

The Use of Fill-Flash in Bird Photography: Part 2 – Tom Oliver

In Part 1 I said that the skill of using a fill flash in bird photography was to ensure the light from the flash did not become the main light source thereby “washing out” all subject detail. In the examples below, of a much photographed African head that I’ve owned for over 26 years, you can see quite clearly the effect of different flash values on a subject.

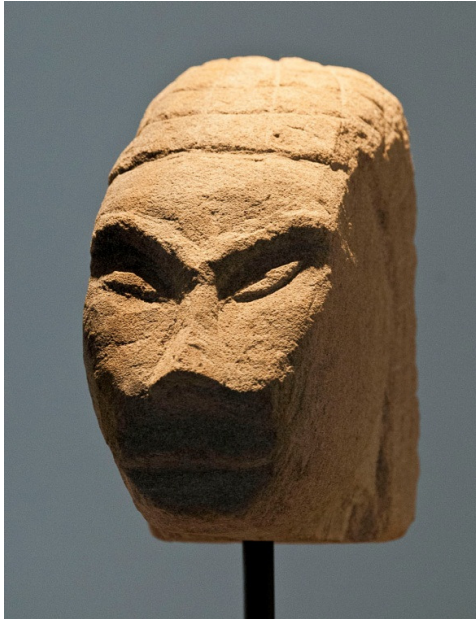


Fig 1 No flash used (*downlight only*)



Fig 2 Flash full power (*plus downlight*)



Fig 3 Flash dialled back to -1.0 EV (*plus downlight*)



Fig 4 Flash dialled back to -2.0 EV (*plus downlight*)

In **Fig 1** the only light source is from overhead and it casts strong shadows across the lower parts of the eyes and nose. Imagine the sun as the primary source of light on a bird and the shadows cast onto that bird sitting within tree foliage. You can envisage how much feather detail would be hidden in those shadows.

Fig 2 shows the other end of the continuum where the primary (strongest) light source is the flash. This is the flash effect most of us are familiar with. All detail is “washed out” and colour is de-saturated. Almost all the effect from the overhead light is also “washed out”.

In **Fig 3** the flash exposure was reduced to -1.0 EV and straight away we can see the fill flash is starting to enhance shadow detail rather than obliterate them. The overhead light source is also more noticeable.

Fig 4 shows the effect on the subject when the fill flash power is reduced even further. By using a flash exposure of -2.0 EV the face details are even more apparent and the overhead light source can be seen clearly. The flash has “filled in” the shadows.

As stated in Part 1 of the article, the effect we are trying to achieve is an image that does not look “flashed”. Another plus in many cases, is that fill-flash will put a catch-light in the bird's eye (see images below). The difference between using fill-flash and no fill-flash can be dramatic.



Photos by Tom Oliver

The bird on the left, above, was taken in the shadow of a cliff face and the subject was in deep shade. The background is the beach below the bird's perch, and the beach was lit by the sun.

The bird on the right, above, was illuminated by the early morning sun coming from the right. The underside of the bird's rump and tail were in deep shadow. The use of a fill flash brought out the colour and detail which might have otherwise been lost. Both images were captured by using a Nikon D300 camera and a Nikon SB-600 Speedlight, with a Better Beamer Flash Extender mounted on the flash unit.

Flash Extenders

With bird photography the subject is often further away than the reach of a flash, typically when using a lens between 300 mm to 600 mm range. The greater the distance the more diffused the light from a flash will be. Also, because the angle of view of a telephoto lens is narrow, much of the flash power is wasted by illuminating areas outside this angle of view. Even large external flash units run out of steam beyond 15 metres. A flash extender focuses the light of a flash into a narrower beam, by using a Fresnel screen. This enables the light to travel further.

The “gold standard” for flash extenders is the **Better Beamer** (*see below left*). It’s used by most of the top wildlife photographers worldwide and focuses the light from a flash into a narrow beam so that it reaches further; thereby increasing the flash output by about 2 f-stops.

It consists of two brackets which are placed either side of the flash unit and are held in place by a Velcro strap. A Fresnel lens is then attached to the brackets by Velcro. It takes less than a minute to assemble and put into position on the flash unit, packs flat and weighs almost nothing.



Better Beamer Flash Extender mounted on a **Nikon SB-600 Speedlight** and Nikon D300 camera. The lens is a Nikon 500 mm AF f4 with VR



Nikon SB-600 Speedlight set to -1.7 EV for fill flash

A limiting factor in bird photography is that it's often impossible to get close enough to the subject to be within the working range of even the most powerful flash unit. A flash extender enables you to use a long lens and project the light of a fill flash over longer distances.

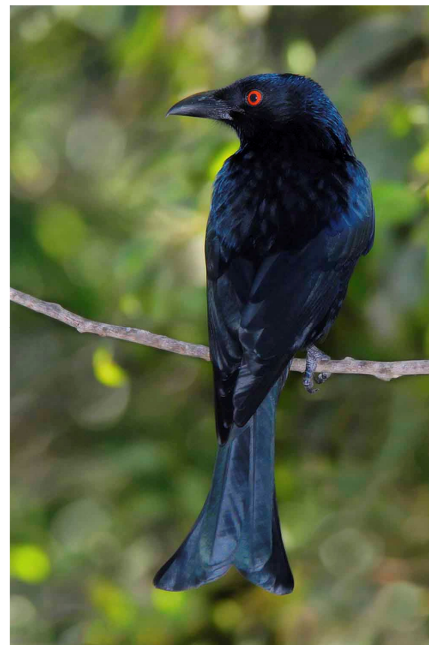
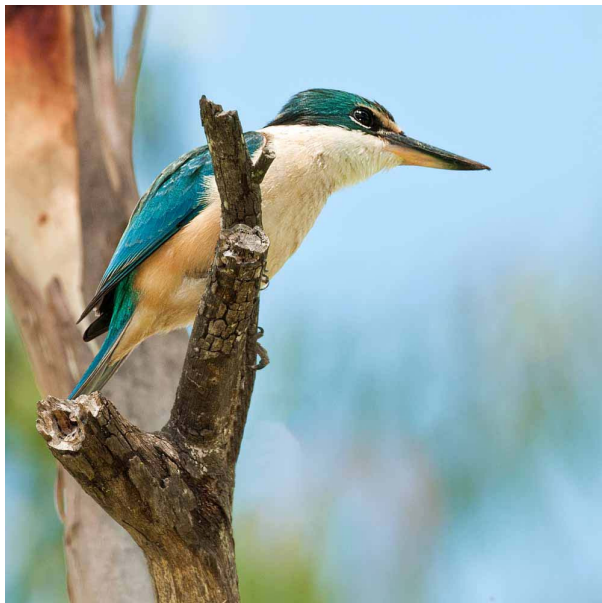
Fill flash is one of the key techniques for easily improving bird images. Electronic flash improves the colour balance of the image, improves colour saturation, fills in dark shadows with detail, adds a catch light to an animal's eye, and may help increase sharpness.

Further examples of the use of fill flash can be seen in the images below. The feather detail and contrast in the top image is enhanced by the fill flash and the use of a Better Beamer Flash Extender allowed me to project and concentrate the flash illumination 38 metres.



Photo by Tom Oliver

Notice the detail and eye “catch-light” in the Kingfisher image, below left. The dark-plumaged bird, below right, was captured perching beneath a shaded tree canopy and you can observe the contrast and detail in the feathers on its back.



Photos by Tom Oliver

I hope this article has been informative and encourages members to experiment with fill flash. Just imagine all the opportunities you may have missed by not using fill flash in the past.

Links to web sources used in the preparation of this article can be found in Part 1 of this article, in the previous newsletter.