



A female Rufous Hummingbird hovers over her two young.

University of British Columbia's Cowan Vertebrate Museum. This class dramatically increased my knowledge and interest in all things avian.

In the spring of 1990, shortly after I completed the course, I had no idea that a phone call I made to a Vancouver camera store would change my life. I had called about camera-triggering devices for wildlife, and the lady who answered suggested I call a Don Waite in Maple Ridge. She assured me that he would know what I needed and that he would be willing to help me. Don pointed me in the right direction and even offered me the chance to photograph birds with him. He was to become my close friend and mentor.

After working with Don for a short time, I found myself hooked on the challenge of using multiple high-speed strobes to capture birds in flight.

If every photographer could afford to use the set-up Don has, we would be seeing a lot more pictures of birds in flight. The use of two off-set front light strobes, with a third strobe for rim and backlighting, creates a balanced and soft lighting set-up for nesting birds. The background is lit well with this method and complements the subjects, while the intense burst of light the strobes produce allows you to shoot at shutter speeds of up to 1/10,000th of a second—enough to freeze even the fastest of hummingbird wing beats. The bright flash of the strobes also enables you to shoot at f-stops of up to f 40, giving great depth of field. Even with very slow film, which yields impressive resolution and detail, this light is more than sufficient, and all of this illumination can be powered by a 12-volt motorcycle battery. Add to this set-up a blind that you can place very close to the nesting birds without disturbing them, and a top-of-the-line Nikon D70S digital camera with a 70–300 mm zoom lens, and you have all the tools for success in bird photography—although that success is not achieved without plenty of struggle.

The first time I went bird watching with Don we found the nest of a Golden-crowned Kinglet. I spotted the bird carrying food, and within a couple

of minutes Don located the nest about fifteen feet up in a conifer. I climbed up to the nest and saw several fully feathered young looking back at me. After our first outing, I naively thought that locating nests would be relatively easy; however, neither Don nor I have been able to find another kinglet nest since, and I have come to realize just how difficult it is to find birds' nests—let alone photograph them.

In 2003 I had an opportunity to spend a few months in Dawson City, Yukon Territory, as an actor in "The Palace Grand Prize," which was playing at the restored Palace Grand Theatre, built in 1899. I persuaded Don to lend me some of his camera equipment so I could photograph on my own for the first time. Don impressed upon me the importance of detailed note-taking while I photographed birds; we both agreed that it would be a valuable endeavour. I prepared thoroughly by researching the birds of the region and by getting advice from Cameron Eckert, a government naturalist and Yukon bird expert.

The following spring, I purchased my Nikon D70 camera and returned to Dawson City with Don's lighting equipment. It was during this second season there that I reaped the benefits of fifteen years of steady work; I finally began to get those ideal shots that up to then had eluded me. I'd often take 500-plus shots in a day, deleting any missed shots from the memory card. But the biggest bonus (and perhaps surprise) was how quickly the birds adapted to the presence of my blind and the flashes from the strobe lights.

A photographer must always balance the welfare of the birds being disturbed with the educational good his photographs will do. It is a delicate balance, and I have learned to take great care when photographing nesting birds to minimize any disruption to their routine. When young birds fledge successfully after a photo shoot, I am relieved and grateful that my presence was not harmful, and that my images may help others to appreciate nature.

My two seasons in the Yukon gave me a