

Dripping Water Draws Birds to the Camera

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Many bird photographers regularly photograph birds frequenting feeders stocked with black oil sunflower seeds, cracked corn, Niger seed, and suet. Providing food to bring birds close to you for great photos is often successful for certain species. But most birds are not attracted to seeds and suet as they prefer dining on insects and berries. Consider my home in the mountains at 7000 feet near West Yellowstone, Montana. Seeds and suet attract evening, black-headed, and pine grosbeaks, lots of pine siskins, and thousands of Cassin's finches in June, but flycatchers, warblers, vireos, tanagers, kinglets, most sparrows, and many others don't eat this kind of food. Several years ago, I noticed that many of the bird species that are not attracted to the food I provide are attracted to the water bath in my yard. For a few years, I photographed birds at the water bath, but many warblers and vireos did not use the water bath that was in an open yard, even though bushes grew only ten feet away and I could see them hopping about in the bushes, but not going to the water.



Figure 1 A broad-tailed hummingbird stretches on the small branch placed above the drip pool to provide a convenient perch. This image is made with a Canon R5 using a 25mm extension tube on a Canon 600mm lens and the camera is set to 1.6x crop mode.

I own ten acres and the rest of my property borders national forest, so my neighbors are all wildlife! I noticed a natural cavity in a large boulder in the small aspen forest that makes up most of my front yard. Since this natural depression holds water, I wondered if the rock cavity would attract birds if I brought water to it? To get a steady trickle of water to the rock cavity, I ran a 200-foot garden hose from my home, through the trees, and out to the rock. Then I bought an adapter at a greenhouse with a valve to control the water flow. I hooked the adapter to the hose that converted the diameter of the hose to a ¼-inch plastic tube used by gardeners to water their plants. Since this ¼-inch plastic tube is fitted with a valve, it is easy to adjust the rate of flow to control the dripping water. I completed my water drip by using a 10-foot stick to both support and suspend the end of the ¼-plastic pipe about 3 feet above the edge of the natural cavity in the rock. A long stick to support the tube that drips the water will work, but I upgraded this in Sept of 2021. Now I use a Phottix Saldo 395 Studio Boom Light Stand. This works much better as it is far more flexible in positioning the drip above the pool.



Figure 2 A yellow warbler in autumn plumage takes a quick bath. The drip is most popular during the first three hours after sunrise and then bird activity tapers off.

Would it work to draw birds inside the dense aspen grove? I turned on the water, adjusted the dripping water to hit the pool of water that is about 8 x 11 inches and ¼ inch deep once a second. This makes the water move as some suggest moving water tells the birds it is fresh. Actually, I doubt that is the reason dripping water attracts birds. Rather than the sight of moving water, the sound of the dripping water readily and quickly attracts them to the spot! If the birds had to rely on seeing the water, that would be difficult as the aspen forest is rather dense, so visibility is low with so many leaves blocking the view to the drip. My water drip is most productive for drawing birds to within easy photo range from early

August through the end of September. Most small songbirds migrate or fly at night and land in the morning. Over the last several years, I have noticed while sitting in my blind near the drip that typically there are few birds stirring in the low bushes at first light. Instead, often bird activity is slow at sunrise, but then rapidly picks up shortly after sunrise and often becomes a frenzy for a couple of hours before it tapers off again. Since I can easily view the aspen forest around the drip well, I notice activity becomes most noticeable high in the trees first. I suspect the migrating birds land in the tops of the trees at first light, then they hear the sound of dripping water and soon begin to work their way to lower and lower branches. Finally, they are quite close and clearly looking for the dripping water, but also alert for danger, so they are wary. While not all the birds come to the water, a great many of them do. Indeed, if a bird is already drinking the water or bathing in the pool, other birds quickly join the pool party.

Keep in mind where you live affects how well water attracts wildlife. I grew up in Michigan where lakes, rivers, and creeks abound. Although I did not try it in Michigan, my photographers friends tell me a water drip isn't particularly successful for them. That stands to reason when fresh water is readily available all over the place. But it certainly works in dry places or during dry seasons. While the mountains near West Yellowstone have plenty of water in winter and during spring snowmelt, late summer and early autumn is dry, as is most of the western states. That's why forest fires are such a problem in the western states. Where I live, there is no standing water within ¼-mile of my home. I live on a mountain slope where the sagebrush meets the aspen and conifer forest. This abrupt change of habitat is called an ecotone and it tends to be rich in wildlife. In early June my drip does not draw many subjects, but dry conditions and autumn migration bring numerous birds to my water drip – much to my delight!



Figure 3 Toward the end of August, Wilson's warblers begin appearing at my drip. Indeed, one morning at the end of August we had two dozen Wilson's warblers approaching the drip simultaneously! As the autumn season changes from early August to early October, the amount and variety of bird species continually changes.

An observation. I do have a creek $\frac{1}{4}$ mile away, but migrating songbirds readily use my water drip rather than go to the creek. I suspect that even in places where standing water is plentiful, a water drip could work well. Even in Michigan, I knew of plenty of natural areas where no water was present for a $\frac{1}{4}$ mile. Surely dripping water would work there too. While some have told me dripping water does not work there, I wonder if they put their drip in an open yard. I have a drip in my open yard too, and while it draws robins, the warblers, and other small songbirds that I see in the bushes within 15 feet of that drip do not use it but mob my woodland drip. I wonder if a drip in a woodland area with plenty of close cover next to it and designed to make lots of noise from dripping water would actually work quite well. I think it would. A perfect spot for a drip is along a brushy area that is open to the dawn sunshine, but close bushes within a foot or two of the drip both on the right and left side of the drip, and perhaps not much cover behind the drip to provide a more photogenic less distracting background.



Figure 4 A very wet adult male western tanager enjoys its dawn bath. Some birds eagerly seek the chance to bathe, while others seem to have no interest. Wrens don't seem to care, and western tanagers can't get enough bathing in.

Aside from the photography, the bird activity is wonderful to observe from close range and each morning is a surprise. One morning I may enjoy six western tanagers bathing in my drip, and the next

morning there are no tanagers, but a dozen Wilson's warblers are the main attraction. And on most mornings, a hummingbird or two also takes a bath in the pool. By the way, the natural rock cavity that is somewhat circular and about 11 x 8 inches was also six inches deep – far too deep for small hummingbirds, vireos, flycatchers, and warblers to bathe in. Therefore, I helped the birds out by filling the rock depression with small gravel and then put a little soft sand on top. Now the rock cavity when full of water is only ¼- inch deep. Extra water from the hose merely flows over and down the side of the rock, so the water depth is always perfect for small birds. The water drip also attracts some small mammals as I regularly photograph yellow-pine chipmunks and red squirrels drinking water, but I have also had mule deer, yellow-bellied marmots, and long-tailed weasels come to the drip too.

There is a huge difference between the water drip in the woods and the one 25 yards away in my grass lawn. I get different species. Warblers, vireos, flycatchers, kinglets, and some sparrows are easily photographed at my woodland drip, but I rarely see any of them at the open yard drip. The yard drip tends to attract robins and common flickers better. Overall, though, for photos, my woodland drip is far more productive than the nearby yard drip.



Figure 5 The tiny calliope hummingbird is soaking quietly. You would think hummingbirds would bathe later in the day when the air is warmer, but sunrise is the favorite time at my drip.

To further draw birds to the water drip, I put a couple platform feeders that hang from aspen branches and stock them with black oil sunflower seeds. When I do this, I attract numerous evening grosbeaks and pine siskins, and both readily drink and bathe in the water at the drip. Starting out, I found these birds a joy to photograph, but there is a downside. Often I have so many siskins and grosbeaks coming

to the seed feeders and then the water that they get in the way of the other birds I am especially keen to photograph. It is really tough to photograph well a gorgeous male western tanager when four evening grosbeaks are also fighting over the drip. So, sometimes I let the seed feeders go empty to reduce the chaos at the drip. On the other hand, the evening grosbeaks and pine siskins live on my property, so they get used to the drip and readily go to it. It appears their presence encourages new birds on migration to use the drip too.

Photo Strategies

I have thoroughly enjoyed photographing wildlife, especially birds, for over five decades. Techniques have come a long way from the Kodachrome 25 film I started with in 1970 to now all digital with ISO 1000 and more when needed. I like to photograph birds well. Therefore, I tend to use really good camera gear, but honestly, much less expensive camera gear does super well with birds, so don't feel like you can't do this if you are on a budget.

You Need a Blind

While birds that live on your property often get used to you and allow easy close approach, migrating birds new to the area are another matter. You need a good blind to conceal yourself and your photo gear. I own several commercial small hunting blinds that I use for photography, but these would not work in the woods but do fine on my lawn. Why not in the woods? My aspen woods are on a hillside so there is quite a slope, and it is full of large boulders. A blind with fixed sides that is designed for flat terrain does not work in that situation. I planned to build my own blind on the site, but even that is a problem as the hill is mostly rocks so pounding four stakes in the ground to support the blind would be a real job and likely not possible at all with all the large rocks.



Figure 6 Here is the blind. You see the drip pool in the lower left corner. Notice the stick I put above the pool for birds to perch on. They readily take the suggestion. Notice also the 1/4-inch tube that is connected to a regular hose and that is connected to my home about 200 feet away. The blind frame is construction scaffolding. I ran a wire around the top of the metal posts on each corner and then hung camo netting from the wire with clothes pins. It is a simple, stable, and effective blind.

Finally, it dawned on me that I had the solution all along. I needed a blind frame that I could cover with camo netting to hide me, but it had to be sturdy so the wind would not tear it down. That is when I remembered the construction scaffolding in my barn. Years ago, I bought two sections so I could photograph nesting birds up to 14 feet above the ground. While I don't do that anymore, I realized one section of the construction scaffolding would make a dandy blind frame, and each of the four metal legs is an adjustable leveling leg and it worked perfectly in my rocky unlevel spot. The blind blends into the forest well when covered with camo material, and the birds do not notice me inside the blind so they approach closely. Indeed, often they perch on branches only a few feet away from me.

Sharp Images

I always use a blind at my seed feeders and water drips. I am patient, so sitting quietly in a blind while waiting for the subject to approach is easy for me. Of course, most of the time I enjoy steady photo opportunities as bird activity is quite good! I use a Gitzo tripod with a Wimberley gimbal head mounted on top. The gimbal head lets me balance my camera and lens on the tripod. When balanced, I can let the pan and tilt controls be loose, so it is easy to **slowly** move the lens to focus on the bird wherever it happens to be at. While birds are usually at the edge of the small water pool or bathing in the pool, sometimes they perch on aspen branches a few feet from the pool and the Wimberley head lets me photograph them at these locations. Notice I said move the lens slowly! Birds notice quick movements immediately. When in the blind, I do not make any noise and every movement I must make is super slow.

I normally photograph relatively still subjects as this is no time for flight shots, so I leave the image stabilizer on and set it to Mode 1. Since the lens is not perfectly still on a Wimberley head and I am touching the camera, there are vibrations, and those are minimized by image stabilization. Currently, I am using a camera that offers In Body Image Stabilization or IBIS. And it works in conjunction with the image stabilization built in my lens too. If the light is sufficient, I use shutter speeds of 1/500 second or faster to capture super sharp images. However, I increase the shutter speed to 1/2000 second if birds are actively bathing as they move quick when bathing. Even that shutter speed is normally not fast enough for bathing action.

When I can, I prefer to use an aperture of f/8 or f/11 to give me more depth of field than what you get shooting wide open at the biggest aperture such as f/4. And birds move quickly and unexpectedly, so I always shoot more images than I think I need. Even as the bird quickly looks up, then down, now right, and finally left. If you shoot enough, you will capture images where the head is still at the moment of exposure and therefore get a sharper image. Obviously, if the bird is rapidly turning its head during the exposure, sharpness is diminished – usually the rapidly turning head is a blur.

Lens Choices

For bird photography where I stalk the bird on foot or from a floating blind that moves, I greatly prefer my Canon 600mm f/4 lens. It gives me a lot of reach that I describe as how big the subject is in the viewfinder and the angle of view is narrower than a shorter lens and this means the lens “sees” less background and therefore the background is less cluttered. But stationary blind photography where you cannot move closer or further away isn't ideal for a prime lens where the focal length can't be adjusted. If the bird is too small in the viewfinder, you can always crop the image and make it larger. But if the bird is too close and therefore too big for your prime (fixed focal length) lens, then you are too tight and

perhaps cut part of the bird off in your photo. A good zoom lens gives you more flexibility. For example, I recently used my 600mm lens at my woodland water drip to photograph hummingbirds and kinglets, both small birds. The 600mm worked really well when I used a 25mm extension tube to allow the long lens to focus closer. But the fixed 600mm lens was simply too much lens for the evening grosbeaks that visit the drip pool. There was no way to successfully photograph a tiny bird and a much larger one at the same distance with a prime lens.



Figure 7 The Canon RF 100-500mm lens on the Canon R5 mirrorless camera easily made this image. Due to the closeness of the drip to the bird, I did not need to use the crop factor.

The next morning, I used the lens that works better for the drip photo opportunities. I selected my Canon 200-400mm zoom lens that also has a built-in 1.4x teleconverter. By flipping a switch, I can instantly move the 1.4x teleconverter in or out of the optical path. While 200-400mm is really too short for birds at feeders and water drips, when used with the 1.4x teleconverter, the 560mm focal length now works fine for most birds. By using this lens and choosing to use the 1.4x teleconverter or not, along with zooming the lens between 200mm and 400mm, essentially I have focal length choices that cover 200mm to 560mm. That is super handy when your photo location is fixed, but the size of your subject and distance from varies considerably.

On the other hand, I found the 600mm with the camera set to 1.6x crop factor gave me a fuller image of the subject when photographing the really tiny birds – hummingbirds and ruby-crowned kinglets. But if I am set up for these small birds with the 600mm, I cannot photograph larger birds like the grosbeaks. Sometimes I just have to decide what size I am going after. Lately, I have been mainly using my 600mm lens at the drip and concentrating on small kinglets, warblers, chickadees, and vireos. When a robin

comes in, I just have to accept that I cannot photograph it as I cannot include all of the large bird in the image.

Camera

I have used the high-end Canon cameras for decades. They include the 1DX, 1DX II, 1DX III, and the 5D Mark 4. These cameras are super, but none were mirrorless cameras. Many of my workshop clients migrated to a mirrorless camera system, so I knew I had to get one to keep up to speed on this new technology. In October of 2020, I finally managed to get the new Canon R5 that is hugely popular and in high demand, so I was lucky to get it then. I did not know the advantages it offered me, but now that I have shot over a million photos with it, I fully understand the enormous advantages for wildlife photography. I realize you probably don't have the Canon R5, but in your present camera or a future camera, try to get these features.

1. Eye Detection and Focus

The Canon R5 when set to this focus mode finds the eye of the subject and focuses precisely on the eye. The camera does this even when the animal is moving about in its environment. Never before has my focusing been so consistent and precise. I do admit the eye focus isn't perfect as the system has a difficult time finding the eye of large mammals with lots of hair around the eye and it fails with bathing birds as the eye moves quickly around the composition and then disappears when the bird dips its head under the water. But eye focus works most of the time and it is incredible. Everyone I know who uses a camera with eye focus technology loves it, it is a selling point, so you know future cameras will have improved eye focus!



Figure 8 Small birds at a drip are often quick! Eye focus helps me get sharp images with time is so fleeting. Also, shooting images at 20 shots per second helps a lot too. It is amazing how much this Wilson's warbler moves in 1 second!

2. The full-frame sensor on the Canon R5 has 45MP

While you don't normally need that many pixels in your final image, the resolution of the full frame allows considerable cropping capability. More pixels mean more resolution, but it really only matters if you plan to crop the original image a lot or make huge prints. For use on the web, a small file of 1MP works just fine. Even for prints, a 17MP file produces wonderful prints using 300dpi if the print is no larger than 13 x 20 inches.

3. The 1.6x crop mode

The Canon R5 offers several crop modes and I find the 1.6x crop mode quite useful in wildlife photography. Essentially, the 1.6x crop mode makes the field of view of the lens smaller and the lens acts like it is longer. In other words, using the 1.6x crop mode gives a 300mm lens the field of view of a $(1.6 \times 300) = 480\text{mm}$ lens. This 1.6x crop mode does reduce the image file to 17MP, but that is plenty for most uses. Only if you wish to make prints larger than 13 x 20 inches does the smaller file size become a concern. A huge advantage for the 1.6x crop mode is the subject is larger in the viewfinder. It is easier to monitor how the subjects legs are positioned or head is turned so you shoot photos when the body posture is most favorable. Another huge advantage of shooting in the 1.6x crop mode is the file size is smaller so you are less likely to fill your camera's buffer and therefore can keep on shooting using a fast frame rate.



Figure 9 I often use the 1.6x crop mode to fill the viewfinder more fully. This lets me see the pose better and more importantly, the file size is small, so I never fill my camera buffer allowing me to shoot continuously when I need to. This is an Audubon's warbler.

4. Touch and Drag AF

This allows you to use your right thumb and drag the active AF point around the image by touching and sliding your thumb on the LCD display on the rear of the camera. While normally I rely on eye focus, for those animals where eye focus does not work, then moving the active AF point to coincide with the animals face using Touch and Drag is quick and precise.

5. Electronic shutter

Wildlife often reacts to the sound of the camera's shutter. Many birds fly away as soon as they hear the shutter, so always use the quietest shutter your camera offers. The Canon R5 has three shutter options that include mechanical, electronic first curtain, and electronic. For wildlife, I always use the electronic shutter because it not only is quiet, but it is completely silent and shoots at a fixed 20 shots per second. The camera is able to shoot this fast and silently because the sensor is turned on and off very rapidly to record individual images, but there are no moving mechanical parts to make noise. My ability to photograph nervous birds at my seed feeders and water features is markedly improved with the electronic shutter. Now, when I am perfectly quiet and hidden in my blind, and move my lens slowly to compose, I shoot thousands of bird photos and they never suspect I am there. It is amazing!!!! You **want** a silent shutter for wildlife-especially birds!!!!!!

The Camera Setup

Here is how I set my camera up for bird photography at my water drip in the woods.

Auto ISO

If sunrise is 6:30 am, I know the sun won't appear above the eastern mountains until 7am. I prefer the sun to shine on my subjects because more light makes it easier for me to stop the lens down (say f/4 to f/8) without forcing me to use ISOs that are higher than I prefer. Normally I like to keep the ISO at ISO 1000 or less, but I do use higher ISOs when I have no other choice. While higher ISOs have more image defects called noise, software can reduce their negative effects quite nicely, but not perfectly. Where my drip is located at the huge rock, since I could not move the rock, I had to trim several of the small aspen trees that grew east of my blind to allow the first rays of sunshine to light the drip.



Figure 10 Townsend's warbler is a delight to photograph. They are not common at my drip, so always wonderful to get images of them. On a partly cloudy morning, the ambient light varies often and quickly. Auto ISO adjusts for the changing ambient light while keeping my shutter speed and aperture fixed. When you need auto exposure, Auto ISO is the way to do it, rather than aperture priority or shutter priority as each of those two once popular methods have serious shortcomings.

Because the morning light can vary considerably, I use Auto ISO. As the sun rises in the sky over the next couple of morning hours when photography is best, I find it is easier to let the camera automatically monitor the amount of ambient light that is available and set the exposure. Therefore, I manually set the shutter speed to 1/500 second and f/5.6 to begin and do use smaller apertures when the ambient light brightens as the sun rises. Auto ISO is wonderful because you get to manually set the aperture and the shutter speed and they stay the same unless you manually change one or both, but the ISO automatically adjusts for changes in ambient light. It is like having both aperture-priority and shutter-priority simultaneously. Keep in mind Auto ISO is an autoexposure method. To adjust the exposure, you must use the exposure compensation control found somewhere on your camera. To make things easy for me, rather than searching for this control in the camera menus, I assigned exposure compensation to the SET button on the rear of my camera. I merely hold the SET button in and rotate the top control dial to select the exposure compensation I need to shoot terrific exposures.

Since I use the electronic shutter, my frame rate (images shot per second) is 20 and that is fixed. I do hope future cameras will allow me to set whatever frame rate I prefer as 20 shots per second is really too many for birds that are perched, but helpful when action is happening.

Metering Pattern

For most of my career as a professional nature photographer, I used the spot meter. However, around 2003 when I first began my digital camera journey, I began to use the histogram and highlight alert to set the optimum exposure and found evaluative metering works fine as it get you close and then a little exposure compensation makes things perfect. I have used Evaluative metering since that time with no plans to use anything else.

File Size

I shoot only large RAW files of 45MP that are 8192 x 5464 pixels in size in the full frame mode. When the subject is quite small, then I find the 1.6x crop mode gives me the reach I am looking for. While the file size is only 17MP, that is still plenty big enough to use in my teaching programs, online, and to make prints no larger than 13x20 inches without any loss of quality. Often photographers speak of the loss of resolution when using the crop mode, but that only happens if you are making large prints, something I seldom do anyway. Heck, for use on the Internet, even images shot with the 1.6x crop mode must be reduced in size.



Figure 11 I do not need a 45 MP file of this adult Audubon's warbler unless I wanted to make a print larger than 13 x 20 inches. Using the 1.6x crop in my Canon R5, I still get a 17MP file and that is plenty big enough for my needs.

Image stabilization and/or IBIS

I always have these turned on in wildlife photography. Even though I nearly always shoot on a tripod with a Wimberley gimbal head, the camera is not completely still because I have my hands on it, so these help reduce camera vibrations. IBIS stands for in the body image stabilization and works with all lenses to shoot sharper photos. Regular image stabilization is having the control in the lens. My Canon

R5 can work with both simultaneously giving me tremendous stabilization control resulting in sharper images. Though it depends on your camera gear, you may have more than one Image stabilization option. For example, my Canon 200-400mm lens offers Mode 1, 2, and 3. Mode 1 stabilizes the lens in both the vertical and horizontal direction. This is my preferred mode for subjects that are still. If photographing wildlife action, such as flying birds, then use Mode 2. This option stabilizes the lens in only one direction. If you are panning horizontally, then only the vertical direction is stabilized. In the unusual event of panning vertically, then the horizontal direction is stabilized. Mode 3 is similar to Mode 2, but image stabilization does not activate at all until you press the shutter button. I find Mode 3 helps me track moving subjects, so I use this one for all situations where I know I am likely to only be photographing action. At the drip though, usually Mode 1 is the best option.

Strategy in the Blind

I have a nice board seat with a pillow to sit on. It is fairly comfortable, and I use thin camo mesh on the front of the blind. Birds could detect me moving through the mesh if I moved quickly so I move as little as possible. Normally my only movement occurs when I must slowly move the lens to compose a subject on a perch away from my drip pool. Slow movements are the key to success. I like the thin camo mesh because that makes it easier to spot birds in the aspen forest and see when they are coming to the drip. I tend to watch the upper trees a lot because that is where I normally detect approaching subjects first. The birds photographed at the drip are mainly warblers, vireos, flycatchers, tanagers, and kinglets. These birds all migrate at night. Why at night? There are fewer nocturnal predators (no hawks for example as they are daytime birds) and many believe birds navigate by using the stars. Plus, night tends to have calmer weather and it is cooler so that helps birds that are working hard to fly from getting overheated. My prime time for drip photography is August through September and this coincides with the autumn songbird migration. Each morning I have different birds at the drip, so no two mornings are alike. I don't know it is a fact, but I suspect it may be, is I notice bird activity in the upper portions of the aspen trees first because these nocturnal migrants who have been flying all night land early in the morning in the treetops, and when they hear the dripping water, these thirsty travelers readily fly from branch to branch as they approach the water. My best photo opportunities tend to happen about ½ hour after sunrise and lasts for about 90 minutes. It is remarkable how an aspen woodlot can be devoid of birds around sunrise but throbbing with them an hour later.



Figure 12 A dusky flycatcher is a common drip visitor in August, but by September, they have flown south.



Figure 13 This calliope hummingbird was nervous about coming to the drip. It was on migration and had never seen the drip before, but it sure knew what the sound of water is all about. Unlike a photo blind where you are photographing birds that are used to the food or water attractant, your blind, the sounds of you moving in the blind or the camera noise, migrating birds are not used to the blind. You must be extra quiet and well hidden for a drip blind to work with migrating birds. That why I always use the electronic shutter for bird photography as the camera is completely silent. A camera where you hear the shutter will cost you more than half of your photo opportunities as the bird will flush with the first click and probably not return. My production when up by at least 10x when I went to the silent electronic shutter!

I know the birds will approach the dripping water and tiny pool. Often they land on branches nearby. I suspend a photogenic perch horizontally over the water drip and slightly behind the pool. This way when the bird looks at the pool, it is facing my camera as the pool is between the bird and me. When the bird is in a good photo spot – on a branch, standing on the rock, or in the pool, I photograph whenever its body posture becomes favorable. I tend to like side shots, but full-frontal shots work well at times too. Normally I don't photograph when the bird is looking away from me, or has its back turned to me, but capturing an image of the bird with it back to you but it is looking back over its shoulder in your direction is a fine pose too. Often when one bird is bathing in the pool, other birds rapidly move in on it. I use my right eye to compose the photo, but often while viewing the subject through the camera's viewfinder, I use my left eye to scan the scene to see if another more desirable species is present to photograph, or another bird has assumed an even better photo opportunity. I don't see well with my left eye, but well enough to spot other opportunities.

While the eye focus works super well on small birds at close range (10-12 feet away), it has problems when the bird quickly turns its head and particularly performs poorly when the bird bathes as it continually dunks its head in the water. This makes the camera autofocus on the back of the pool and then it takes time to find the eye again when it is visible. This is the time for back-button focusing – sort of. I keep my autofocus active on the shutter button and set the AF-On button on the rear of my camera to lock focus. Then when I have a bathing bird that continually dips its head in the pool, I focus on the head when it is up, press the AF-On button in to lock focus and hold the button down, and shoot away as the bird bathes. With the autofocus locked, as long as the bird remains in the same spot, I still have good focus on it no matter if the camera can see the eye to autofocus on or not. It isn't perfect as the bird may move an inch closer or further away, but it helps me keep the focus close to perfect most of the time.

By the way, I just had four days of heavy rain. This morning at set up in my blind right after the last shower and the woods was soaked. As I expected on this late date in August, the woods were alive with birds. But since the woods was soaked, nearly all of the birds ignored my water set as there were plenty of places with standing water, so my photo opportunities were limited, even though plenty of birds that normally come to the drip were present. The only reliable group of birds I had were the hummingbirds as they came just as much as during dry conditions. I do know as soon as the woods dries out, the warblers and vireos will once again readily come to the drip.



Figure 14 A Lincoln's sparrow stopped by one morning for a thorough soak.

I also want to emphasize my use of the electronic shutter on my Canon R5 camera. It shoots a fixed 20 shots per second silently. There is no noise at all to frighten the birds. Having a silent camera is enormously helpful. Now that I have one, I cannot imagine using a camera that makes shutter noises when you shoot it. And I like 20 shots per second because often I am photographing birds bathing as when they do that, fast movement is the rule. Twenty shots per second gives you more poses to consider and better odds of capturing a wonderful pose that also is sharp.



Figure 15 A broad-tailed hummingbird really getting into its bath. Sometimes hummingbirds put on a superb show. This is where you want to shoot at fast as possible, use eye focus to be precisely focused on the eye, and enjoy the spectacle!