

An Eye for Birds

Original Photography by David Seibel

Title	Subject	Description
<p>A Not-So-Tender Moment</p> 	<p>Ring-billed Gulls (<i>Larus delawarensis</i>)</p>	<p>What looks like a tender exchange between mates is really two gulls doing what they usually do: squabbling over food. Notice the frozen fish lying at the feet of the bird on the ice. I captured this image in early spring on an arm of Clinton Lake near Lawrence, when the ice was just starting to break up in shallow areas and fish frozen just beneath the surface were accessible to the hungry gulls. Every time one bird would pull a tasty morsel from the ice, at least one other would descend on it and try to steal its prize. The light was gorgeous but very tricky for auto exposure because of the strong contrast between the whites and blacks of the gulls, and so I calculated the correct exposure and used manual settings.</p>
<p>Ascension</p> 	<p>White-necked Jacobin (<i>Florisuga mellivora</i>)</p>	<p>The White-necked Jacobin is fairly common and widespread in the wet lowlands and foothills of Costa Rica, where I captured this male as it flew upward in a light rain – so light, in fact, that I didn’t notice it until I saw the droplets in the photo. I can generally sense when I trip the shutter on a winning image, but I didn’t recognize the power of this one until I saw it on my computer several weeks later. It quickly became one of my favorites, and it has won honors in two international photo contests.</p>
<p>Cold Sayornis</p> 	<p>Say’s Phoebe (<i>Sayornis saya</i>)</p>	<p>The title borrows from the bird’s scientific name and pays tribute to the photo’s special purpose: to accompany a research paper coauthored by my friend John Schukman. Say’s Phoebes, named after the naturalist Thomas Say, breed regularly in western Kansas, but they proved less than cooperative during my several trips west to photograph them. This individual saved the day, so to speak, by appearing unexpectedly at the headquarters of Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area in central Kansas one unusually cold March morning. Normally an aerial insect eater, it foraged on the ground for insects inactivated by the frigid temperature, and it rested once, feathers ruffled, on a loop of cable in good light, just long enough for me to capture this image – which has since appeared on the cover of the ornithological journal <i>The Condor</i>.</p>
<p>Dendroica by Any Other Name</p> 	<p>Blackburnian Warbler (<i>Setophaga fusca</i>)</p>	<p>The stunning Blackburnian Warbler is one of at least 21 species of North American wood-warblers recently transferred out of the now-defunct genus <i>Dendroica</i>, the technical name used by generations of birders and ornithologists. As a scientist, I have no problem with this if it makes the classification more accurate, but as a bird lover, I have to admit that I find myself a little nostalgic for the old name, which still brings to mind so many delightful little birds. I photographed this beautiful male in its summer home of Wisconsin; in Kansas and western Missouri we get to see relatively few of them as they pass through during migration. This image recently appeared on the cover of the American Bird Conservancy’s 2010 Annual Report.</p>
<p>In-Flight Snack</p> 	<p>Glaucous Gull (<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>)</p>	<p>The Glaucous Gull is a rare winter visitor to Kansas. One of the largest, palest gulls in North America, this species breeds in the Arctic and normally winters along the northern Atlantic and Pacific coasts and Hudson Bay. This juvenile appeared at Clinton Lake, west of Lawrence, during the extremely cold January of 2008, and I had the privilege of photographing it several times during its brief stay. It survived on small fish that it caught in the few spots of open water, deftly plucking its prey from the lake with its bill and often, as in this photo, tossing it into the air and then gulping it down in mid-flight.</p>

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<p>It Would Be Gaudy</p> 	<p>Painted Bunting (<i>Passerina ciris</i>)</p>	<p>Every time I see a male Painted Bunting in all its glory, I can't help thinking that the combination of colors splashed all over its body would be nothing short of gaudy if a person were to design a garment of similar hues. Relatively few Midwesterners realize there is such a striking bird living in their midst, but this little jewel is actually quite common in southern Kansas, where I photographed this singing male. When not singing, Painted Buntings are shy, retiring birds whose colors blend in remarkably well with the surrounding foliage. Singing males often perch in the very top of the tallest tree in the area, but even then they can be surprisingly difficult to spot.</p>
<p>Junco with Reds and Blues</p> 	<p>Dark-eyed Junco (<i>Junco hyemalis</i>)</p>	<p>Miserably cold weather often sets the stage for the best photos. Birds are too preoccupied with finding food and staying warm to worry much about an approaching lens, and the air itself seems to be cleared by the cold. Snow enhances the effect by serving as a giant reflector, eliminating shadows even in bright sunlight and making reds and blues glow. All of these factors converged to produce this image on one of the coldest days last January, when I photographed this junco on a roadside in northeast Kansas. Ironically, the cold also took its toll on my car battery, and I had to call AAA to jumpstart my vehicle; I captured this image while waiting for the service truck to arrive!</p>
<p>Just Another Instant in Paradise</p> 	<p>Violet-crowned Woodnymph (<i>Thalurania colombica</i>)</p>	<p>I've had the good fortune to see and photograph many spectacular hummingbirds, but the male Violet-crowned Woodnymph of Costa Rica has to be one of the most stunning of all. In good light, every millimeter of its tiny body shimmers with dazzling iridescence. For this image I used multiple flashes to freeze the wing beats with an effective shutter speed of less than 1/10,000 second. The bees were an unintended but delightful extra.</p>
<p>Majestic Deception</p> 	<p>Bald Eagle (<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>)</p>	<p>When a Bald Eagle flies past at eye level, its speed is absolutely deceptive. Its deliberate wing beats give the impression that it is lumbering slowly along, but trying to follow it with a long lens reveals just how fast it is really going. Those big wings move a lot of air! I captured this adult along the Kansas River in Lawrence during a severely cold spell that left its usual haunts frozen. My fingers were almost too stiff to trip the shutter, but the clear air and beautiful light made a little frostbite seem completely worthwhile.</p>
<p>Pelican Lift-Off</p> 	<p>American White Pelican (<i>Pelecanus erythrorhynchos</i>)</p>	<p>I love to photograph pelicans. They are paradoxically bizarre and spectacular, absurd and magnificent. To me, flocks of white pelicans in flight are among the true marvels of nature as they flap and glide in perfect unison, forming intricate patterns of shifting, interwoven lines that glow beaconlike one instant and utterly vanish the next. The bird pictured here was part of a small group fishing in the ditch along one of the wildlife drives through Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge in Missouri. As I drove slowly past, I could tell they were getting nervous, and so I grabbed my camera in hopes of an action shot. I got more than I expected, as the bird launched itself parallel to my car and flew close enough for this in-flight portrait, each feather of its massive wings perfectly illuminated by the low-angle light behind me. This image was selected for the top photo on the cover of the new <i>Birds of Kansas</i>.</p>

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<p>Precarious Annoyance</p> 	<p>Eastern Screech-Owl (<i>Megascops asio</i>)</p>	<p>The title of this image refers to me rather than the bird. I found this beautiful red-phase Eastern Screech-Owl perched at the edge of the woods beside one of my favorite birding roads in northeast Kansas. It was a frigid winter afternoon, and the road was covered with a sheet of ice from a recent ice storm. To get the shot, I had to stand on the hood of my car, handholding my 500 mm f/4 lens (which weighs about as much as I do, or so it seems). The clicking of the shutter momentarily disrupted the bird's sleep, and the look on its face tells the rest of the story.</p>
<p>Serendipity with Redbud Blossoms</p> 	<p>Yellow-throated Warbler (<i>Setophaga dominica</i>)</p>	<p>Yellow-throated Warblers are becoming increasingly common in northeast Kansas, where I photographed this beautiful male in a pose and setting that I'd been hoping to capture for years. It was one of those rare, magical, insanely intense moments that a photographer dreams of: Everything was working against a successful image, but all the elements nonetheless aligned to produce one of my best images to date. I was shooting off a beanbag from my car window in a heavily shaded spot, with no flash, facing directly into the sun, and for some reason had decided to experiment with a 2x teleconverter on my 500mm lens (which makes focusing and stabilizing the image difficult, even in good light). When the bird flew in, it was actually too close to fit the whole composition into a single frame, so I had to take two shots in quick succession and later "stitch" them together. Luckily, the bird landed just low enough so that the glaring sun behind it was blocked by leaves, and it held absolutely still just long enough for me to freeze it perfectly at 1/320 second - a shutter speed at least six times slower than I would have preferred, but necessary for the low light and long lens. Sometimes luck is more valuable than skill!</p>
<p>Shades of Blue</p> 	<p>Eastern Bluebird (<i>Sialia sialis</i>)</p>	<p>This adult male Eastern Bluebird had just arrived to set up its spring territory on the day I made this photo. I had been shooting a Great Horned Owl nest nearby for the past few weeks, allowing me to observe the comings and goings of the area's wildlife, and so I was acutely aware when this bird appeared and started singing its distinctive song. The sky was as blue as it ever is in Kansas, and the bird was in its brightest plumage. Preoccupied with its territorial instincts, it was oblivious to me and allowed me to experiment with many exposures at close range. For this image, I used an unconventional combination of high ISO (sensitivity) and tiny aperture, along with a very long lens (1000mm) and fast shutter speed, to capture minute details of the feathers and a relatively great depth of field.</p>
<p>Snowy Sunset</p> 	<p>Wilson Reservoir Landscape</p>	<p>I considered renaming this image "Token Landscape" for this show. ☺ I included it because I don't want to give the false impression that I <i>only</i> photograph birds, and because my hosts like the photo (as do I). I was actually on a quest to photograph a Kansas rarity (yes, a bird) that had been seen around Wilson Reservoir – a Williamson's Sapsucker – and as I often do, I took advantage of the opportunity to capture other images that presented themselves. This spectacular sunset over a freshly fallen December snow at the edge of the lake was simply too beautiful to ignore. Using a digital technique called HDR (high dynamic range) photography, I shot it as three frames with different exposures and then fused the images to display the entire range from the lightest highlights to the darkest shadows.</p>

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<p>Southern Fancy</p> 	<p>Booted Racket-tail (<i>Ocreatus underwoodii</i>)</p>	<p>This elegant little bird, an adult male, is one of at least 132 species of hummingbirds found in Ecuador, but it is the only one with a “racket tail.” While on a photographic expedition last November with my partners Bob Gress and Judd Patterson of BirdsInFocus.com, we used a multiple-flash setup to freeze the motion of this and several other species in flight. This race occurs only on the western slope of the Andes, where it is generally uncommon in the foothills and in edges or clearings of subtropical forest.</p>
<p>The Business of Being Cranes</p> 	<p>Sandhill Cranes (<i>Grus canadensis</i>)</p>	<p>By “business” I mean “busy-ness,” which is often how I regard humans’ typical use of time. During their great migrations along the Platte River of Nebraska, Sandhill Cranes remind me of this. Every bird is constantly doing <i>something</i>. The social interactions are fascinating and complex; the birds’ movements are graceful and sometimes comical; and the environmental conditions range from poetically peaceful to relentlessly harsh. This image was my reward for enduring a frigid night in a blind (a floorless plywood box) on the riverbank, awakening to a thick blanket of frozen fog that completely obscured my would-be subjects. Only moments before they all took flight, the fog lifted slightly, giving me unique glimpses of their undefeatable will to survive and carry on... the business of being cranes.</p>