



high-contrast situations

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS
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PHOTOGRAPHING BIRDS is a lot more challenging than simply seeing and then recording them. They tend to move quickly and not stay in one place for any length of time, usually don't tolerate a close approach, and they are in general active throughout the day. As a group, they have an amazing range of adaptations and behaviours that allow them to operate in diverse environmental conditions. So, as a bird photographer, I have found that if I want to maximise my opportunities I have to adapt my usual methods and work in conditions that might ordinarily fall beyond my photographic comfort zone.

In this series, I will be sharing some of the tactics and thought processes that help me work in the challenging photographic conditions often encountered when photographing birds: high-contrast situations; wind; heat; low light; wet weather and extreme backlight.

above African Pygmy Goose photographed using a Canon 5D MK3 and EF 500L f4 IS ii. Shutter speed 1/6400 sec. at f5.6, ISO 800. I under-exposed it by two-thirds of a stop to guard against the whites being over-exposed and blown out.

Over the years I have developed some understanding of the most desirable light for bird photography. Typically the best light comes from the side, rather than directly overhead – that is definitely one of the easier things to figure out when you are hoping to achieve pleasing results! But the problem with such 'ideal' light is that it only occurs in the so-called 'golden hour', the first hour or two after sunrise and again in the late afternoon, for the couple of hours before sunset.

I don't like being restricted to these relatively short periods for my photography, as many of the birds I enjoy watching and photographing naturally disregard any 'special' time for photographers and continue with their activities throughout the day.

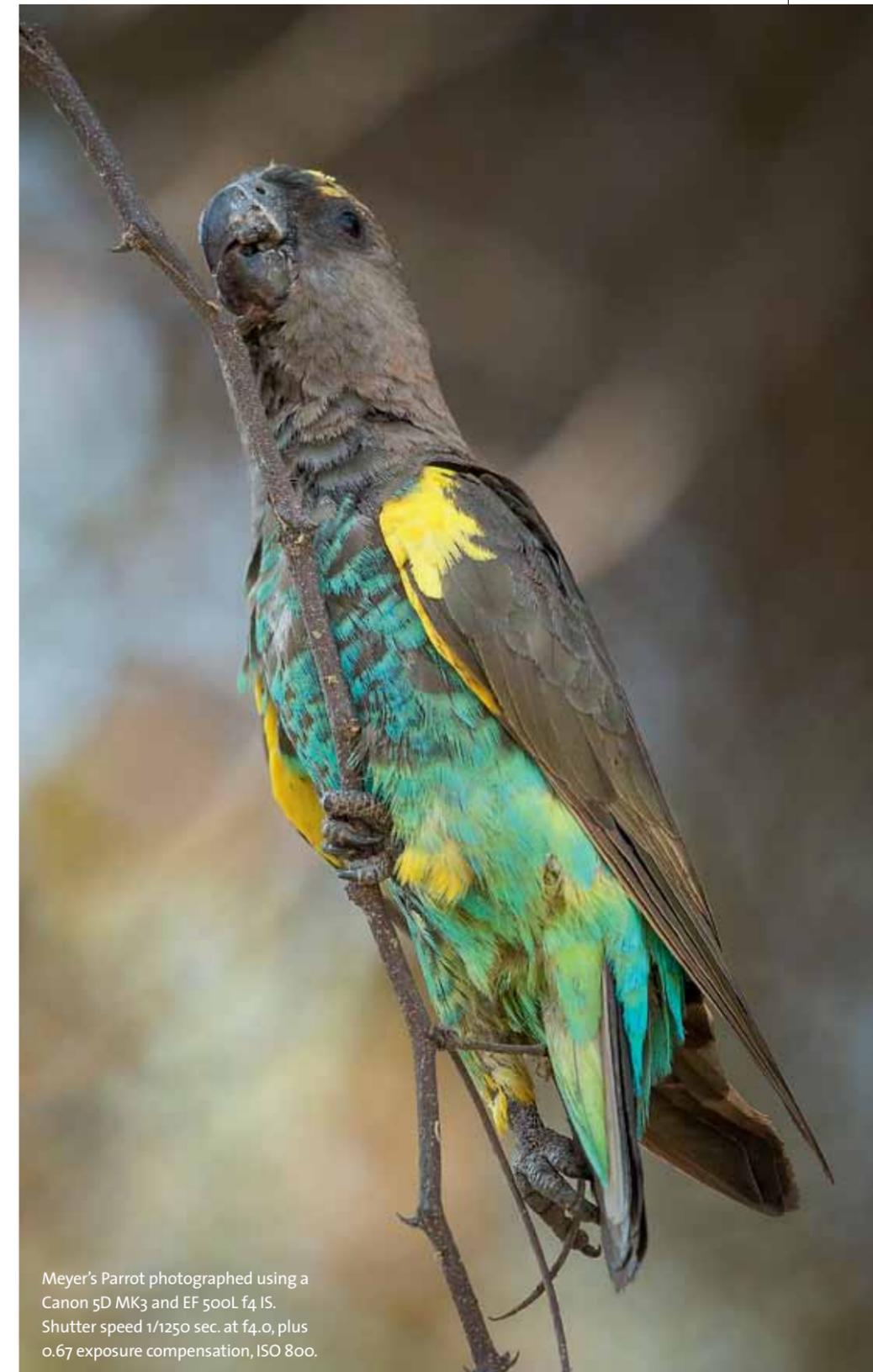
However, I have fine-tuned a couple of ways to mitigate the worst effects of some high-contrast situations and these allow me to continue photographing under what might be considered less than optimal circumstances. Shooting RAW images gives me access to the most data available for post-processing and that can be significant when it comes to dealing with high-contrast conditions.

When looking to reduce contrast in your composition, it is important to remember that there are instances when too much contrast may be problematic. I try to evaluate contrast in both my subject and the background.

PHOTOGRAPH OVER WATER

When faced with very bright sun overhead, I often try to work with subjects either in or over water. Dark blue water makes an excellent background, even in the brightest light. This is particularly enhanced if there is even the slightest wind rippling the surface, because wind-swept water usually shows up far darker in photographs. If water is dead calm, it can mirror the colour of the sky and make the effect considerably brighter. The water surface, whether still or windswept, also acts effectively as a reflector, bouncing light under the wings and body of a bird being photographed, notwithstanding the sun being directly overhead.

The photograph of the male African Pygmy Goose (opposite) was taken as he flew low over some deep blue water. He lifted his wings high enough for the >



Meyer's Parrot photographed using a Canon 5D MK3 and EF 500L f4 IS. Shutter speed 1/1250 sec. at f4.0, plus 0.67 exposure compensation, ISO 800.



African Oystercatcher photographed using a Canon 1D MK4 and EF 600L f4 IS II. Shutter speed 1/3200 sec. at f5.6, ISO 640.

TOP TIPS

- Check the histogram at the back of your camera to make sure that important parts of the image are not over- or under-exposed more than you would like
- You may need to under-expose to avoid bright and lighter colours like yellows, reds and whites becoming over-exposed
- Try to find your subjects in situations where the background is not too much brighter than the bird as this will help minimise high contrast

sun to catch and highlight those feathers while his underbelly was lit by the reflection from the water's surface. The white feathers on his face were a challenge as they came close to being over-exposed and losing all detail. In processing, I selected the brightest white parts of the image and toned them down, which enabled me to recover feather detail.

PHOTOGRAPH IN THE SHADE

Photographing entirely in the shade is an approach that works well for me as there is often a surprising amount of light available for photography in those situations. Instead of trying to deal with the harsh contrasts that result when there is bright sun overhead, I try to find subjects that are active in shady areas, for example when forest birds are perched in a tree.

In order to capture the image of Meyer's Parrot (previous page), I waited until the bird was positioned against the deepest, darkest

patch of background vegetation. The greatest challenge with images such as this often comes in the form of very bright, over-exposed patches of sky in the background. Fortunately there was enough vegetation to block out the brightest parts of the sky. I chose a wide aperture in order to blur the strong structures in the background and over-exposed the image by two-thirds of a stop to ensure I got sufficient detail on the bird, despite the somewhat glaring parts of the backdrop. In processing I needed to darken the background a little and brighten the bird.

PHOTOGRAPH A DARK SUBJECT

Another approach that helps me shoot in high-contrast situations is to choose a dark subject. Typically, dark birds are less likely to appear too bright in the final image, even in quite strong light, and I find I can still get reasonable results when the sun is quite high overhead. In addition it can be

helpful if I am able to manoeuvre myself so that my dark subject is positioned against a dark background as in that way it doesn't differ too much in tone with the surroundings.

For the image of the African Black Oystercatcher (above) in flight, I was able to take advantage of some distant coastal forest as a background. In processing I had to slightly lighten the shadows under the bird's far wing and on its body. ♦

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