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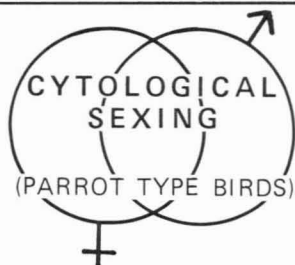


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Bird Photography

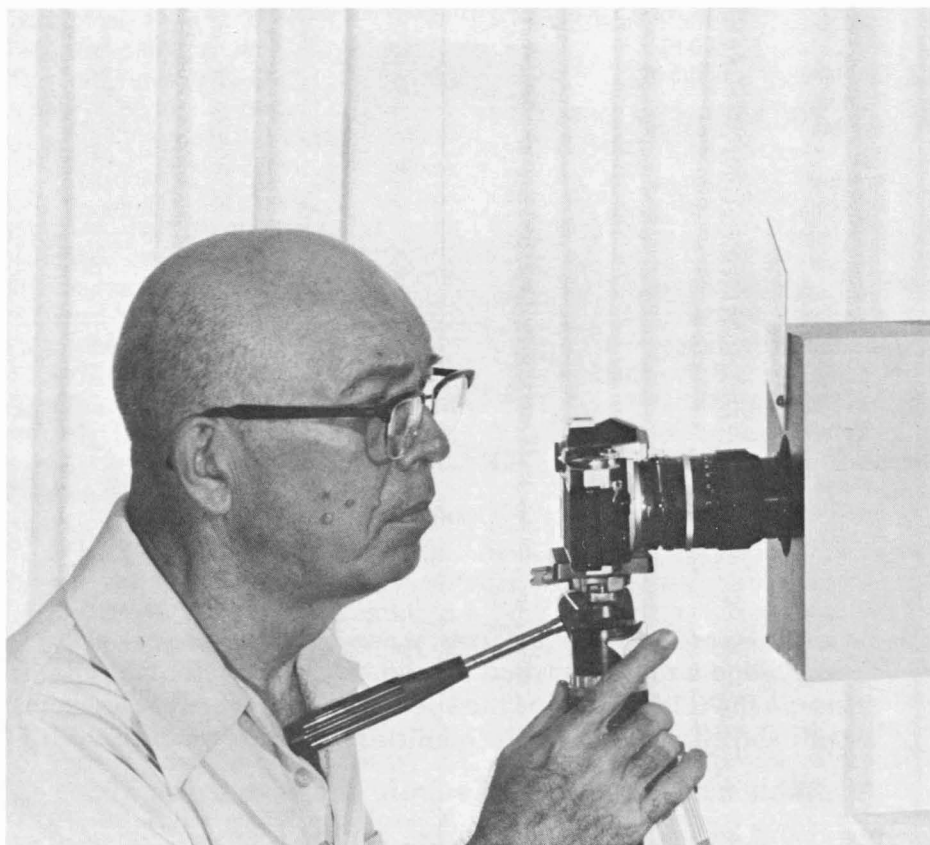
by Dan Martin
Florida

My philosophy of bird pictures is to produce a color print or slide which has accurate (as possible) colors, a typical pose, and in a size sufficient to study the bird in detail. In order to achieve this, I feel that one must process his own film and prints. This is especially true in the color print, because a photo-lab does not know what color the subject was. For slides, a photo-lab can do your job. This discussion will be limited to captive birds and primarily color photography. The same basic technique can be applied to black & white photography, but, when the results are so

superior in color, why limit yourself to B&W? If B&W prints are required for publication, the conversion can be made by the publication facility.

EQUIPMENT REQUIRED

Camera & Lenses — Taking into account image detail, flexibility, available films, portability, and cost; my nomination is a 35mm single lens reflex with interchangeable lenses and focusing at full aperture up to the moment of exposure. Fully automatic cameras are not required as most all pictures will be made using elec-



Dan Martin prepares to photograph some active subjects. Patience and a comfortable position is a necessity.



One of the world's prettiest small birds comes from South Africa, the Violet eared wax bill, (*Granatina granatina*). Male (L), Hen (R).

tronic flash. Depending upon the size of the birds you wish to photograph, your basic lens can be anything from 85mm to 135mm. There are many cameras and lenses on the market which can be used with very good results. Cameras larger than 35mm can be used, but, with increased film cost, increased camera cost, and loss of depth of focus. Closer than normal focusing is also required and can be pro-

vided by a macro lens, extension tubes, or auxiliary lenses. My personal equipment is two NIKON FM's (one for negative and one for slides) with a basic 105mm f2.5 lens and an 11mm extension tube. Other lenses I use are 85mm f2.0, 50mm f2.0, 200mm f4.0 and a 43-86mm f3.5 zoom.

Tripod — A sturdy, repeat sturdy, tripod is required. I recommend a pan

head with a tilt top. The pan head is required and the tilt is very nice when changing from horizontal to vertical format.

Electronic Flash — At least two flash units are required and a third is optional, with a fourth optional as a stand-by. My two basic units are AC and rated for Guide No. 120 with ASA 100 film. My third flash is AC or battery and rated for Guide No.

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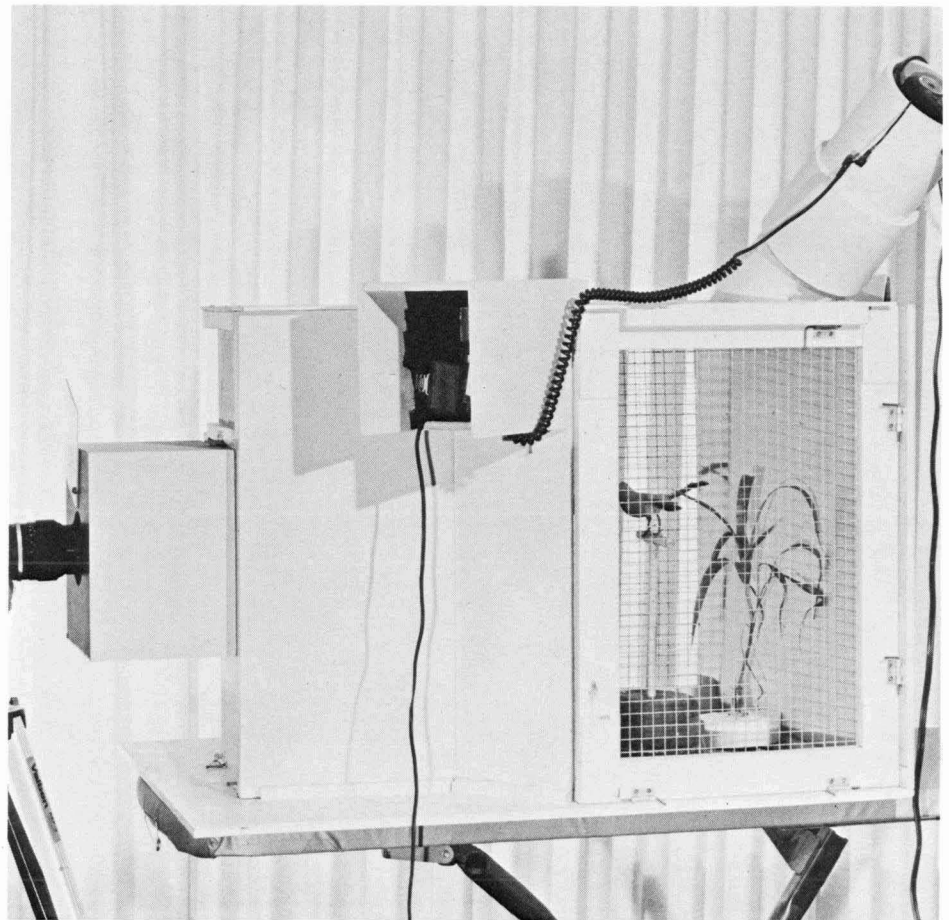
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The author designed and built this box to utilize studio portrait lighting for bird photos.

50 at ASA 100, my stand-by is the same as my basic flash units.

Film — The basic film for negatives is Kodacolor II. I use Vericolor II, which is the professional version of Kodacolor II. Kodacolor 400 can also be used with exposure adjustments. There are other color negative films on the market, but none as available as Kodacolor II. For slide films, there are many to choose from; try them all and select the one with the color balance and speed which suits you. I prefer Fujichrome 100; its speed and color balance are to my taste. Note that both of my films are ASA 100, a definite asset.

T-Bar — A T-bar or suitable bird stand is necessary for taking pictures of the larger birds which will stay on a T-bar. Suitable background is also a must. I use regular photographic background paper in an assortment of colors, I prefer neutral grey or very light blue. Of course, a means must be provided for supporting the roll of paper; any sort of a jury-rig will work.

Photo-Box — A photo-box is required for the smaller birds in order to confine them to a small area where the lighting and background can be controlled. Pictures in

an aviary are possible, but lighting and background are not as good as in the box. My first box was for finches only and was 14x14x33 inches long. It had a door in the back and a slot to drop in different backgrounds; the rear half of the top and the whole front were made of white sheet plastic. (I used the white plastic used for diffusing fluorescent lights in a drop ceiling). In the front was a circle cut out with a cover for the camera lens. One flash was positioned 30 inches from the top and one flash placed 6 inches from the front. This worked fine for finches but nothing large and it lacked a few things.

My present box is now in its third modification and there are two more mods in the planning stage. The criteria for making this box were (1) 3 flash units attached to the box so there is no need for light stands, (2) large enough to use with cockatiels, conures, and true parakeets, but (3) not any bigger than necessary so that the smaller birds can be confined, (4) ability to be taken apart for transportation and storage, and (5) provide several different camera to subject distances while not altering the basic flash to subject distance. Keeping in mind this box is designed for 35mm format using 105mm or 85mm



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One of Australia's showy beauties, the Star finch, (*Poephila ruficauda*).

lenses, here are the measurements: width 18 inches — height 20 inches — length 30 inches — subject 8 inches from the background — sleeves for lens 2, 4, 6, & 8 inches long by 8 inches square. The openings for the three flashes are covered with one or more sheets of the white plastic to diffuse and attenuate the flash. The number of diffusers and the distance of the flash from them is adjusted to produce the

light balance and F-stop desired. My basic ratio is 1:1.5 or 1:2 and the F-stop is f22. F22 may seem like a very small aperture; however, it provides a very good depth of focus. The background is photographic background paper taped to a piece of $\frac{1}{8}$ inch masonite and dropped in the slot provided. In order to provide some greenery, I have a small bottle set in a piece of plaster-of-paris, which will support a branch or

whatever is available. The flash at the camera is synced by the camera shutter. The 45° flash is activated by a slave trigger and the backlight flash is synced by a PC cord from the 45° flash.

The box is usually placed on an ironing board in order to get it up to a comfortable working height. If it is too low, bending over to see thru the camera will give you a real good backache, as you spend a great

deal of time looking and waiting for the right pose. Each piece of the box is fastened to the adjacent piece with hinges which have bent nails relacing the hinge pins, thus the whole box can be assembled or disassembled in just a few minutes. The flash guns are mounted in the open-end boxes using regular camera flash attachment clips, and the flash boxes are fastened to the bird box with the loose pin hinges. The backlight flash is mounted in a piece of 4 inch PVC sewer pipe. The inside of the camera end of the box is painted black in an effort to keep the birds in the photographic area. One problem, if you are shooting slide film and using a perch the full width of the cage, you will notice an over and under exposure as the subject moves from one side of the cage to the other. This is caused by the varying distance from the 45° flash. The way to beat this is to use a single perch in the proper distance from the flash. Using negative film, this is not a major problem because of the increased exposure latitude of the film, there may be a slight shift in color balance which can be overcome in the printing process.

Techniques — When using the T-bar, the set-up is the same as for regular portraits. One flash near the camera at camera level and a highlight flash 45° up and 45° from the subject. A backlight is also nice but not necessary. Place it high from the rear on the same side as the 45° flash and aim it at the back of the subject. The backlight will give some added separation from the background. Place the subject about 3 feet from the background so that the 45° flash can blank out the shadow cast by the front flash. The ratio should be about 1:1.5 or 1:2. Greenery can also be used to help make a better looking picture. Get everything set up and ready to go before the bird is placed on the T-bar, because he may not stay there too long, and also you might spook him during set-up.

Remember, the finished pictures can be no better, only worse, than the subject. Therefore, whenever possible take pictures of the best bird when it is in the best condition. A poor subject will produce a poor picture. An excellent subject MIGHT produce an excellent picture.

When using the photo box notice the light set-up is basically the same as with T-bar. Take many exposures — not every one will be useable even under the best of circumstances and film is the cheapest commodity you are using. Under average conditions you can expect to get one useable picture out of ten exposures. With a very photogenic subject who is most cooperative, you might get eight useable

pictures out of ten exposures, but this is very rare; don't count on it.

Keep your film under refrigeration from purchase to use and then again from use to development. Of course, allow film to reach ambient temperature before using. The refrigeration will ensure fresh film and cut down on heat fog and loss of color. Also store your camera, especially when loaded with film, in a cool place, not in the sunshine. An automobile trunk in the summer is not the place to store a camera or film.

I highly recommend that all serious bird photographers do their own processing. A good lab can do slide film processing for you, but, no better than you can and maybe not as well. The process for developing color slides is not difficult nor is the equipment expensive. For negative film and prints, no one can make better prints than the photographer. There is a lot of color control that can be performed in the film development and print processing. Even an excellent color lab does not know the true color of the birds you have photographed. In fact, even if you do your own processing, as I do, there are times you will take a test print back and compare it with the bird to see how good the colors are and if they can be improved. At this point, I should point out that present films and papers can give excellent results, but there are some colors and color combinations that cannot be reproduced. Color prints can be made from slides as well as from negatives. There is a better chance of success in using negative film because of its greater exposure latitude and the fact that its contrast can be increased or decreased during development.

Remember ESPP:

- E** — Equipment: your pictures can be no better than your equipment will permit.
- S** — Subject: poor subject, poor picture; good subject the chances are much better.
- P** — Practice: practice makes perfect, or at least helps.
- P** — Patience: slow and easy does it; getting a good picture of a particular bird may take 15 minutes or 3 days or even longer ●

Editor's Note

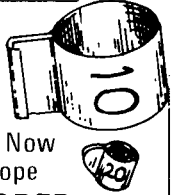
In the next issue of WATCHBIRD we will run Dr. Travnicek's article on his methods of photographing birds in through the wire of show or other cages. His techniques differ, of course, from those just described by Mr. Martin because the subject birds are under very different conditions.

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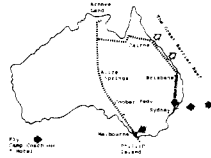


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