

Nature Photography

Our Backyard
in
Vernon, British Columbia

Alan and Elaine Wilson



Nature Photography

Our Backyard



A Blurb BookWright Publication

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Preface

It's always exciting to be on the road in a quest to capture an elusive species that would make a great addition to our image archives. It was on just such a trip that we were introduced to the concept of "birds-as-art" by a photographer who produced stunning images by creating a "set-piece" using local flora and attracting target species with either feed or water to perch in an environment where light and backdrop could be controlled. What was most compelling about this approach to bird photography was that he was doing this in his backyard! This was certainly a departure from the hours we had invested in walking through natural habitat in varying light and weather conditions trying to isolate a subject in what we hoped would be a natural setting. This brief insight into a technique that had the potential to elevate the quality of our compositions was truly inspiring. We began to research locations that offered photographers access to property that was specifically designed to attract birds and wildlife to settings where the critical elements of composition could be controlled – setting, light and background. Our first foray into this new field was on a trip to Texas where we discovered the Lens and Land program, a series of ranches that catered to set-piece photographers. This led us to locations in Arizona, most notably the Pond at Elephant Head and the Drip at Madera Canyon. All were truly great locations for bird and wildlife photographers dedicated to elevating their craft to a more artistic level. We were now "hooked" and soon began assembling a kit that we could take on our travels that contained all the tools necessary to construct a set-piece while on-the-go, items such as pruning shears, zap straps, clamps, a portable blind and, of course, a selection of seeds. We've visited many great locations that offered unfettered public access where we could practice this new craft with relatively few disturbances, our favorite being the Cabin Lake "guzzlers" near Fort Rock in Oregon.

As our learning curve developed, it certainly wasn't much of a stretch to introduce the techniques that we had practiced while on the road to try and attract birds to our property in Vernon, British Columbia. The arid climate of the north Okanagan region is well suited for the creation of a water attraction. Our home is situated on a large, private, open treed landscape that is attractive to a variety of resident and migrant species including California Quail, Ring-Necked Pheasant, Northern Flickers, American Goldfinch, Pine Siskin, Bohemian and Cedar Waxwings, Black-Capped and Mountain Chickadees as well as the ubiquitous Barn and Tree Swallows that seem to breed everywhere.

It took several years to develop a landscape conducive to attracting a wide variety of species. We finally started our program by introducing bird boxes, suet cages and a combination of tube and platform feeders to various locations on the property where a portable perch setup could be positioned to take advantage of natural light with decent backdrops. Adding hummingbird feeders in late April also helped attract Rufous, Calliope and the odd Black-Chinned that migrate and nest in our area annually.

It wasn't long before our yard was teeming with birds. Unfortunately, they were quickly followed by a host of hungry raptors, notably a Merlin Falcon, an American Kestrel, several Red-Tailed Hawks and on occasion a Cooper's and Sharp Shinned Hawk. There's nothing like a bird feeder for providing an easy meal. The real blight was Black-Billed Magpies that continually scavenged and excelled at nest robbing, although we enjoyed "baiting" them with peanuts in-the-shell as they are incredibly beautiful to photograph. Although the birds we managed to attract are, in some respects, fairly pedestrian, the backyard hours we spent trying to improve our composition skills went a long way to advancing our approach to bird photography.

This book hopefully provides insight into how our backyard experience evolved, from creating a conducive landscape to attracting and photographing subjects in-habitat, through controlled set-piece attractions and, in the case of hummingbirds, using a high-speed flash setup. As serendipity inevitably plays an important role in all nature photography, we've included images of a few unexpected visitors that "dropped in" and we were fortunate to catch a glimpse of. It was exciting to be constantly surrounded by birds and wildlife year-round and great fun trying to photograph the experience. It certainly taught us that a backyard can be a truly great place to learn the basics of bird and wildlife photography.

Alan D. and Elaine R. Wilson
Vernon, British Columbia

Our Vernon Property

We retired to Vernon in late 2010, a small rural community in central British Columbia where we purchased a home on seven acres located on the western edge of the city. It's a tremendous view property overlooking Okanagan Lake and we felt a premier spot not only for privacy but also to attract local and migrant birds and wildlife. Although the geography of the North Okanagan is relatively open and typical of semi-arid, sage brush grassland, the actual property had several large trees surrounded with dwarf Mountain Pine, Oregon Grape, Staghorn Sumac and a variety of fruit trees planted by the original owners. It's an area that thrives on irrigation and the basic property foliage and open space made great habitat for birds to forage, nest and feel secure.

The images on the following pages hopefully provide a sense of the final layout we developed. It was an immense task. Although we did build a large workshop, the real core of the redevelopment was the creation of a landscape that was not only easy to maintain but also conducive to our photography plans. The land had been neglected for several years and the fruit trees needed to be pruned and culled as we were overwhelmed with the amount of fruit we had to deal with each year. Nonetheless, the bird attractions we envisioned became a mainstay of our redevelopment design and within two years we had completed the rudiments of the landscape we had envisioned and began to build or acquire most of the feeder and nesting boxes that were central to the set-piece program we were keen to implement. It was a labor of love and soon proved to be a mainstay in the evolution of our nature photography experience.

SPRING BLOOM

Bella Vista Road, Vernon, British Columbia







**NORTH
VIEW**



**SOUTH
VIEW**

**EAST
VIEW**



**WEST
VIEW**



WORKSHOP





DRIVEWAY WILLOWS
Bella Vista Road Entrance, Vernon, British Columbia



SUMMER SQUALL
View From the Front Patio

EAST VIEW
Fire Pit



EAST VIEW
Lower Meadow







Attracting Birds and Wildlife

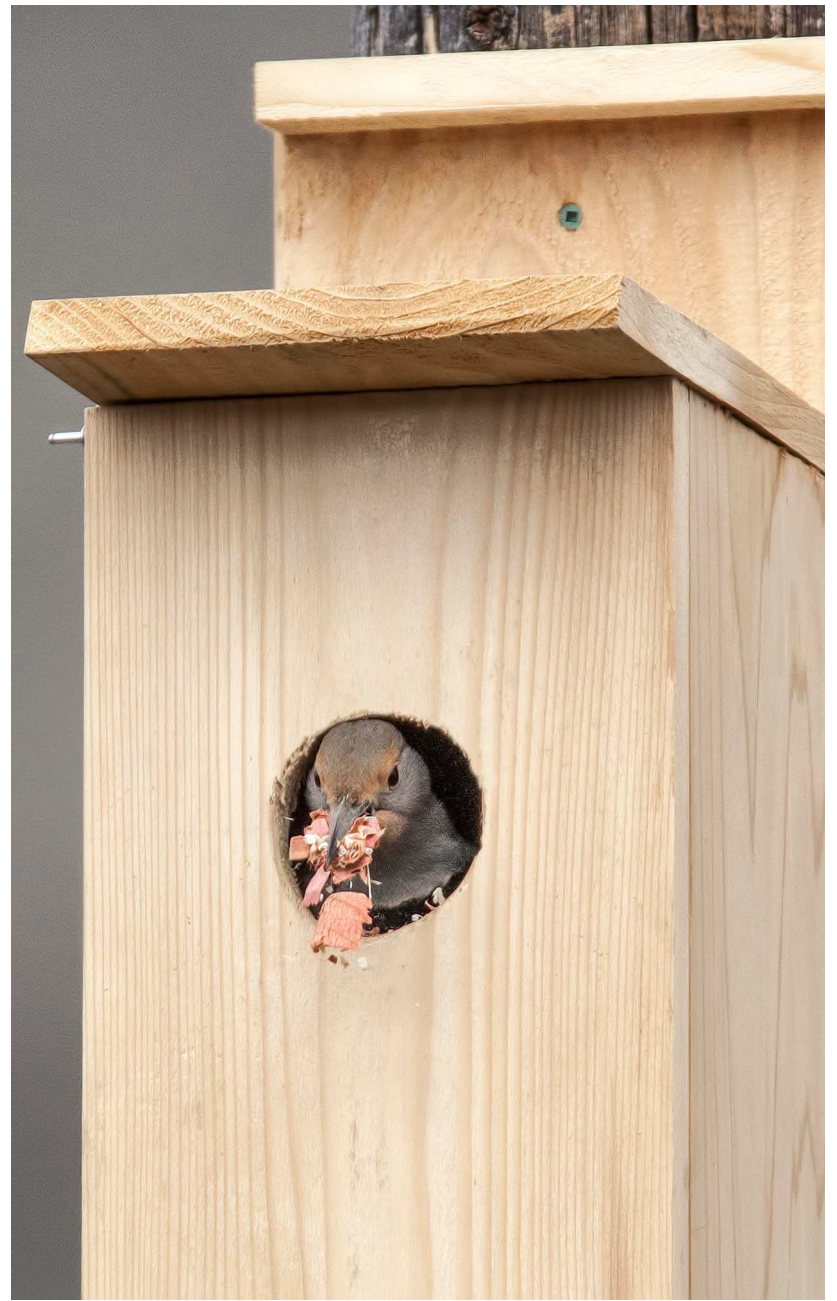
It took some time for resident and migrant birds to arrive in numbers and begin to settle into the routine of raising young. Birds require an environment where they can forage and raise their young in relative safety. It is important to place feeders next to trees or bushes where they can retreat and hide from predators. Moreover, nesting boxes must be custom made to accommodate the size of the birds being attracted, specifically the entrance hole and depth of the inner cavity. Wrens, Sparrows and Swallows require smaller holes than Northern Flickers. The latter can only be enticed to a nest box filled with compacted wood chips that can be “cleared-out” in much the same fashion as removing pulp from a rotting stump where they usually make their home.

The nesting boxes we placed on our property were spaced widely apart and constructed to attract a wide variety of resident and migrant birds. We did have initial problems with predators, notably an American Kestrel that was adept at stealing young that made for an easy meal. Moreover, several boxes we designed were just large enough to accommodate European Starlings. These we soon took down as Starlings are a menace and the scourge of local orchards. The following pages contain images of several that were successfully inhabited, mostly by Northern Flickers, House Sparrows and House Wrens.

Our feeding program began with a series of ground and elevated tube stations filled with either wheat kernels or black oils. We placed these in several locations that we used for photographing subjects in-habitat. Once we began to observe and understand their respective foraging and nesting behaviors, we progressed to set-piece creations to attract targeted species into what we hoped would produce more artistic compositions.

NORTHERN FLICKER (MALE)

Checking Out a Nesting Box



NORTHERN FLICKER NESTING BOX

Female Showing Some Interest then Clearing Out the Wood Chips



DESIGNER NESTING BOX

Simple Set-Piece Photography

Although the techniques used to attract birds to a set-piece are numerous, they usually have several elements in common – feed, water or sound. Our approach relied solely on feed and although simplistic, tended to be quite productive.

The Staging Approach

Observing bird behavior is the first step in creating a compelling set-piece. The objective is to entice birds to perch in a setting that closely matches their natural habitat. Sparrows, Finches and Pine Siskins will quickly gravitate to a feeder, especially one stocked with a mixture of small seeds or shelled black oils. We use a covered, vertical tube feeder with several openings and small horizontal perches for easy access. We would place this in a large apricot tree and let the birds feed for several days and become acclimatized to using this as a secure place to forage.

Most birds using this type of feeder as a food source usually “stage” prior to eating. In other words, the most aggressive birds would eat first, and the others would slowly descend through the branches awaiting their turn. This is a predictable behavior as there are a limited number of feeding holes to accommodate the number of birds trying to reach them.

The next step is to clamp a pleasing branch, usually one with early spring blossoms, to a tripod and clip away leaves and twigs in a small area where the staging birds can perch. This is then positioned next to the feeder and adjusted for the composition we had in mind taking light and backdrop into account. Now it's simply a matter of covering all but one of the feeder access holes with duct tape and removing the bottom tray. This limits the ability to feed to only the most aggressive birds and forces the others to stage, hopefully on the branch we've conveniently placed next to the feeder. This technique can be extremely productive and was used to capture the image of the White-Crowned Sparrow on the opposite page.

WHITE CROWNED SPARROW
Set-Piece on Blooming Apricot Branch





A Mating Season Tactic

Male birds, especially Quail and Pheasants, tend to search out a high point to announce their presence with whatever mating call they use to attract nearby females. We observed Ring-Necked Pheasants using the upper fence rails in our yard to garner an elevated viewpoint where they could simultaneously call and beat their wings during mating season. We built a set-piece overlooking our lower meadow using an old, orange colored cedar log surrounded with bright green Oregon Grape branches zap strapped to stakes in the ground. This highpoint was a location one male Ring-Necked Pheasant consistently used during mating season. We baited it with black oils and wheat seeds to encourage daily foraging and were suitably rewarded with what became a predictable early morning event. It didn't take long for him to climb our set-piece log and begin using it as a highpoint for his mating calls. The composition on the right is one of many images we captured during his quest to attract females. We used a similar tactic to encourage male California Quail to perch on a rock set-piece we created. The trick we used here was to place a small concealed ramp baited with wheat kernels behind the stacked rocks to entice feeders to get to the top. We spent many enjoyable hours photographing their antics as they usually travel in large groups, moving throughout our property to the many baited areas we had set aside as forage attractions.

Although these setups are simple and the subjects fairly pedestrian, the techniques used produced some pleasing images and created a venue for us to observe bird behavior and learn the tactics required to have them perch in just the right position. Understanding the habits of birds and controlling the photography experience is the key to developing truly compelling compositions.

The image notations used in this book are qualified as either taken by chance “In-Habitat” or from a “Set-Piece” constructed for the purpose of controlling light and background to create a more artistic composition.



RING-NECKED PHEASANT (MALE)
Set-Piece on Cedar Log with Oregon Grape Branches



AMERICAN GOLDFINCH AND WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW
Set-Piece on Cherry Blossom Branch

**AMERICAN GOLDFINCH
(JUVENILE)**

Set-Piece on Cherry Blossom Branch



**AMERICAN GOLDFINCH
(FEMALE)**

Set-Piece on Cherry Blossom Branch



HOUSE FINCH (MALE)
Set-Piece on Blue Spruce Branch

HOUSE FINCH (FEMALE)
Set-Piece on Blue Spruce Branch





CALIFORNIA QUAIL (MALE)
Set-Piece on Cedar Log with Oregon Grape Branches

CALIFORNIA QUAIL (MALE)
Set-Piece on Rock



CALIFORNIA QUAIL (MALE)
Set-Piece on Cedar Log with Oregon
Grape Branch and Berries



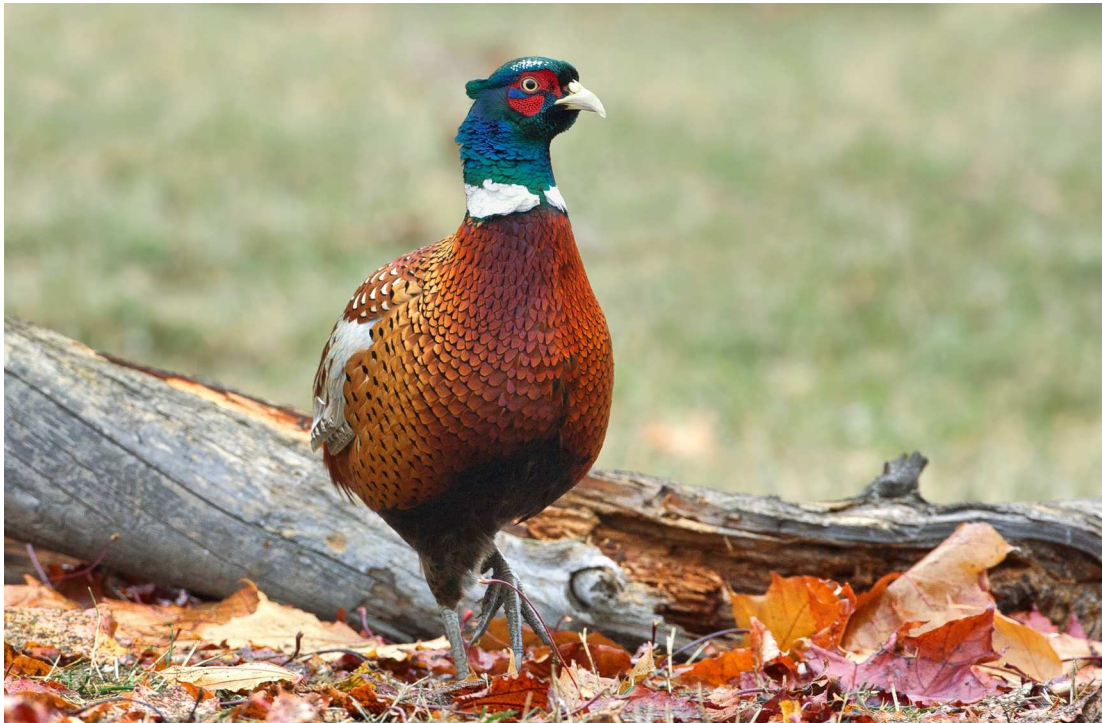
**AMERICAN ROBIN
(YOUNG IN NEST)**
In-Habitat

**AMERICAN ROBIN
(ADULT AND YOUNG IN NEST)**
In-Habitat





AMERICAN ROBIN
In-Habitat



**RING-NECKED
PHEASANT (MALE)**
Set-Piece with Fall Maple Leaves

BOHEMIAN WAXWING
In-Habitat



BOHEMIAN WAXWING
In-Habitat



**RING-NECKED
PHEASANT (FEMALE)**
Set-Piece with Fall Maple Leaves



WESTERN TOAD
Set-Piece on Rock with Vines



MULE DEER (FEMALE)
In-Habitat

**CANADIAN
TIGER SWALLOWTAIL**
In-Habitat



PACIFIC TREE FROG
Set-Piece on Rock

MERLIN FALCON

In-Habitat



AMERICAN KESTREL (MALE)

In-Habitat



LAZULI BUNTING (MALE)

In-Habitat



COMMON REDPOLL (MALE)

Set-Piece on Pine Branch



BULLOCK'S ORIOLE (MALE)
Set-Piece on Apricot Branch

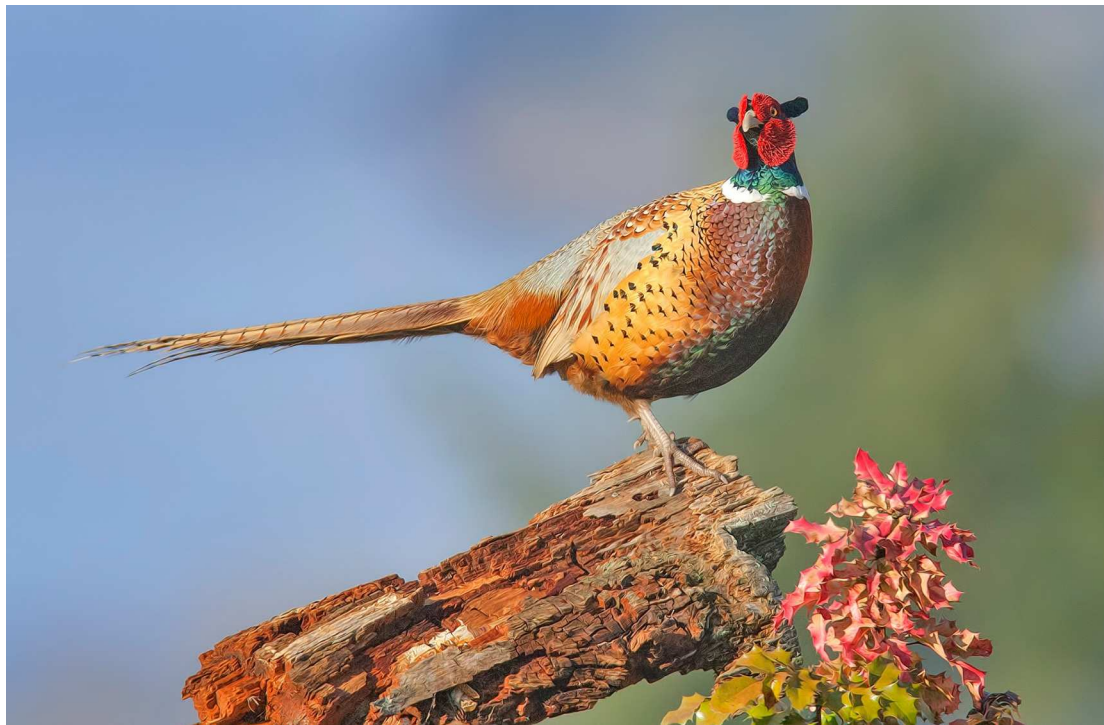


GREAT-HORNED OWL (FEMALE AND JUVENILE)

In-Habitat



SHARP-SHINNED HAWK
In-Habitat



**RING-NECKED
PHEASANT (MALE)**
Set-Piece on Cedar Log with Oregon
Grape Branch

**RING-NECKED
PHEASANT (MALE)**
In-Habitat





RING-NECKED PHEASANT (MALE)
In-Habitat



HOUSE FINCH (MALE AND FEMALE)
Set-Piece on Hawthorn Berry Branch

**EURASIAN
COLLARED DOVE**
In-Habitat



**HOUSE
WREN**
In-Habitat



CALIFORNIA QUAIL (MALE)
Set-Piece on Stump with Local Flora



CALIFORNIA QUAIL (MALE)
Set-Piece on Rock with Local Flora



CALIFORNIA QUAIL
(CHICK)
In-Habitat

CALIFORNIA QUAIL
(CHICKS)
In-Habitat





BLACK-BILLED MAGPIE
Set-Piece on Stump with Dried Thistle



COOPER'S HAWK
In-Habitat

MOURNING DOVE
Set-Piece on Decaying Western
Juniper Branch



**BLACK-CAPPED
CHICKADEE**
Set-Piece on Cherry Blossom Branch



BLACK-BILLED MAGPIE
In-Habitat

HOUSE FINCHES (MALE)
In-Habitat



PINE SISKIN
Set-Piece on Willow Catkin



GRAY CATBIRD
Set-Piece on Mugo Pine Branch



RING-NECKED PHEASANT (FEMALE)
Set-Piece with Fall Maple Leaves and Burned Stump



CALIFORNIA QUAIL (FEMALE)
Set-Piece on Cedar Stump with Oregon Grape Branch



STAGING SETUP



HIGH-SPEED FLASH SETUP





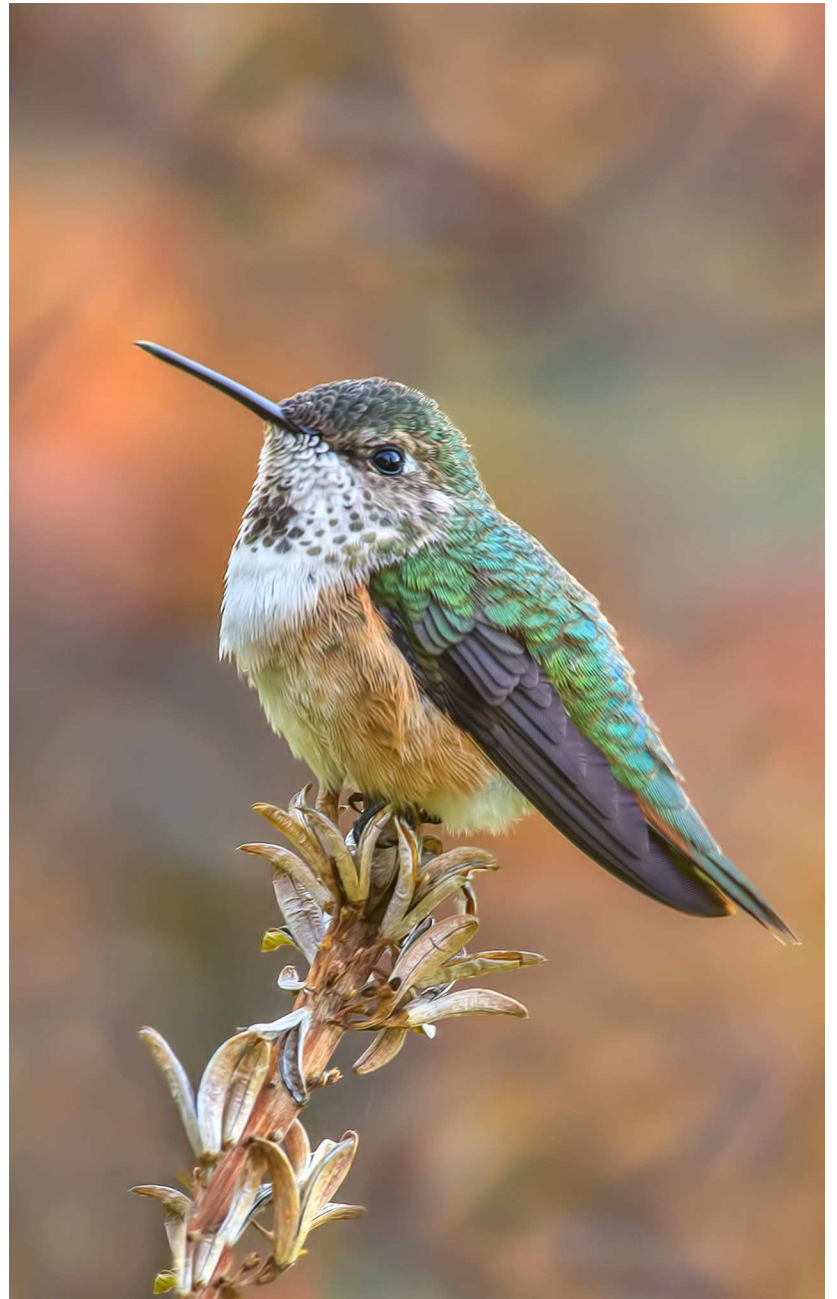
Hummingbirds and High-Speed Flash

Hummingbird photography can be truly addictive. They are easy to attract but the techniques used to capture images vary tremendously. Our preferred method was to use a high-speed flash arrangement that effectively killed all ambient light at the feeder setup such that the frenetic beating of their wings could be “frozen” in a moment of time. Although we prefer not to use flash in any of our bird and wildlife photography, we couldn’t find any research material that indicated what harm it might cause a feeding hummingbird (unlike an owl, where we had read that it can cause damage to their eyes). We arrange four low-power flash “slaves” controlled by a “master” wireless unit on the hot shoe of a camera body, three on the bird and one on the background. This is a simple method of capturing an image of a bird in mid-air with its wings in a stationary position. We would then merge this image with a second photograph of a flower where the background had been given a mottled or blurred effect in Photoshop. Although the ethics of this is a hotly debated subject, professional bird photographers feel this is a legitimate method for displaying what is essentially a photograph of a hummingbird. Several species frequent our property between late April and the end of July. The following pages contain images we’ve taken using the method described above.

Hummingbirds also make frequent rest stops in a tree or the upper branches of a bush. In the case of this latter perch, it’s easy to place several set-piece arrangements close by but slightly higher than the sugar feeder and sit patiently to see if they will try them out. We’ve had good success with this technique and included several images of birds resting on perches we’ve placed next to the feeders hanging on the deck next to our kitchen window. It can be a great show as the males often stretch their wings which tends to extend the gorget in what can be a striking display of color if the bird is positioned to reflect the available light off the throat feathers.

CALLIOPE HUMMINGBIRD (MALE)

High-Speed Flash with Flower Addition



CALLIOPE (MALE) AND RUFOUS (FEMALE) HUMMINGBIRDS
Perching In-Habitat



RUFOUS HUMMINGBIRD (MALE)
Perching In-Habitat



**RUFIOUS
HUMMINGBIRD (MALE)**
High-Speed Flash with Flower
Addition

**CALLIOPE
HUMMINGBIRD (FEMALE)**
High-Speed Flash with Flower
Addition



**CALLIOPE
HUMMINGBIRD (FEMALE)**
High-Speed Flash with Flower
Addition



**RUFIOUS
HUMMINGBIRD (FEMALE)**
High-Speed Flash with Flower
Addition



RUFOUS HUMMINGBIRD (MALE)
Perching In-Habitat



RUFOUS HUMMINGBIRD (FEMALE)
Perching In-Habitat



**CALLIOPE
HUMMINGBIRDS
(MALE)**

**RUFIOUS
HUMMINGBIRDS
(FEMALE)**





RUFOUS HUMMINGBIRD (FEMALE)
High-Speed Flash with Flower Addition

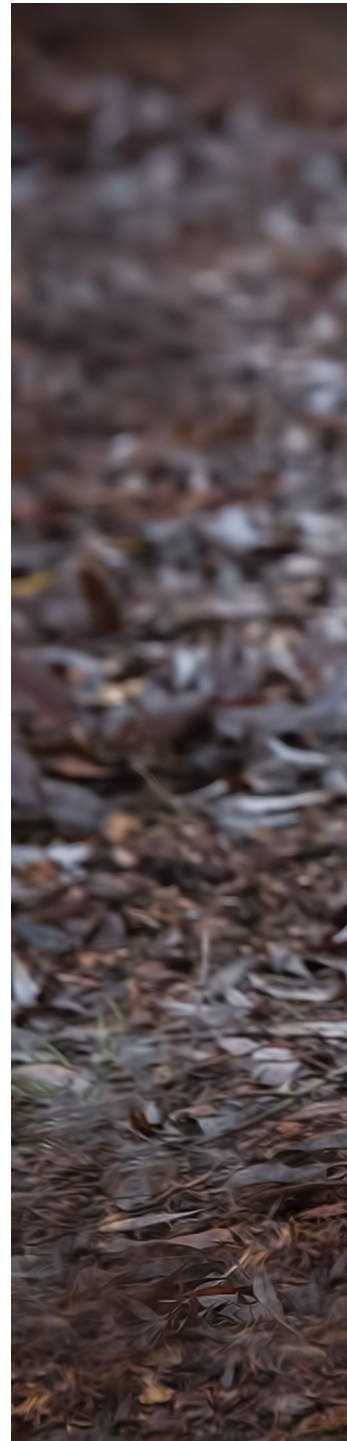
Some Unexpected Visitors

Serendipity plays a crucial role in nature photography as it's almost axiomatic that a rare bird or wandering wildlife will suddenly appear when least expected. This happened many times on our property, usually with owls or an off-track migrant. However, Bobcat, Porcupine, Yellow-Bellied Marmot and Coyote do frequent the area, as do hordes of Mule Deer that graze on the nearby hill slopes and love to get into the orchards and munch on leaves and low hanging fruit.

The following pages contain images of birds and wildlife that have popped-in unexpectedly and which we were lucky to photograph. The Bobcat, however, proved to be not only a challenge but also great fun. We found it sleeping next to an abandoned dog house near our workshop, not exactly a stellar position or great setting for a compelling photograph. Over the next week we placed pig bones as bait in an area where we had setup an old log that had a decent backdrop. The bones would, of course, disappear daily so we were confident that our visitor had decided to stick around. We setup our portable blind and nailed a pig bone to the log as a tactic to make quick removal somewhat of an onerous task. The result was a good thirty-minute session photographing a frustrated but determined Bobcat as it slowly pried lunch free from the log. This was a young animal, so the ear tufts were not as fully formed as we would have liked but the images were much better than we could have achieved if we had encountered one in the wild.

The rarest visitor we ever had was a Long-Tailed Weasel. We were having our usual morning tea enjoying some warm summer weather when it suddenly appeared under a nearby apricot tree with a California Quail in its mouth. It was quite a sight, covered with pine needles and feathers from the recent kill activity and hardly what we would consider photogenic. Our cameras are always close by and were rewarded as it soon returned in relatively pristine condition and proceeded to scurry back and forth checking us out. It was an incredible experience as we have only encountered them in the wild on rare occasions.

BOBCAT (JUVENILE)
In-Habitat from a Portable Blind





Another chance encounter happened one winter morning as we were clearing snow from our driveway. After closing the gate and beginning up the hill on the tractor, we noticed a Long-Eared Owl roosting in a Willow tree. This was a subject we had spent hours trying to track down and never completely succeeded as they tend to hunker down during the day in deep foliage where a compelling photograph is virtually impossible to capture, even a decent documentary image. What luck to see one in the open with a good background and incredibly in our backyard! This bird was much farther north than its usual habitat and a rare find in the Vernon area.

Visitors such as those described above don't happen often but are an exciting event in rural life. We learned early on to keep equipment at hand and were lucky to capture the odd image from several unexpected but compliant guests. The Porcupine on the opposite page was a regular visitor and loved to dine on pears as they ripened in our orchard during late summer.



PORCUPINE
In-Habitat Foraging on Hawthorn Leaves



LONG-EARED OWL
In-Habitat



LONG-TAILED WEASEL
In-Habitat

Night Photography

Photographing star trails is a unique way to capture an image of the night sky. The technique uses long exposure times to capture the apparent motion of stars due to the Earth's rotation. A single star-trail photograph shows individual stars as streaks, with longer exposures yielding longer arcs.

Night photography is not something that can be done just anywhere. The basic requirements are a clear, moonless night with an unobstructed view of the Big Dipper and North Star. The sky must also be devoid of light pollution, usually found near large communities. Lastly, the artistic effect of the composition can be enhanced if the star trails can be balanced with a foreground object such as a mountain or lake. If it is a windless night, a tree can be ideal. The objective is to take a series of sequential images from a tripod, typically with a fast lens that is wide open. The results are then post-processed using image stacking and blending software. The result is a single image of the night sky that illustrates the earth's rotation using a time-lapse of a multitude of individual stars.

We've used this technique many times at different locations in western North America, the best being the Mono Lake Tufa State Natural Reserve and Yosemite National Park in California. The image on the right was taken in our backyard during a cold October evening when the conditions were perfect. We used a flashlight to illuminate a large apricot tree which remained motionless as there was no wind.

STAR TRAILS

Bella Vista Road, Vernon, British Columbia







TOTAL "SUPERMOON" LUNAR ECLIPSE - JANUARY 31, 2018
Bella Vista Road, Vernon, British Columbia



TOTAL "FULL WOLF MOON" LUNAR ECLIPSE - JANUARY 21, 2019
Bella Vista Road, Vernon, British Columbia



**PIXEL BENDER OIL PAINTING
MERLIN FALCON “ROOSTING IN THE WILLOWS”**

Our Photography Journey...

The adventure began during the latter part of our careers when we started to ponder the question of what to do during our retirement. We had no objective in mind but finally settled on the combination of travel and nature photography as something that might be an interesting pastime. After months of agonizing research, we became early adopters of Canon's transition from film to digital camera bodies. What started as an overwhelming introduction to an emerging and complex technology soon mushroomed into somewhat of an obsession, especially as we progressed from wandering around local habitat searching for compliant subjects to attracting birds to "sets" we designed and photographed from a blind in our back yard. As we became more proficient behind the camera, we decided to focus our attention on travelling to locations in western North America, targeting sites known for outstanding bird, wildlife and natural landscape photography. Although our approach to stalking subjects "in-the-wild" produced some compelling images, we soon learned that most eye-catching exposures are the result of set-piece creations where subject behavior and ambient light are manipulated in a controlled setting. This is most readily achieved when photographing birds. The concept of "Birds as Art" was first introduced by Arthur Morris and subsequently taken to unprecedented heights as an artform by Alan Murphy. Both photographers raised the bar for what eventually became a photographic standard and one we passionately pursued as an adjunct to the traditional approach of simply searching for subjects in their natural habitat.

Not surprisingly, we were soon overcome with the urge to display and share our images. We began by producing web graphics and hosting an educational blog online for beginner photographers. As the sophistication of the digital darkroom evolved, a host of programs began to appear that elevated post-processing techniques to a new and exciting level. This led us to not only improve our web graphics but also to experiment in-house with the production of large prints on specialty media, including textured watercolor paper and canvas. During this time, we became overwhelmed by the emerging world of digital art, a niche genre designed to create stunning special effects from photographs. At the time of publication, our favorites were Pixel Bender, a Photoshop plug-in with an Oil Paint filter and LucisArt, a standalone program that creates incredible watercolor renditions. Both programs became mainstays in our Photoshop workflow.

This book is our self-published attempt to showcase, in print, a selection of photographs from the backyard of our property in Vernon, British Columbia.

Our Backyard

Nature Photography

Bird, wildlife and natural landscape photography is an enjoyable and absorbing pastime. It's also an immense amount of fun! The advent of the digital camera and image enhancement software has had a significant impact on what was once the domain of professionals and serious amateurs. Today, it's an accessible and affordable hobby, no matter what your level of entry.

Like most photographers, we were soon overcome with the urge to display and share our images. We began with web graphics of photographs captured at outstanding locations throughout western North America, including: Alaska, Alberta, Arizona, British Columbia, California, Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, Nunavut, Oregon, Saskatchewan, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Washington, Wyoming, the Yukon and several sites we visited in eastern Canada.

This book contains selected images from the backyard of our property in Vernon, British Columbia.

