



Novice Bird Photographer

I began trying to photograph birds at the nest back in 1975 at a time when there were few books about this type of photography. At that time the Internet did not exist and any books or courses on the subject were unknown to me. Most of what I learned was by trial and error—and I certainly made mistakes—and lots of them.

It took me from 1975 until 1984 to eventually glean enough material to publish a 9" x 12" 96-page book about bird photography with Isidor Jeklin titled 'The Art of Photographing North American Birds'. This would never have happened had I not read about Isidor Jeklin in the Braun Photo News, a publication about flash units. Isidor had recently won a contest in which he was awarded an expensive Hasselblad camera. The first run of 12,000 paperback and 2,000 hardback copies were published by Whitecap Books in North Vancouver. This initial printing went sideways and I ended up doing a buy back of 8,000 books. A short time later I made a deal with Galahad Books in New York and they did a second printing of 10,000 books. They later did two more printings of 10,000 copies each for a grand total of 44,000 copies. I was pleasantly surprised that Gallahad had been the publishers of Dr. Eliot's book. In reading the book year later, it didn't seem that I failed to acknowledge my mistakes.

In hindsight, it's interesting to read some of the comments that I made in that first book—comments that would not be acceptable today with respect to the techniques that Isidor and I used to get our images. I wrote: "People often ask how the birds react to all this equipment. Birds, like people, have their own idiosyncrosies, and some birds will not tolerate the presence of a photographer and the equipment, while others of the same species carry on perfectly normal after a short period of adjustment. To work in such close proximity to a nest requires careful study, and if the adult birds are unwilling to accept the blind, lights, and camera—the project must either be abandoned or started afresh, but from a distance. In most instances, birds are extremely adaptable, and, once they become accustomed to the photographer, are very trusting.

"It is important to realize that, although much time is spent actually doing the photography, the photographer must be prepared to spend many hours in observation, both before and during the shoot. Isidor takes anywhere from three to twenty days to sometimes photograph a single nesting situation. A person who spends this much time and effort in the outdoors, closely observing creatures in the wild, is not likely to damage the environment or leave debris about, but this point cannot be emphasized too strongly. Raccoons, weasels, squirrels, rats, mice, and birds of other species might find and destroy a nest as a result of the photographer's activities. For this reason, tiebacks, ropes, or anything else that might attract the attention of a predator must be removed at the finish of a shooting session.

"Recent gains in the field of electronics have opened new doors for the outdoor photographer. I have just purchased a Dan Gibson parabolic microphone, with which I hope to record the vocalization of breeding birds, and by playing back their own song, bring them into camera range. I actually used the microphone to listen for the adult birds to arrive at the nest.



Northern Flicker, Renfrew, Ontario, 1978.



Belted Kingfisher, Maple Ridge, BC, 1978

Often I'd be dozing off and when I heard the whir of wings I'd come to full alert ready for a photo opportunity. I don't think that using tape recordings during the nesting season is now acceptable. "With all the video equipment now on the market, it is possible that before long a photographer will be able to monitor birds on a television screen and fire the camera by remote control whenever the bird strikes the desired pose. While this might not appeal to the photographer who is also an outdoor enthusiast, it is undoubtedly true that the future holds many new and exciting possibilities." I sincerely feel that this type of bird photography at the nest will be the way of the future with the photographer monitoring the comings and goings of the adults to the nest and firing the camera from a blind that is set up 30-feet or more away from the nest.

I wrote about my challenges attempting to photograph a Common Nighthawk. It was so early on in my bird photography that I used an air release to fire the camera and then had to get out of the blind to recock the camera after each exposure. I certainly crossed the line in my aggressiveness to get photographs: "For some reason I expected the adults to come into the nest

by dropping straight out of the sky. Instead, I saw one of the nondescript brown and black adults waddling towards the nest through the salal. Just before she reached her young, they rushed out to meet her and all the feeding took place behind a stump and out of my field of vision. When the bird flew off I emerged from the blind to reset the camera. In less than two hours the adult birds became so tame that before I was back in the blind from resetting the camera, they would be back tending to their babies. Over the next few days I would allow the female to brood for as long as an hour before I took any photographs. On several occasions I observed one of the parents resting on a burned windfall. Perched sideways, or parallel to the log, the bird was camouflaged so well that it appeared to be the proverbial bump on a log. When it began to rain I took the role of surrogate mother, cupping the two fuzz-balls in my hands, and exhaling warm air onto them—only to have one jump in my mouth. At the end of the fifth day the young had matured to the point where they began to move off into the vegetation, making photography difficult. I was generally pleased with the results, except that I photographed an area two-feet square when all the activity happened within a one-foot square area. However, after cropping the negative, I could tell that I had a parent nighthawk and her two chicks." I believe that this type of photography would today certainly come under the category of harassment and could be subject to criminal charges under the Migratory Birds Convention Act that carries a maximum fine of \$1,000,000 for an individual.

I wrote: "The American Dipper is one of the many birds to take full advantage of the seasonal abundance of food on Blaney Creek. Each year, near the end of April, Peamouth Chub ascend the creek as far as the falls to spawn. Over a four day period, the creek is choked with spawning fish, and then, as quickly as they appeared, the chub disappear down the creek. Their eggs, encased in an adhesive gooey substance, stick to the rocky creek bottom to a depth of one to three inches. I often watched in amazement as adult dippers, standing chest deep in peamouth chub eggs, gorged themselves until they were almost unable to fly. The same month, chum salmon fry are released by

the Fisheries Department from the hatchery's holding tanks, located less than half a mile above the falls. It is little wonder that the dippers often choose to build their nests along the creek. Appearing almost tail-less, and slate gray in color, this plump, robin-sized bird of the fast flowing creeks has the characteristic habit of continually bobbing up and down while resting. Capable of walking underwater, the bird has a nictating eyelid, similar to goggles worn by a skin diver. As protection against cold water, it has a secondary coat of oily down, making it unique among land birds.

It was not until 1982 that I finally got my chance to photograph the dipper. I found the nest in the early part of May just above the falls on Blaney Creek and deduced that it should be ready for photography around the beginning of June. For several evenings I observed this pair feeding, marvelling at their musical communications. A few days after the young hatched, Stan and I began to set up. We discovered that early morning was the best time to photograph these birds. Shortly after 6:00 a.m., the female flew out of the nest. In the first hour she made four trips back with two-inch-long salmon fry. Her movements soon became totally predictable. Landing at the water's edge just below the nest, she carved the fry in half by rubbing it against a rock. She then landed on a rock outcropping adjacent to the nest, and after a moment's hesitation fed the two halves to the first two young to poke their heads out of the nest. She soon became so accustomed to our presense that when I placed my hand in front of her nest, she would serve the food to her young between my fingers. Around 7:00 a.m. the male made an appearance. He was much chunkier than his mate, not surprising since he averaged one trip to the female's four, and usually brought stonefly or mayfly nymph, and by 10:00 a.m., when it became quite warm, the feeding trips dwindled to one every two hours."

I never wrote about the fun that I had with Stan photographing the dippers nor did I mention that the nest was located underneath a bridge that crossed over Blaney Creek just above the falls. Stan and I used a step-ladder and six-foot tripod to set up my equipment in the middle of the creek. By this time I had purchased a 100-foot electric cable release with which to fire

the electric camera. For a couple of consecutive days, Stan and I had arranged to arrive out at the dipper nest at 6:00 a.m. Instead of packing up each evening upon leaving, we left most of the equipment covered over with large black garbage bags to speed setting up in the mornings. One morning I arrived out at the nest location only to observe Stan positioning the lights in readiness for the morning's photography session. I had managed to lower myself down a steep embankment to the end of the 100-foot cable without Stan seeing me. I fired the camera when one of the plate-sized strobes was not more than a foot in front of Stan's face. Predictably, he did a recoil but then started carefully to look at the camera in an attempt to determine why the unit had fired. A short time later I revealed my position only to have Stan announce, "Now I know how the birds feel the first time they get their picture taken!"

I wrote in the book: "The years 1976 through 1980 could be categorized as expensive learning experiences and the best advice I could ever give anyone breaking into the field of bird photography would be to apprentice with someone who has "been through the ropes". During those 4-years I spent considerably more time setting up and tearing down my equipment than actually taking photographs. My initial aim was for quantity; not quality, and one day I prided myself on having photographed three different species in a single day. That short paragraph surely shows where my priorities were in the beginning stages of my bird photography and no doubt the birds suffered because of my ignorance.

I once tried to photograph Belted Kingfishers either entering or exiting the burrow entrance with a good-sized fish but always seemed to only get a head or tail or nothing at all. This was very early on in my bird photography and unknown to me the long duration of the flash unit that I was using was incapable of stopping the bird in flight and all the photographs were blurred. Frustrated, I later opted to partially block the burrow entrance with a stick hoping that the bird might land at a location of my choosing. My strategy worked but my tactics were totally unethical." This was another example that would certainly be categorized as harassment and subject to heavy fines.