera body; I own both and will continue to do so. Up until December 2018 I used a full frame Nikon D810 camera body, which has a 36MP sensor. This allows the capture of very fine detail at high resolution and with minimal digital noise. The issue is that the maximum frame rate for the D810 is 5 frames per second. I have now upgraded to the new D850, 45.7MP full frame camera body and with a range of new features. I thought the D810 was fantastic, the D850 is simply amazing. For fast frame rates I use the Nikon D500 20.7MP crop sensor camera that fires at 10 frames/s. The D500 is state of the art, delivering high resolution images with low noise. At the time of upgrading to the D850, I purchased the new Nikkor AFS 180-400mm, f4 (throughout the range), with built-in 1.5 extender, which takes the lens to an equivalent 560mm, f5.6. This lens is the most sophisticated in the Nikkor product range and worth the high cost. Although a zoom, the image quality is equivalent to a prime lens. I recently took this lens to Antarctica and South America and it didn't disappoint.

With all photographic equipment there will always be compromises. When in an Antarctica motoring through the sea and ice in zodiacs, I found the length of the 180 – 400 imposing and with another 9 people on board, it was unwieldy. Hence, a lighter weight and shorter lens would have been ideal; the Nikkor 80 - 400 or Canon 100 - 400 being perfect choices. This shows that lens choice is multifactorial; in this example the ability to operate in a confined space was an equally important factor in lens choice.

I have been asked recently would I consider moving to another manufacturer. My personal opinion is that I have extensively tested the Nikon sensors and they are superb – so the answer is NO! As to the question of smaller lighter weight gear: I have played with the new Nikon Z series mirrorless body, and coupled to the Nikkor 500mm PF, f5.6 telephoto it produces the highest quality images. The 600mm PF is scheduled for the middle of 2019 – which gives a great deal more to think about. Technology moves far quicker than the expansion of our wallets!

Glenn Pure

I have been a keen photographer since my early teens and always had an interest in nature photography and birds. However, I never had suitable gear to photograph birds until my first digital super-zoom, all-in-one camera (a Lumix FZ10). The results were exciting but patchy. It wasn't until I was given a relative's old Canon 450D DSLR with 55-250mm kit lens that I realised what might be possible especially the big jump in image quality, responsiveness and autofocus speed. That was in 2013 and started me on my journey into bird photography.

After investing in a few lenses, I was committed to the Canon path – so it was really an accident of circumstance that I became a Canon DSLR user. It didn't take long before I

wanted more 'reach' from my lens and bought a used Canon 100-400mm (original, series 1) lens that I found on eBay. It made a big difference along with upgrades to my camera body (first a Canon 700D then an 80D). Once Canon released the series II version of the 100-400mm lens, which had significant improvements in sharpness and image stabilisation, I knew I had to have it.

I've gone into this history because I think many people don't start with a 'clean slate' - they build on what they know or already have and their gear 'evolves' from there. The thing I really value about my 80D - 100 to 400mm combo is the excellent quality of the optics, good 'reach' of the lens, good image quality from the camera combined with the combo's compact nature and relatively light weight. Having the ability to zoom back on the lens has got more out of a tricky situation more than once also. The things I miss are the beautiful bokeh of the big prime lenses (but I'm not prepared to put up with their size and weight, not to mention cost) and more limited low light performance of my 80D compared to many full frame cameras.

Would I go the Canon route if I started from scratch today? Knowing what I do, I'd look seriously at the Nikon camp, probably the D500 crop sensor camera. The low light performance of Nikon is marginally better and Nikon has some great new lens offerings suited to bird photography along with arguably a better autofocus system especially for birds-in-flight ... but it wouldn't be an easy decision.

Jen Carr

I shoot with Canon equipment because way back 20-30 years ago I had a Canon camera which used film, and I had a few old lenses that I could interchange on other Canon cameras. My first Canon digital SLR camera was a Canon 1000D which came with two lenses, which was all I could afford at the time. I quickly progressed to a Canon 40 D and then a 7D digital camera, which I still use, and it has served me very well.

When I started really loving bird photography I purchased a second hand Sigma 500 mm lens via eBay. I vowed never to purchase a second hand lens ever again after the aperture cable snapped when I was very close to a pair of Brolga on Lake Connewarre, and the lens could not be repaired. I purchased a new Sigma 50-500 mm lens to replace the broken lens, and I really enjoyed using this as I could capture birds as well as scenic images with this lens, so I didn't have to change lenses all the time. The problem with this lens was that frequent zooming of the lens (to adjust the focal length) sucked in dust, and I took it to Darwin on two occasions and eventually it was so full of dust I had to spend a small fortune to get it cleaned.

In the meantime I was talked into buying the Canon 400 mm fixed focus lens by Glenn Pure, and this lens has been just wonderful. It is light to carry and it gives great results in picture quality especially with close up bird images. I am very happy with the Canon 7D and Canon 400 mm lens. I don't use a tripod, and I find the equipment I do have very portable and I'm happy with the quality of the images. I have purchased a 1.4x magnifier but I haven't used it yet as I haven't really needed to.

I would love to purchase a Canon 500 or 600 mm lens in the future when I win TattsLotto.

Mark Davidson

I bought the Olympus OM-D E-M1 mirrorless micro four-thirds body shortly after it was released in late 2013. I knew little about modern cameras but was attracted to its compactness, light weight, splash and dust-proof specification, and was persuaded by several reviews. I added a 75-300mm zoom shortly thereafter and started photographing birds which was always my main interest.

Being a novice on a steep learning curve I grappled with the complexities of the multi-layered menus, added and continually altered custom settings and joined the DP Review forum attempting to understand the camera. That forum made me aware of the weaknesses of Mk 1 model, particularly focusing on moving targets.

Olympus released their 300mm f/4 PRO lens in mid-2016 which, combined with my improved field techniques – mainly understanding bird species common to my area – and the 5-axis image stabilisation, resulted in a greater “keeper” rate. Launched in late 2016, the E-M1 Mk 2 was a big improvement, notably far better focusing on moving targets, so that, combined with the 300 f/4 and 1.4 teleconverter, has become my standard kit that takes about 95% of my images. The addition of a battery grip improved the balance and overall ergonomics and makes for comfortable long sessions hand-holding the 2.3kg package. I occasionally use a tripod, mainly for birds arriving on or departing a perch, or a monopod, but following birds requires mobility so hand-holding is my standard.

To me its weakness is in “low” light situations and it is essential to get the light in and get close to the bird. I shoot at ISO 800, standard for perched birds, or 400 if the light is better in the case of birds in flight.

I am happy with the overall camera/lens combination and have a second body plus a variety of smaller Olympus PRO lenses for landscape and travel. All bodies, lenses and accessories fit in a LowePro medium-sized bag that goes under the seat in front or easily in the overhead locker.

I just need to improve in order to make the most of it.

My own story....

I moved from film to digital photography using Sony cameras. For those who remember, Sony bought out the struggling camera and lens manufacturer Minolta, and their early DSLR cameras were compatible with Minolta lenses. I had previously used a Minolta film camera, and had a couple of lenses, so it was a logical low cost entry point to digital.

I stuck with Sony through several generations of (perfectly acceptable) DSLRs and gradually came to focus on nature and bird photography using one of Sony’s ‘G’ specification telephoto zooms. It became clear that I would need to invest more heavily particularly on a longer telephoto lens to progress this hobby, but at the same time Sony was going through a transition from a DSLR manufacturer to a company which focused on mirrorless systems. It was clear Sony was never going to make significant new investments in DSLRs, so I was faced with a choice – go Sony mirrorless or migrate to a new system. Either option involved starting from scratch because Sony introduced a new lens mount with its mirrorless system. While my existing Sony DSLR lenses would fit the Sony mirrorless system if I used an adaptor,

this was not an attractive solution so I would need to invest in both a body and a new telephoto lens whatever I did.

It was an easy decision to move away from Sony. While their cameras have become excellent, I find it difficult to use electronic viewfinders so mirrorless was not my preferred system at the time. That also ruled out other mirrorless systems, such as Olympus, Panasonic and Fujifilm.

Like Glenn (above) I currently own the Canon 80d and the Canon 100-400 Mark II zoom. Choosing these essentially involved a process of setting out what I wanted and doing a lot of research to see what fitted as the best compromise of features. I came at this totally agnostic on brands, other than I wanted an 'advanced' DSLR with an optical viewfinder. Considerations of price, weight, sensor and optical quality, build quality/dust sealing, 'feel in the hand', and features such as frame rates and focusing, all came into it. I came down to three bodies (Canon 80d, Canon 7dMkII and Nikon D7200 – which was then the current Nikon enthusiast APS-C model) and two lenses (Canon 100-400 zoom, and Nikon's 80-400 zoom). While the Nikon has the better sensor, and the 7dMkII the better focusing and build quality, the 80d was the best combination of features and price for me. Also the Canon zoom lens seemed to have better reviews than the Nikon.

The Canon system is not perfect: it's arguably not Canon's best overall APS-C model particularly with regard to its focus system; and the lens is a zoom lens with relatively slow maximum f/5.6 at 400mm. However, it is a relatively light, high quality package that is capable of great bird pictures, and versatile enough for other photographic activities such as other wildlife, not to mention grandchildren. The lens, in particular, is very high quality and has made me appreciate how much it is worth to invest in really good optics. It is pretty much the only photographic equipment I carry when I travel, as I am not someone who could be bothered with constantly changing lenses in the field (particularly in the dusty locations to which I usually travel overseas) or setting up tripods, and fits easily into cabin luggage. I do have a 'nifty fifty' (Canon's basic 50mm f/1.8) in case of need. However, if Canon ever puts out a successor to the 7dMarkII I would be sorely tempted! My fear is that Canon might shift quickly to mirrorless in its enthusiast consumer products, following the recent release of the EOS R, which would be a backward step for me.