



The Avicultural Society of New South Wales Inc. (ASNSW)

(Founded in 1940 as the Parrot & African Lovebird Society of Australia)

Wild Side Australia Bird Photography

Presented by Brendon Levot

(Photos: © Brendon Levot 2015)

Website: [Wildside Australia](#) | **Facebook:** [/wildsideaustralia](#) | **Instagram:** [@wildsideaustralia](#) | **Twitter:** [@Levot02](#)

Thank you for allowing me to come and talk at the Avicultural Society of NSW Meeting. My name is Brendon Levot and I work in conservation land management; with wild species, including birds and also with plants. I also practice wildlife photography and documentary film making. They sort of go hand in hand.

My role as a conservation manager is to look after plants and animals in natural places and my role as a photographer and filmmaker helps me to present the things I love the most in a way which helps to inspire the public to care about conservation as much as I do.

I have been practicing photography for 10 years now. I have had images in various publications, magazines and newspapers, etc., and whilst I do love it, it started to take on a different turn. I developed [Wild Side Australia](#) which is an online blog and TV series, the site's main focus is to stage all sorts of things in relation to conservation. We have a base on Christmas Island, the Sunshine Coast and we also have a base in Sydney, and we travel Australia to try and bring you the greatest stories about conservation and our Australian animals. So I thought that for tonight I would throw together a bit of a presentation about birds. Being an avicultural society I thought that you all might enjoy that.

So we'll kick it off with bird photography.



This is a very big lens and it is what most people think you need when going out to take pictures of wildlife, birds in particular. In some cases – *yes you do* – but in most – *you don't*. This kind of set up here would set you back many, many thousands of dollars. This is a Nikon 800mm lens and it's a super telephoto. You definitely don't need that sort of stuff.

Take for instance this image (below); I shot that with a 300mm entry level Nikon lens.



You are able to get great detail with just your entry level stuff. Here he is again (below); this is a [Whistling Kite \(*Haliastur sphenurus*\)](#) by the way.



It is about knowing your target species.

You can travel the countryside trying to get Whistling Kite photos, when you know in actual fact; you just have to go to where they might feed. This little guy was hanging out around the wharf on the [Sunshine Coast](#) in [Noosa](#) and he was picking up scraps. Scenarios like this place you in a position to get good shots if you know what you are looking for.

Take for instance here, it is all about when I am out in the field (and I am still talking about that small lens). I like to get to know the environment and get to know the animals that I am taking a photo of.

I was walking along this track here...



This is in [South Australia](#) in the [Mallee country](#). There is not much left of it but it is fantastic country.

As I was walking along I noticed that there was a little bird and he was sitting in this [gum](#). I thought "*WOW! I'd like to get a photo of that*".



So what I did was I just approached him slowly and the whole time that I was doing that, I would stop and I would let him get used to me. I would change my settings on my camera; adjust my exposure, etc., so it was all working out right. Then I would move a little bit closer and I would take another photo.

This is the next photo – and you can see him sitting here...



Again, I was still messing with my photo settings trying to get it just right. He has then flown down to another branch and I was in reaching distance of this little guy now.

This is a [Jacky Winter \(*Microeca fascinans*\)](#). They are very friendly little birds.

Because I have built up this rapport with him and this relationship by taking my time, I am able to get really close and in a position where the lighting is perfect, the end result is an image like this...



A couple of things about this image is that it has got a nice composition I think. I made sure that when I was approaching the bird, I was doing it when the sun was behind me. So what that does is, it gives him a nice little shine in his eye there, a nice little glimmer; and it helps catch your eye.

Another thing about it is that he has got his head turned to the side. Now I don't know if it is just me, but I don't really like looking at bird images when they are looking front on at you. It just doesn't sit right with me. I just think of a bird and I think side profile. That's just me.

The mallee region also provides habitat for the [Mallee Ringneck parrots](#) and they are incredibly hard to photograph. So again, when I was taking this shot, I just made sure that the sun was playing just right with him there.



This little guy for instance; the [Southern Whiteface \(*Aphelocephala leucopsis*\)](#) is a little bird endemic to Australia of finch like appearance, and why I put this image into the presentation here is because it's not such a glamorous photo, i.e. it comes down to the reason why I take photos; it's a passion, and if you want to do photography and you want to do it for a living, you can never lose that passion.



When I was younger and I was growing as a twitcher and a bird watcher, all I wanted to see was a Southern White-face. They used to be around NSW but they're declining everywhere, all across Australia; and I got the chance to see one. So that is not an image that I would use ever, but it is something that I would keep close to me in my personal collection. You can just never lose your passion for photography.

Also within that same area, we've got lots of hidden cameras and things set up; the following image was captured by a remote sensing camera that we set up at a little water hole. This water hole would only ever fill up when it rained and we had had a little bit of rain so we set this little camera up and we hid it in these bushes just here that you can see in the foreground.



That is a [Spiny-cheeked honeyeater \(*Acanthagenys rufogularis*\)](#) coming into drink. I was hoping to get the [Malleefowl \(*Leipoa ocellata*\)](#), which are extremely rare and endangered.

So basically throughout the whole area, knowing what I know about Malleefowl and knowing that they'd want to come in for a drink at some point, I set these cameras up at all the different water holes.

I was checking them every day to see if one had come in and then I would know that I would be able to hide out around that water hole and be able to get the subject that we were after. It turns out that while I was picking this camera, this little fella came in...



A Western Grey kangaroo (*Macropus fuliginosus*); and whilst it's not a bird, he was very soon joined by this little fella...



This is a little Brown-headed honeyeater (*Melithreptus brevirostris*). It's another great reason why you should take photos of birds, because you can record bird behaviours.

The most amazing thing happened when I was sitting there in the bushes watching this little Brown-headed honeyeater. He starting picking the fur off the kangaroo and he was going to take that back and use it for nesting material. So I just stumbled across this great photo of animal interaction and bird behaviours.

Whistling Kites happen to be very common around South Australia.



I threw this image in because it helps to show that you need to think when you are going to go out and take bird photos.

The morning and the afternoon are the greatest for lighting. This photo was taken in the very late afternoon and it has cast this beautiful light across the bird; and we are also able to capture this cloud cover in the background. If we had taken that photo in the middle of the day the background may have been blown out and over exposed, the timing of the day is integral for capturing great images.

Okay, so from the desert, we are going out to the oceans now, and here, I managed to snap some Black-browed Albatross (*Diomedea melanophris*) off the coast of Sydney.



Albatross I think make some of the best photo subjects. They are extremely charismatic. They come right up to you when you are out on the boat. You can take a boat out 20 nautical miles off shore (and there are plenty of organisations that can do that here) one of the things about the albatross is that it is a fantastic way to get some practise in for photographing birds. You get to know their habits and the way that they fly – they've got such massive wing spans (210-250cm); you can see them coming in from miles away. You get to learn how birds use their wings, how they use their environment and their habitat, so that you can then take that and apply it in the field.

When you are taking photos of birds and any type of wildlife, you need to think about your composition. Portraits are fantastic when you take photos of animals, but it is also sometimes nice to get the animals within their environment.

Here is a big line of albatross coming across the water and it really adds to the beauty of that image.



Now on this boat that I was on the organisation was actually conducting some scientific research; they were banding the albatross. Not a great deal is known about the habits of albatross so the more information and data the guys can collect when they are out there on the ocean, is great for the conservation of the species.

Here in this particular image (below) it depicts the albatross and he has been caught and he's been brought onto the boat and he doesn't look that happy. To me it just strikes emotion within that image because you know the people are giving a helping hand to the albatross. He's not happy about it but he's going to be okay, it is more of a photo journalism kind of thing.



Taking an image like that and including a bit of the hand or something in it, makes you ask...

"Why is that in there?"

"Why is somebody holding that bird?"

It makes you think about the image.

The idea with photography is to catch people's eye and keep them engaged and keep them asking questions about it; drawing attention to photographs.

Again the same sort of principle; here they are measuring the wing span of the albatross. The Black-browed albatross has a wingspan of about 1½ to 2 metres.



An image like that depicts just how big these birds really are and like I was saying, they are so charismatic in their approach to life. So it is really great to get out there onto a boat and put yourself into a scenario that you are not comfortable with if you are going to try and push the limits of your photography.



There he is again, they are like cartoon characters. They just come up and play the bingo run and wave off again, they are absolutely a great subject for you to practise your photography on.

This is a glorious background... with the blue water against the white bird.



Then there is the other part of my talk which is working with animals, birds and wildlife within the studio.

We all know what they say about "working with kids and animals" – *well, it's all true!*.

You never know what's going to happen.

So here we are on set. We have the fantastic Ravi from [Feathered Friends](#) who is an associate member of the Society, with a couple of his birds.



We use a whole range of different techniques with flashes and backboards, etc., to get the images. This is a shoot for a magazine article and you end up with images like this.



These are Ravi's Blue and Gold Macaws...



This is in the studio setting.



It just shows the difference between wild to studio. The birds come to you in the studio and do what you want them to. In the wild they don't. You really have to study about what the bird is going to do at any particular time of the day.

Know their habits; know their habitat; so that you can get them in the right months. You are not always given the opportunity as I was here with these birds.

Think outside the box with your photography.

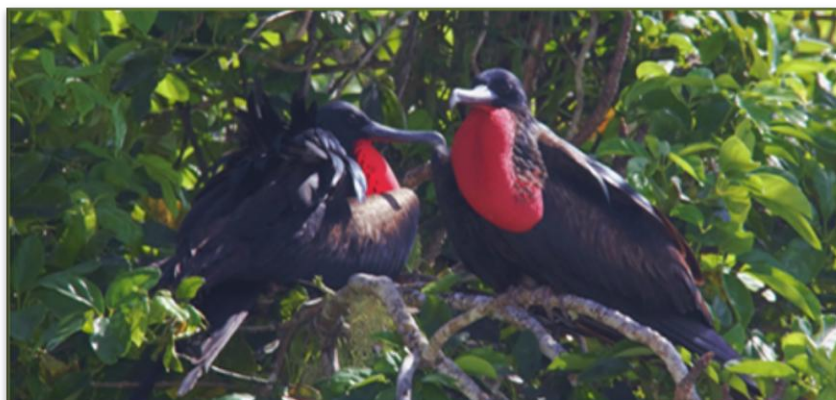
You don't always have to get a picture or a portrait or a close up of a bird. Birds have got these fantastic things called feathers; they've got great little bills and beaks; and you've got these great details that you can photograph and enjoy.

These are the tail feathers of a [Red-tailed black cockatoo](#) (*Calyptorhynchus banksii*), this image is featured on our Instagram account @wildsideaustralia.



I love seeing things like that you know. To me it really shows the true beauty of the bird.

I have here an image of [Christmas Island Frigatebirds](#) (*Fregata andrewsi*). If you are looking for a birding destination anywhere in the world, anywhere in Australia, go to Christmas Island. That's where all the magic happens. You can find out more about the premium birding destination by searching [Christmas Island Tourism Association](#).



That concludes my short presentation for this evening. I would love to hear from you and any questions you might have and I would be happy to answer them, whether they are photography related or not.

Questions

Graeme Phipps

I am fascinated and learnt a lot. I am fascinated by how you are seeking to capture behaviour. Like the Brown-headed honeyeater with the Western Grey kangaroo. Just capturing that aspect; because so often you've just got birds on a perch and they are just not doing anything, but you are seeking to capture the bird doing something; like the Whistling kites coming in, and all of that.

Brendon Levot

What I try to do with my photography is to be original. I don't want it to be like anyone else's. I want it to tell a story and pose those questions...

"Why is that Brown-headed honeyeater sitting on a Western Grey Kangaroo?"

Graeme Phipps

There is an element of the serendipity isn't there? But still you planned to get there didn't you? It is just wonderful.

Brendon Levot

Yes. Thank you very much Graeme.

Comment

I don't really have a question for you, other than to say that I think it is great what you do, and I think you are right about the charismatic nature of the albatross. I think they are quite a bird.

Brendon Levot

Absolutely! In taking one of these tours you are supporting a great cause and at the same time get some fantastic shots to hang on your wall practicing photography. It is really worthwhile to get out there. As I said before, I mentioned the albatross because they are just such a great example of birds in their environment that you can really capture quite easily.

Graeme Phipps

Is that the tour off [Port Kembla](#)?

Brendon Levot

Yes it is. It is the [Southern Oceans Seabird Study Association \(SOSSA\)](#). If you contact them they would be happy to take you on a tour, they now operate from [Kiama on the NSW South Coast](#).

Graeme Phipps

It might be a good club event!

Catherine Dever

When you are photographing birds of prey, how do you manage to take the shot without alerting them? We get a lot of birds of prey where I am and as soon as the bird makes eye contact with me they're off! So I wondered how you managed to capture the shot without startling the bird.

Brendon Levot

I guess you have got to be quick! With some birds you can try seeds! It is best to capture an image of an animal without disturbing it or interrupting its daily routine. Most of the bird and animal shots that I have are just animals going about their business. I am not rushing into what I guess you would call "likely shots". The last thing that I would want to do is disturb a Whistling Kite on a kill on the side of the road, taking away that precious energy that those birds used when hunting their prey. To answer your question, I guess it comes down to a little bit of luck and a little bit of skill with the camera.

Graeme Phipps

What about when you had those wildlife cameras set up at the waterholes to try and work out which waterhole to go to. In captivity we've got large aviaries and so we could set up similar things like that. No one is a Brendon Levot in this club, but could that type of setup be helpful to bird keepers, to know where their birds are in the aviary and what they do, and then they could photograph them?

Brendon Levot

Absolutely. The way that the travel cameras work is they are sensor cameras and those particular ones are infrared, so when they do take a photo there is no flash so they don't disturb them. It works off movement, so if something moves within the range that you set the camera to, it will take the photo of that animal. The great thing about it is that every photo is date and time set so you would know when and where that bird has been in the aviary. The only issue is that if you set it up in front of a moving branch or a swaying seed feeder, or something like that, you are going to get a hundred thousand images of a branch or a twig or a swaying seed feeder. So you have got to be careful that you don't waste your shots. But yes it is a fantastic idea if you are looking at doing that in the aviary, doing a scan of their behaviour in the aviary situation.

Duncan Macpherson

When you photograph endangered birds, does anybody use the information that you are getting?

Brendon Levot

I always contribute to citizen sites, so wherever I see an endangered bird I will always report it to the relevant authorities. In NSW we have [Birdline New South Wales \(Eremaea Birdlines\)](#), [Birding Aus](#) and [Birdlife Australia](#); they all love to know about interesting sightings. For instance last year in western Sydney I happened to stumble across the largest congregation of Swift parrots in NSW after their northern migration. Birdlife Australia was very happy to get some images and video footage that I was able to collect.

Duncan Macpherson

Do you do any nesting photography too?

Brendon Levot

No. I tend to steer clear of nesting photography. I find it a little bit unethical in the wild. If I am walking past a nest I might stop and take a quick snap and keep walking, but I won't actively seek nesting birds. I just find that if you spend too much time around a wild bird's nest they fret a little bit too much. With captive birds it is great, e.g. Eclectus parrots, there are many images of them in the nest and they seem to love it. It just comes down to how much interaction they have with people.

Graeme Phipps

Well, thank you very much Brendon. That was very interesting indeed.

(Members showed their appreciation with a round of applause.)

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