

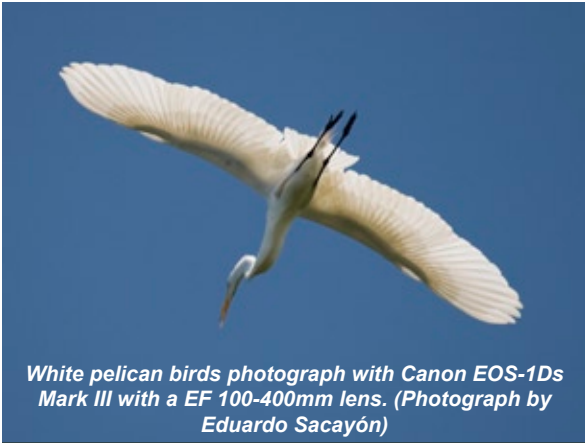
# Photographing Birds



Which lens(es) are best?, Which camera is best?, Medium format?, Large format?  
35mm? Which? Nikon or Canon?, Is point-and-shoot adequate?

Nicholas Hellmuth

Photographs by Eduardo Sacayon and Nicholas Hellmuth



*White pelican birds photograph with Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III with a EF 100-400mm lens. (Photograph by Eduardo Sacayón)*

This report has not been licensed to any camera manufacturer, distributor, dealer, sales rep, media to distribute. So, if you obtained this from any company, you have a pirated copy.

Also, since this report is frequently updated, if you got your version from somewhere else, it may be an obsolete edition. FLAAR reports are being updated all year long, and our comment on that product may have been revised positively or negatively as we learned more about the product from end users.

To obtain a legitimate copy, which you know is the complete report with nothing erased or changed, and hence a report with all the original description of pros and cons, please obtain your original and full report straight from [www.FLAAR.org](http://www.FLAAR.org).

Your only assurance that you have a complete and authentic evaluation which describes all aspects of the product under consideration, benefits as well as deficiencies, is to obtain these reports directly from FLAAR, via [www.wide-format-printers.NET](http://www.wide-format-printers.NET) [www.digital-photography.org](http://www.digital-photography.org)

## Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Large-format for bird photography</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Medium format for bird photography</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>35mm for bird photography</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Which camera, Nikon or Canon?</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>What about Olympus or Pentax, or Minolta (now Sony?)</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>What about Leica?</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Is a Point-and-Shoot digital camera adequate?</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Conclusion: which camera(s) are best for bird photography?</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Which lenses are best?</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>11</b>

## Introduction

For over forty years I have enjoyed looking at books and articles on bird photography. I have always been impressed by the patience these photographers must have. Although I have a few telephoto lenses (a great 250mm for my Leica, but I sent it to Stan Tamarkin and I am not sure I ever received a check before he went out of business). In past decades I had both the 500mm and 350mm for my Hasselblad ELX cameras (in the era of medium format roll film). But I will admit that I tended to avoid photographing birds.

Now, in 2010, photographing birds has become a necessary goal as part of a long-range project to photograph all plants and animals associated with the water-lily eco-system of Guatemala. There are herons, pelicans, and a host of other water-related birds on the rivers, lakes, and mangrove swamp areas where water lilies flourish.

So the first step was to analyze all the forty years accumulation of camera equipment to judge what we could use for photographing birds. Since I had sent my Leica 250mm lens to a Leica dealer on commission years ago (and they went out of business before I got my check, if I remember properly), I did not really have even a basic bird lens. I would consider anything less than 400,, as not adequate even as a starting point. Since the price difference between a 400mm and a serious bird lens of 600mm is the difference between night and day (and the difference between what I had available in funds, and what not), it was an easy decision to select a 100-400mm zoom lens. That way I could cover dozens of species of animals, more than just birds.

We thank Parrot Digigraphic for providing the camera and lens ([www.ParrotColor.com](http://www.ParrotColor.com)). They specialize primarily in printers for fine art photography, décor, and giclee: HP Designjet, Canon iPF, and Epson Stylus Pro.



*Great Egret, photograph with Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III with a EF 100-400mm lens. (Photograph by Eduardo Sacayón)*



*Great Egret birds, photograph with Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III with a EF 100-400mm lens. (Photograph by Eduardo Sacayón)*

## Large-format for bird photography

In the era of film and darkrooms, I used both a 4x5" and also an 8x10" camera. I smile when I hear advertisements claim that any digital camera is as good as a 4x5". And I would laugh if I heard any advertisement claim their digital images are as good as an 8x10". Not even a Gigapan can match an 8x10 (too much distortion and disjointed overlays with even the third generation Gigapan Epic Pro).

But I have not used my large-format film cameras in over 14 years now, and doubt they will be useful during the next decade of my photography. My large-format BetterLight can achieve panoramic views and capture circumferential rollouts that beat any film-based camera of the previous century.

But for bird photography, large format is too bulky except if you shoot from a blind. The bird photography we do in Guatemala is usually from a boat and a tripod is a liability on a moving boat. Sooner or later your tripod, camera, and probably you too would tip over into the crocodile infested river or lake.

So I would not even research large-format digital to attempt to accomplish photographing birds from a boat.



*Great Egret at Monterrico Guatemala, Central America, photograph with Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III with a EF 100-400mm lens. (Photo by Eduardo Sacayón.)*



*Nicholas Hellmuth and Evo Orellana FLAAR helping biologist setting up for bird photography at Monterrico Pacific Cost Guatemala.*



*Nicholas Hellmuth setting up for bird photography at Monterrico Pacific coast Guatemala, with the Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III with a EF 100-400mm lens.*



*Eduardo Sacayón with the Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III with a EF 100-400mm lens doing bird photography.*



*Great Egret bird photograph with Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III with a EF 100-400mm lens. Photograph by Eduardo Sacayón FLAAR photo archive.*

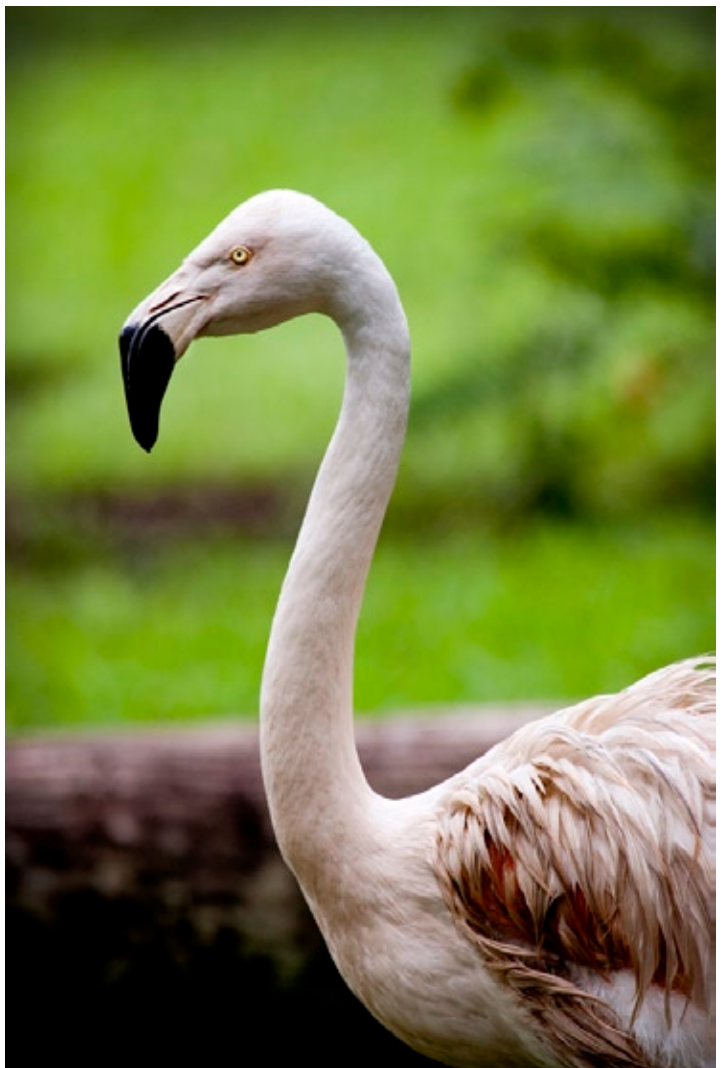


*Great Egret bird photograph with Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III with a EF 100-400mm lens. Photograph by Eduardo Sacayón FLAAR photo archive.*





*Gray Pelican, photograph by Nicholas Hellmuth.*



*Bird photography with Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III with a EF 100-400mm lens.*

## Medium format for bird photography

I am sure there are thousands of photographers who have captured prize-winning images of birds with their medium format cameras. But you would need eternal patience and shoot so many frames (to capture one shot that was in focus), that unless I was in a blind, or otherwise had the camera on a tripod and was on firm ground, would I even consider a medium-format digital camera for bird photography.

I realize that others may be successful with such large heavy cameras, but with aging eyes I can't focus fast enough with a Zeiss lens if both the bird and my boat are moving. Even if the boat were anchored, a bird can fly faster than I can focus manually. I tried to photograph deer (hardly as small as a bird) and the photos with 35mm auto-focus telephoto simply came out consistently better with a 35mm digital camera.

## 35mm for bird photography

Even though a top of the line Nikon or Canon is not exactly a lightweight camera, and even with the weight of a telephone lens, I can handle this without a tripod. A neck-and-chest "tripod" (from Metz Novoflex Wimberly)

## Which camera, Nikon or Canon?

I have three Nikon cameras and four Canon cameras. I have preferred Nikon since they reached pro status a decade before Canon (I used Leica until Nikon became sufficiently good that a 15mm ultra-wide angle Nikkor lens on an F3 was plenty good enough for wide-angle interior photography inside 5<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century Maya temples and palaces). In that year (late 1970's or early 1980's) I never would have considered a Canon. But today, after being disappointed with the Canon EOS 5D and one of the EOS 1d models three years ago (the one that could not read exposure in relative darkness, such as in a cave), the EOS 1Ds Mark III has changed my mind.



*Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III with a EF 100-400mm lens and Nikon D300 with a 200mm lens.*

## What about Olympus or Pentax, or Minolta (now Sony?)

Minolta was a good brand in its day but traditional Japanese style companies took too long to switch from film to digital (Pentax was among the slowest). Minolta never could catch up with Nikon digital or Canon digital, so went belly up. Sony (subsidized with profits from other products) bought the remnants several years ago. Frankly today I would rather have a Sony camera than any Olympus or Pentax. But Sony lacks clout in the world of pros compared to Nikon and Canon.

People who had Olympus or Pentax cameras in the era of Fujifilm or Kodachrome probably tended to buy the same digital camera body as the lenses that they already had. Of course they got caught up in the rhetoric about lens reduction size: the sensors for Olympus and Pentax are simply too small to impress you once you have used a Nikon and especially once you have a full-frame Canon.

But the main issue is lack of new extreme telephoto lenses for second-tier camera brands.

	zoom	400mm	500mm	600mm	700mm	800mm
Canon	100-400mm, \$1610	F2.8, \$7190	F4m 6140	F4, \$8050	None listed	F5.6, \$10,900
Nikon	200-400mm	F2.8	F4	F4	None listed	None listed
Leica	We will continue research at Photokina 2010.					
Sony	70-200mm F2.8G Gold Lens \$1999	70-400mm f4-5.6 GSSM \$1599	500mm F8 Reflex \$749	We will continue research at Photokina 2010		
Olympus	None listed	None listed	None listed	None listed	None listed	None listed
Pentax	F4 300mm \$1327	We will continue research at Photokina 2010				
Sigma	70-200mm F2.8 EX DG OS HSM \$ 2470	120-400mm F4.5-5.6 \$1320	50-500mm F4.5-6.3 \$2400	We will continue research at Photokina 2010		300-800mm F5.6 EX DG APO HSM \$11,500

## What about Leica?

I used only Leica cameas for fifteen years. Then, circa 1970's, I decided to experiment with medium format Hasselblad.

WOW, once I saw the results of Hasselblad, I only used the Leica (and Nikon) when it was not convenient for whatever reason to have a large heavy camera. What really convinced me of the advantages of medium format quality was when I used a medium format projector to give slide lectures with Hasselblad slides.

The quality of the projection of a medium formt slide, whether with a Rollei projector or the remarkable Hasselblad projector, left audiences speechless Actually not totally speechless: all I could hear were oohhs and aahhs.

And this is in comparison with Leica slides using an actual Leica projector (not a Kodak projector). I was a stickler for quality.

I calculated that if a medium format was that much better than 35mm, perhaps I should try a large-format slide projector. In former East Germany I found a company that was still making such projectors, so I tried one. It was not worth the extra cost, so I kept with my medium format system.

I have not used a Leica camera now for over fifteen years. Leica was not successful with digital cameras because a digital camera is best when it has great software inside. Merely having German lenses is not enough in the world of digital imaging. So model after model, the Leica attempts at digital cameras evaporated. I hope their current model is successful, but PhaseOne and Hasselblad are so far ahead, it is barely worth the risk. At Photokina 2010 I will take a peek at the new Leica digital camera, but unless I won the Lottery and had trouble spending millions of sudden surplus money, I doubt I will ever seriously consider a Leica. The photographs from even an only 20-megapixel Phase One, on a twenty-five year old Hasselblad ELX, are plenty good enough.

Plus I doubt that Leica will offer any telephoto lens that would be adequate for serious sustained bird photography.

## **Is a Point-and-Shoot digital camera adequate?**

I have seen professional quality exhibited photos taken with a 4 MB camera (six years ago). If a subject has appropriate light and shadow, color and texture, and composition, any camera can take a professional quality image.

But of a heron a fifty meters away, not many point-and-shoot cameras can match the quality of a DSLR.

If you are close to your subject, then point-and-shoot is acceptable for basic hobby photography, but I doubt if many National Geographic wildlife photos are taken with a point-and-shoot camera.

## **Conclusion: which camera(s) are best for bird photography?**

Skip large-format; forget point-and-shoot. Medium format is okay for really large birds if you have flawless eyes and can find the maximum telephoto lens with adapter to extend its focal length. But the weight of all that, and the number of lost shots, not to mention the cost, rule out my even considering medium format for bird photography sitting in a canoe or other unsteady small boat on some jungle river in Guatemala.

This leaves 35mm, and my instinctive vote would be Nikon or Canon. The smaller the physical dimension of the sensor the more telephoto effect your lens has, but I would rather not experiment with Pentax or Olympus with their image reduction factor due to their small sensors.

## **Which lenses are best?**

Since I don't have x-thousand dollars sitting around to buy the most expensive Nikon or Canon lenses, I settled

for a 100-400mm zoom. This cost less than \$2K and has proven versatile photographing herons and pelicans out in the wild in Guatemala.

If you do bird photography as a serious hobby, or if otherwise you do wildlife photography, then you will have more fun with a ##@ lens.

## Bibliography

I wrote this report from my own experience and from inspecting cameras at Photokina 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, and in a week I will be at Photokina 2010. The bibliography we will be adding as we update this report after attending Photokina 2010.