

Fourth of four issues

An Eye for Birds: A Photographic Journey

Southwestern Specialties



Scott's Oriole, Madera Canyon, Arizona. Olympus OM-D E-M1 Mark II, M.Zuiko Digital ED 300mm F4.0 IS PRO with MC-14 1.4x teleconverter. Exposure: 1/750 sec., f/5.6, ISO 200.

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Gilded Flicker, Desert Botanical Garden, Arizona. Olympus OM-D E-M1 Mark II, M.Zuiko Digital ED 300mm F4.0 IS PRO. Exposure: 1/750 sec., f/6.7, ISO 200.

10 Photography Hotspots

Where to go to photograph birds unique to the southwestern U.S.

By Matt Mendenhall • Photos by Scott Bourne

Every region in North America has special places to view and photograph birds. Professional wildlife photographer Scott Bourne, an Olympus Visionary, visits Alaska and Florida every year — for eagles in and around Homer, Alaska, and for wading birds at hotspots along the Florida coasts.

For Bourne, however, one region, the American Southwest, stands out as a top-notch bird-photography destination. From the California coast to south-central New Mexico, it offers a wide range of species and habitats that will keep any birder busy.

Bourne, who lives in the Seattle area, takes at least one trip per year to the Southwest “because it’s so reliable. It’s virtually impossible to strike out down there.” Here are his top 10 spots in the region:

Salton Sea, California. Bourne calls it “an absolutely unbelievable experience any time of year.” In winter, head to the sea’s southern shore for shorebirds, Burrowing Owl, and Mountain Plover. Summers at the sea are hot but offer the chance to spot Yellow-footed Gull.

Tijuana Slough National Wildlife Refuge, San Diego. More than 370 species, including Ridgway’s Rail.

La Jolla Cove, La Jolla, California. A great spot to photograph California Brown Pelicans and three cormorant species.

Arizona-Sonoran Desert Museum, Tucson. A museum and botanical garden in one that is great for birders and non-birders alike. Look for Verdin, Gilded Flicker, Gila Woodpecker, and other desert birds.

Madera Canyon, Santa Rita Mountains, Arizona. A magnificent place for hummingbirds, plus Buff-collared Nightjar, and Cassin’s and Botteri’s Sparrows. Look for Arizona Woodpecker higher up the mountain. Elf Owls nest at the lodge.

Ramsey Canyon, Huachuca Mountains, Arizona. World famous for the variety and quantity of hummingbirds. Go in July or August. Sit and marvel at Black-chinned, Rivoli’s, Blue-throated, Broad-billed, and maybe even Violet-crowned Hummingbird.

Gilbert Water Ranch, Gilbert, Arizona. This water-treatment facility south of Phoenix offers great photo opportunities. “I’ve seen 60 species there in a weekend,” Bourne says. “It’s very accessible, free of charge, and birds are there year-round.”

Download the previous articles in this series, “Creating Exceptional Portraits,” “Mastering Flight Shots,” and “Photographing Owls.”

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Curve-billed Thrasher, Madera Canyon, Arizona.
Olympus OM-D E-M1 Mark II, M.Zuiko Digital
ED 300mm F4.0 IS PRO with MC-14 1.4x
teleconverter. Exposure: 1/180 sec., f/5.6, ISO 800.

to some bird photographers who want to chase the birds. The real success comes when you just wait for the birds to come to you. If you have cover, food, and water, birds will be there because that's what they're looking for."

A lighter load

When Bourne went to Bosque del Apache this winter, he didn't take a tripod — a first in his 35 years of visiting the refuge. He didn't need a tripod because now he uses Olympus gear, which is smaller and lighter than most other brands.

"In the old days when I had a DSLR, I had a giant 800mm lens, and the only way you're going to operate that lens is on a gimbal head and a tripod. But this year, I had the equivalent of an 840mm lens (the M.Zuiko Digital ED 300mm F4.0 PRO lens and the MC-14 1.4x teleconverter), which you can handhold. My OM-D camera's in-body image stabilization syncs with the in-lens stabilization of my M.Zuiko PRO lens to create Sync-IS. It gives me more than six stops of image stabilization, so I can handhold shots at much lower shutter speeds, all the way down to an 80th of a second even with an 840mm equivalent lens."

He also used the M.Zuiko Digital ED 40-150mm F2.8 PRO lens, which is equivalent to an 80-300 f/2.8 lens in the DSLR world. "The birds would come in from different directions, and I was simply able to pivot and take photos of a different group of birds," he says. "On the gimbal head, you're limited to birds that are flying straight in front of you on a parallel line. It's really quite freeing to not have a tripod for the first time in 35 years. It definitely helped."

The lens also works well in low light. Bourne used it recently at La Jolla Cove because of its wide aperture. "In the early dawn hours, when the sun was just coming over the mountains, I was able to shoot at F2.8," he explains. "I could still get a good image, whereas most lenses in that range started at 4.0, which is quite a bit less aperture."

A big advantage of Olympus equipment is its weight, especially in places where the weather gets hot. "If you're lugging a giant lens around, you're going to be sweating and

Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, New Mexico. Go in winter to find thousands of Snow Geese, Sandhill Cranes, and maybe even a Ross's Goose. The riparian habitat along the Rio Grande holds many Curve-billed and Crissal Thrashers.

Gila National Forest, New Mexico. This forest is home to Flammulated and Spotted Owls, Painted Redstart, and Hepatic Tanager. Check riparian habitat along the Gila River for Common Black Hawk.

Sandia Crest, Cibola National Forest, New Mexico. Watch for all three rosy-finch species, Black-headed Grosbeak, Hermit Thrush, and Red-naped Sapsucker.

Stay in one spot

Bourne has been visiting some of his top-10 sites for 30 years or more. His first piece of advice, no matter which place you go, is to pick a spot and stay put. "The biggest mistake photographers make at places like this is they start running around chasing birds, but if you just sit in one spot you'll see eight or ten species in an hour."

At the Gilbert Water Ranch, for example, he takes a stool and sits near a cactus garden at the facility's entrance. Woodpeckers nest in holes in the cacti, so he finds the holes and gets in position to shoot. "I know that a bird is going to hit that hole eventually, and when it does, I'm ready. It's a simple technique, but it's very counterintuitive



Sandhill Crane, Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, New Mexico. Olympus OM-D E-M1 Mark II, M.Zuiko Digital ED 300mm F4.0 IS PRO with MC-14 1.4x teleconverter. Exposure: 1/640 sec., f/5.6, ISO 500.

tired, and you're not going to want to stay out as long," Bourne says. "With this lighter gear, I find myself, even though I'm 63 years old, shooting like I am 18. I didn't even know how much the heaviness of my past equipment was impacting my body. Because if you simply do something for a long time, you take it for granted and deal with it. But as soon as I picked up Olympus gear, it was like night and day. I can stay out almost twice as long."

Olympus advantages

A primary reason that Bourne gets more time in the field is that his OM-D E-M1 Mark II camera, like other current Olympus models, is a mirrorless camera. It's smaller and lighter than a DSLR. It also has an electronic viewfinder, which Bourne says is a big plus.

"If you're taking a picture of the sunrise or sunset, you don't have to worry about hurting your eyes because you're seeing a representation of what the camera sees; you're not

looking through the lens, so you don't have the possibility of eye damage. And you don't have to worry about shots where birds are flying through a light source, for instance."

The electronic viewfinder allows a photographer to see the actual picture that he or she is taking instead of

relying on a histogram. "You can see while you're taking the shot whether it's too light or too dark, whether there's flare, or if the image is sharp," Bourne explains. "That real-time advantage is crucial. And that's a really strong argument for using mirrorless cameras as a bird-photography tool. You can see in real time whether your exposure compensation needs to be added or reduced and how your white balance is. With a DSLR, I could only do that after I'd taken the picture. And if I had it wrong, then I'd have to hope that another bird would put itself in the same situation after I'd made the adjustment, which is kind of a silly thing to hope for."

Since the development of mirrorless cameras about 10 years ago, Bourne says a traditional knock against them was that they had poor battery life. "The reason for that," he explains, "is because they use electronic viewfinders." Recently, however, Olympus engineered the batteries for its OM-D E-M1 Mark II camera to last much longer. "They

7 more great places to photograph birds

► Cape May, New Jersey

The many refuges and natural areas around the southern tip of New Jersey provide exceptional birding. Go for hawks, warblers, shorebirds, waterfowl, and many other birds.

► Hawk Mountain Sanctuary

This eastern Pennsylvania hotspot is where to see migrating raptors in September and October.

► Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge

This green oasis near JFK International

Airport in New York City is a terrific spot for shorebirds, herons, songbirds, and waterfowl.

► Magee Marsh Wildlife Area

In spring, this site near the Lake Erie shoreline east of Toledo, Ohio, comes alive with warblers and other songbirds.

► Platte River

This shallow river in central Nebraska is the site of one of North America's greatest wildlife spectacles:

the spring stopover of about half a million Sandhill Cranes.

► Point Reyes National Seashore

Nearly 490 bird species have been recorded at this 70,000-acre national seashore north of San Francisco, California.

► Santa Ana NWR

This 2,088-acre refuge along the Rio Grande, south of McAllen, Texas, is home to Green Jay, Great Kiskadee, and other specialties of South Texas.



Brown Pelican, La Jolla Cove, California.
Olympus OM-D E-M1 Mark II, M.Zuiko
Digital ED 300mm F4.0 IS PRO with
MC-14 1.4x teleconverter. Exposure:
1/180 sec., f/5.6, ISO 200.

Luck and preparation

One of Bourne's favorite recent photos from the Southwest is an image of a Sandhill Crane flying across the face of the moon (previous page). Taking it required "a little bit of luck and a little bit of preparation," he says. He shot it at Bosque del Apache around dusk; by adjusting the exposure, he made it look more like night.

Bourne had been watching the thousands of Sandhills that winter at the refuge and noted which direction they flew when they returned to their roost and that they'd fly into the wind, as birds always do. He found a pond that the cranes roosted on and "saw that they'd probably be flying past the moon, and I basically just set up on the moon. I tried about 10 of those shots, and that's the one that came out."

The scene was another example, Bourne says, of a fundamental truth about bird photography: "The beauty and the curse of being a bird photographer is the knowledge that you have absolutely no control over your subjects. That is bizarrely appealing to me. I'm simply a participant in the mix."

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last comparatively as long as DSLR batteries, and that may not sound like a big deal, but if you have to change batteries in the middle of an important shot, you'll never forget that," Bourne says. "When I've tried other mirrorless brands, I may have used up to 11 batteries in a day, but with my Olympus, I use one or two."

WHAT'S IN SCOTT'S BAG



Scott Bourne shoots with Olympus equipment. He says it's extremely lightweight, easy to pack, and best of all, it produces photographs on par with more expensive gear. He notes that his work can be printed at dimensions of 6 feet by 9 feet.

"Image stabilization is built into the camera body, so you don't need a tripod with Olympus gear," he adds. "It's much easier to carry around, and the image quality is stupendous. The tracking autofocus is another thing that bird photographers really need. You can't fake it when you're trying to photograph an eagle that switches its dive angle toward the water 90 degrees in one tenth of a millisecond. Autofocus has to be able to keep up."

Here's what Bourne carries into the field:

- **OM-D E-M1 Mark II (Scott carries 2)**
- **M.Zuiko 40-150mm F2.8 PRO (80-300mm in 35mm equivalent)**
- **M.Zuiko 300mm F4.0 IS PRO (600mm in 35mm equivalent)**
- **M.Zuiko 12-100mm F4.0 IS PRO (24-200mm in 35mm equivalent)**
- **M.Zuiko 7-14mm F2.8 PRO (14-28mm in 35mm equivalent)**
- **MC-14 1.4x Teleconverter**
- **HLD-9 Power Battery Grip**
- **EE-1 Dot Sight**
- **FL-900R Flash**