



Dan Martin designed and built this "photo box" to utilize portrait lighting for bird photographs. Mr. Martin is also a winner in the AFA 1978 Photo Contest. His 1st and 2nd place photos are seen on the front and back covers of this issue of Watchbird.

A Focus on Feathers

by Terry Dunham
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Dan Martin, who took the prize winning pictures on this issue's cover, first focused on feathers five years ago. He quickly found his 40 years' experience with cameras and darkroom procedures did little to prepare him for the task at hand:

"I tried avairy pictures first," says the Seminole, Fla. native and member of the Suncoast Finch Society. Natural light produced "poor" results; flash proved impractical in the uncontrolled setting. "And my pride and joy rangefinder Leica was completely and utterly useless for taking bird pictures," he recalls.

Undaunted, he persevered. Thousands of exposures later his determination and flexibility led to his present success.

He switched to single lens reflex cameras (Nikons) and built a mini-studio, a "photo box" that confines the birds and provides the studio lighting he applies to bird photography: one flash, at camera level, lights the bird; a second, 45° to one side and 45° overhead, provides highlights and creates depth in the image; a third strobe illuminates the background, sep-

arating it from the subject and eliminating shadows. Finally, he learned color darkroom techniques, because "doing your own printing was the only way to get accurate color reproduction."

Mastering the technical challenges solved only half his problems: "To get a picture that looks like the real thing," he says, "you've also got to get a natural pose." Waiting becomes as important as shooting.

A typical photo session begins when friends arrive with a new species to be recorded on film. (He's photographed close to 100 kinds of birds, including all those raised by his wife, Carol). The bird is introduced to the "photo box" and is given time to get accustomed to its new surroundings. Then Martin positions himself behind the camera, sets the strobes, and the waiting begins.

A red canary proved to be his most difficult subject. "I shot it for three days and I still don't think I got a good picture of it. It just wouldn't stand normally." A Heck's Shafttail Martin feared would be flighty

turned out to be his easiest subject: "He grabbed a perch and sat there. In ten minutes I had ten usable exposures."

Getting a good exposure is only the first step, however. Next he processes the film. When it dries he selects the negatives he wants to print. Shortly after 8 p.m. he begins preparing chemicals for printing. When he is through, at 2 a.m., he will have made only eight 8 × 10 color prints.

He prefers shooting larger birds on a T-bar. The Blue-fronted Amazon he photographed is Sam, a family pet, and the photo is his favorite:

"It's in focus, the color is good, and that eye's looking right at you," he says. "The bird has personality, and it's reflected in the picture." The photo was taken with a 105 mm Nikkor lens, with a 11 mm extension tube, at 30 inches. The waxbill photo which won second prize was taken with the same equipment, at 26 inches, using his "bird box".

"It's damn hard work," he concedes. "But when you get them done and someone appreciates them, that's the reward. That and pleasing yourself."



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