



Picture Perfect

Learn how to get great bird photos in your own backyard.

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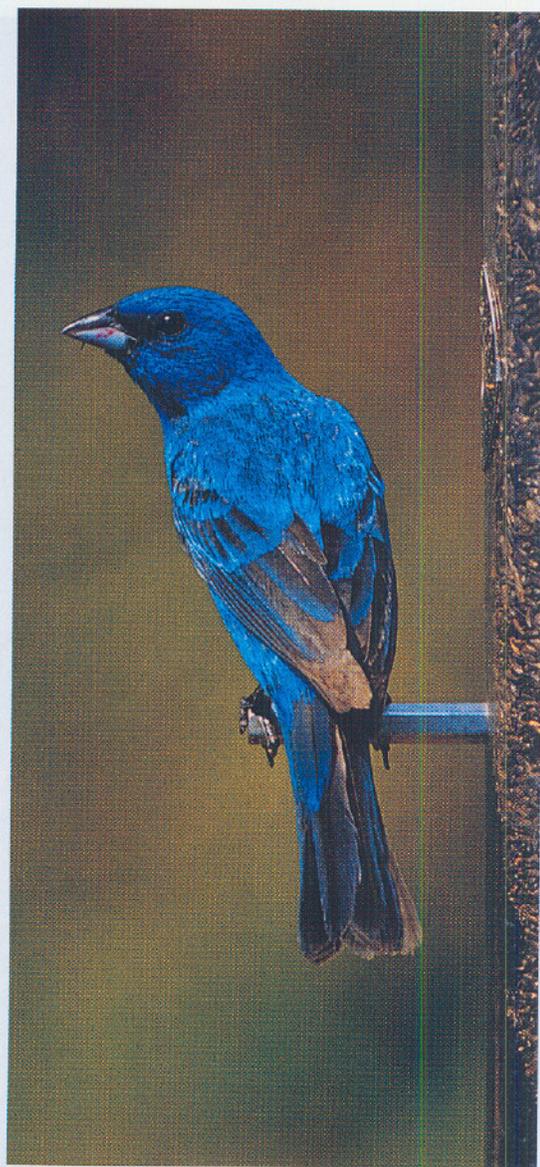
IF YOU WANT to take stunning close-up photographs of wild birds you could:

- A. Spend thousands of dollars on equipment.
- B. Travel to expensive faraway places.
- C. Suffer with mosquitoes, muddy swamps, freezing temperatures and sweltering humidity to get that “perfect shot.”
- D. Check out your own backyard.

If you like option ‘D’, then you’re going to love my six-step plan for snapping great bird photos. This method has given me professional-quality photographs for relatively little money and work. All it takes is a little practice and patience.



Francis and Janice Bergquist



Chances are, you already have plenty of interesting birds in your area, such as black-capped chickadees, purple finches, song sparrows, dark-eyed juncos, spotted towhees and more. So keep reading, and soon you’ll be able to capture these beautiful birds in photos just like the pros. And the best part is you don’t even have to leave your backyard!

1. If You Feed Them, They Will Come

Put up a bird feeder. Almost any kind will do as long as the birds can get to the food. My personal favorite is a platform feeder (like the one at left). It doesn’t have a lot of frills—it’s basically a plain horizontal stand with low walls on the sides to contain the seed.



You can place this type of feeder anywhere, fill it with any kind of seed and use it to attract any type of bird.

2. The Right Mix

Fill the feeder with tempting food. There are many kinds of birdseed, and some are better than others. I prefer black-oil sunflower seed because it tends to attract the most birds. You could also try millet for sparrows, peanuts to attract jays and thistle for finches (like the goldfinch above with an indigo bunting).

3. Location, Location, Location

Put your feeding station in a good location for photography. If you don't have a perfect

Capture beautiful shots like the pros.

place, don't panic. Find the best spot you can, giving highest priority to areas with good light. As a general rule, try to follow these guidelines:

- Find a spot that gets early morning sun, which will give you nice lighting.
- Place the feeder near cover, such as bushes, trees and other objects so the birds have a spot to perch.
- Don't put the feeder in the shade—this will cast shadows on the birds that will show up in your photos.
- Position the feeder near a window, so you can easily capture the moments from inside your home.

TAKE AMAZING PHOTOS

right out your back door! First, use feeders to attract birds to come to you (like the brown thrasher at far left, and the indigo bunting and American goldfinch above left). Then offer places to perch so birds like the white-crowned sparrow and black-headed grosbeak (above) will pause while you snap a few shots.



Outdoor Classroom

4. Come in for a Landing

Place perches strategically around the feeder. To get nice, clean shots of birds in their natural environment, you'll probably have to create perches. Birds like to land on branches near a feeder before eating to make sure the coast is clear.

You might want to experiment a little to see which perch works best and where, but I like a plain dead branch stuck into the ground near the feeder. It's sturdy, doesn't wilt and isn't complicated.

Mix it up, though. You don't want all of your photos to look the same, so give your feathered friends plenty of perches to choose from.

5. A Good Hideout

Find cover for yourself. You can devise many ways to hide yourself 10 to 15 feet away from your birds. This distance is about right for the 400mm camera lens I often use.

The simplest cover is your house—an open window close to your feeder is perfect. Another option is to build a temporary cover in your yard (like the one at right). I hang a camouflage tarp over a couple of metal posts stuck in the ground, and it works great.

Make sure you're comfortable, though. Finding the perfect shot takes patience. If you have a long wait, you'll want a chair to keep from getting cramped.

6. Fully Equipped

Use basic, reliable camera equipment. You can spend a lot of money on fancy cameras and lenses, but they aren't necessary. The three main things you need are a basic lens (at least 300mm), a tripod and a flash. The tripod will help you keep the camera still and pointed in the right direction, while the flash can help lighten a dark picture and put a glint in the bird's eye.

One final tip—prefocus your camera where you think the birds are going to land. Some birds stay for only an instant, so you need to snap the picture quickly!



SNEAK ATTACK. When venturing into your yard to take photos, set up temporary cover like a tent or tarp near a feeder or perch. Frequent *Birds & Blooms* contributors Steve and Dave Maslowski used the setup at right to capture this stunning shot of a male downy woodpecker (top).

Photos this page: Maslowski Productions