

GREG DOWNING

PHOTOGRAPHY

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Produced by Greg Downing and Heather Forcier



Burrowing Owls, Florida © Greg Downing

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ST. PAUL ISLAND, THE PRIBILOFS

We are offering a workshop at this amazing and unique place in July 2003. Be sure to check out our April 2003 article on the [Pribilofs, Alaska](#) at [NaturePhotographers.Net](#).

THE BURROWING OWLS OF CAPE CORAL, FLORIDA

Cape Coral is home to Florida's largest population of Burrowing Owls. When development first began in the area of Cape Coral and the land clear-cut for homes, these owls found pleasing habitat in the sandy soil of freshly cleared lots and set up residence.

Aptly named, the owls either create new or make use of abandoned burrows in the ground to live in and nest. They stand approximately nine inches tall and weigh roughly four ounces. Active both during day and night, they can often be seen either peering out of their burrow or standing atop the small mound of sand over it.

As we were scouting areas around the city in search of these owls to photograph, it was disheartening to see many of the vacant lots bulldozed and construction starting on new homes. Scanning from street to street for the telltale markers put up to protect the owls but not finding any active burrows, our concern began to mount about the fate of these small birds.

Several phone calls led us to Susan Scott, a Planning Technician for the City of Cape Coral charged with the protection of the Burrowing Owls amidst new construction. Despite our lack of luck finding burrows in the areas we had been searching, we were reassured that the owls were definitely around. After changing our search to different areas we had greater success.

Upon finding a pair of owls, we carefully approached the burrow. Hearing about them and even seeing photos is nothing compared to being in their presence. Immediately their small size and character is endearing, and it is a treat just to watch them. At first glance you might miss a little round head jutting slightly out of the

burrow; the birds are well camouflaged in their environment. A slow, careful approach can help win their trust.

Inhabiting the burrows in nesting pairs, one or both owls may emerge from the burrow to stand outside of or on top of it. If they start bobbing their heads or become vocal, your presence is disturbing them. You should take several steps back and stop until they appear more comfortable. If they continue to appear agitated, you may have to forgo your visit. However, since the birds live among people, it is more likely they be accepting of you if you invest in the right approach. Be sure not to walk inside the boundary of the burrow's protective markers.



Owl on the Lookout © Greg Downing

We were able to slowly move in to a fairly close vantage point and watch as their little heads swivelled back and forth to take in the surroundings. Eventually they became so accustomed to our presence that they began to doze off. We were able to spend a good amount of time there and at last light, we took our final photos and withdrew, leaving the birds undisturbed.

Many Cape Coral residents help protect their feathered neighbors by placing stakes around the burrow with a string perimeter. Sometimes a



Burrowing Owl, Cape Coral, Florida © Greg Downing

"T" stake is placed behind it for the birds to perch on. Since the burrows don't go very deep, it is important to mark off the area to ensure other traffic, such as riding mowers, doesn't collapse the tunnels below. The owls actually prefer shorter vegetation around the burrows and people are encouraged to maintain their area by trimming longer growth.

The owl's nesting season starts mid-February and extends to mid-July. Neighborhood cats and dogs, as well as some local wild foxes, pose a threat to these ground-dwelling birds. As fledglings learn to fly around May and June they sometimes end up in roads and their inexperience around cars can prove fatal.

New construction in areas of active burrows must either maintain a protected area with a ten-foot radius from the burrow, or must be postponed until after nesting season. A permit from Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission must be issued in order for builders to destroy an empty nest. The owls, burrows, and nests are protected from harassment or disturbance by state law.

The City of Cape Coral promotes a "Starter Burrow" program. Citizens wishing to attract an owl pair can dig a small hole in an open area safe from flooding on their property before the start of nesting season in February. Placement of a "T" perch can further help to attract the birds. Owls nesting for the first time or previously displaced due to construction may be drawn in to the starter burrow and take up residence. Construction sites having obtained permits to destroy existing burrows are encouraged to consider these starter burrows to help replace lost habitat.

While no formal counts have been conducted for the Burrowing Owl population of Cape Coral, the residents and City appear to be making an effort to arrest the declining numbers.

TRAVEL TIPS FOR PHOTOGRAPHERS

Whether taking a day trip or venturing out on an extended photo safari, proper planning is key to ensure you maximize your time in the field.

Having done quite a bit of traveling, we try to continually improve the process. We are also constantly learning new things from other photographers. If you have a travel tip you'd like to share, please be sure to email us as we plan to make travel ideas a common topic in future newsletters.

Before setting off to our destination we are sure to check the weather via the internet, times of sunrise and sunset, and if applicable, the tides. We create a trip envelope with area maps, directions to specific shooting locations, hotel addresses, phone numbers, and other important information. We call hotels directly, not just the chain but the physical location we will be at, before leaving to confirm our reservations. It has become standard for us to get people's names for any kind of confirmation.

Our camera gear is packed into backpack-style Lowepro camera bags with as many items as can be safely placed in there with adequate padding. The removable separators are great for customizing the bags in different scenarios.

Upon arrival at our destination we mount our cameras on the tripods and affix the flash units, even if flash doesn't appear to be necessary. We carry this over the shoulder.

For shorter trips in the field, such as two to four hours, we transfer items such as teleconverters, digital media, and spare batteries to smaller packs that fit around the waist.

For lengthier outings we utilize smaller Lowepro backpacks to fill with additional lenses and other items that may be needed.

Some of the more unique or overlooked things we typically have with us are:

Hakuba digital media carry cases

We have both the two flashcard case with convenient clip and the hard case for four flashcards. Blank cards are placed with the card front visible, filled cards with the card back visible.

Bulb blower in a sealed plastic bag

Especially necessary for digital shooters wishing to clean dust of sensors but also great for blowing small collections of sand out of lenses and off other gear. The plastic bag is to help minimize sand, dirt, moisture, or anything else from getting inside the bulb blower.

Large paintbrushes

Great for dusting sand off equipment before repacking it.

Original equipment wrenches or other tools

You never know when a bolt on your tripod may become loose, or when you otherwise might need these tools.

Powerstrip

For trips with hotel stays, having a powerstrip is very convenient.

Computer related items

An external harddrive is peace of mind for backing up laptop files, or even writing to it directly if the laptop harddrive becomes full. Carrying our original software installation CDs with us has already made a difference in our travels.

Ducttape

You never know when you might need it or what for, but it can help to have it if you've got the room.

Additionally, we always carry sunblock, and almost always have bug repellent with us as well. But we are cautious not to get these chemicals on our photography equipment.



Greg at Estero

© Heather Forcier

EQUIPMENT REVIEW**Sigma 50-500mm f/4.0-6.3 EX APO RF HSM
Autofocus Lens for Nikon AF-D
By Heather Forcier**

When I started in wildlife photography, I would leave the field almost every time wishing I had a longer lens. In researching my options I quickly realized that telephoto lenses were a serious investment. On a budget and just beginning as a photographer, I couldn't justify several thousands of dollars, so a review of the Sigma 50-500mm lens in a photo magazine captured my attention.

A cost effective solution to my dilemma, the Sigma 50-500mm appeared to have all the features I was looking for. I made the purchase, and it quickly became the lens mounted on my camera almost exclusively.

The ten times magnification factor available with this lens allows for a lot of versatility in the field. On my early photographic journeys I could easily frame scenics in countless ways, or switch to photographing wildlife with the telephoto range.



A durable tripod mount allows adjustment from horizontal to vertical compositions, and a zoom lock prevents "lens creeping" for subjects such as birds in flight. Even extended to 500mm f6.3, the Nikon dynamic auto focus tracks admirably as the Sigma's quiet Hyper Sonic Motor (HSM) auto focuses on the subject.

Weighing in at just over four pounds in addition to a camera body there's no question when it's in the pack! But with such a zoom range, other



lenses can be left at home. Minimum focus distance is approximately three feet at 50mm (and roughly ten at 500mm), allowing close work with flowers and smaller animals or birds. Magnification is listed as 1:5.2. At 50mm the lens is eight and a half inches long, fitting nicely into a Lowepro Mini Trekker bag; extended it reaches about thirteen. The lens hood that comes with the lens can add another three inches but reverses for packing.

I had my share of minor incidents while carrying this lens, yet it has been durable and continued working throughout. It's been used in cold enough weather that my film stopped advancing, as well as in hot and humid weather, with no perceptible change in performance.

The versatility of this lens, especially combined with its price, made getting into nature photography feasible for me. This lens may be all some photographers need in their camera bag.

About the Photos

Purple Sandpiper, Barnegat, New Jersey. Captured with Nikon D1, Sigma 50-500mm lens at 420mm (effectively 630mm with the camera's magnification factor), tripod mounted. There were groups of these birds moving over the rocks and the zoom range provided some flexibility in framing to help isolate one bird and still capture it in its entirety.

Lily close up from a vase of flowers. Captured with Nikon D1, Sigma 50-500mm lens at 370mm (effectively 555mm with the camera's magnification factor), tripod mounted. The image was cropped from a horizontal composition to a vertical one, and then some.

FLORIDA BIRD PHOTOGRAPHY

Bird photography in Florida is an amazing experience. Timing our March Avian Photographic Workshops from the 4th to the 12th to coincide with the breeding period for many wading birds, we found some birds resplendent in their peak breeding plumage. Areas we visited include:

Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary
 Sanibel and Captiva Islands
 Estero Lagoon
 Cape Coral
 Eco and Mrazek Ponds (Everglades)
 Shark Valley (Everglades)
 Anhinga Trail (Everglades)
 Fort Desoto
 Venice Rookery

Several locations had an abundance of birds, while others had quieter activity but the birds that were present were treasures to find. Fairly acclimated to human presence, most of the birds throughout the trip were quite approachable.

During the workshops we were fortunate to have cooperative weather. The days seemed very long, starting well before sunrise to leave for our morning's destination, and ending long after sunset as we did slide shows, photo critiques, and edited our digital images. On some days we took afternoon breaks from the high temperatures and humidity as the harsh midday light phased into softer light of late afternoon.



Tricolored Heron, Estero Lagoon, Florida © Greg Downing



Sandwich Tern in Flight, Florida © Greg Downing

This series is an annual event and March 2004 details are already being arranged. Workshops are also scheduled with co-host Charles Glatzer of Shoot the Light for this May at St. Augustine's Alligator Farm and at Wakodahatchee Wetlands. Wading birds will be primary subjects, some with chicks in tow.

For more information please visit:

www.gdphotography.com/workshops

Testimonial from the March Florida Workshop

Greg was always professional; he was well prepared and well organized, a difficult task given the vagaries of finding and photographing birds. At the same time he was flexible and prepared to take advantage of any unforeseen opportunities that arose. He adjusted his approach to the abilities of those in attendance and was able to do a nice job teaching and working with a wide variety of individuals from near-novices to experts. If my hard drive crashed and I didn't get a single shot from his workshop - and I certainly have many with which I'm quite pleased - I still more than got my money's worth. In sum, I would highly recommend a workshop with Greg Downing.

Rich Sheehan, Indiana

WORKSHOPS

Workshops are customized to the individual participants and photographers of all abilities are encouraged to attend. Group sizes are restricted to ensure personalized attention and to minimize disturbance to the birds.

Florida Avian Photographic Workshops

Join me and Shoot the Light Photographer Charles Glatzer as we co-host this Florida workshop series. Included is extensive photographic instruction, slide presentations, personalized image critiques, as well as getting you in the right locations at the right times to ensure we are making the best use of conditions, weather and most importantly, light!

May 24-26 Wakodahatchee Wetlands

May 27-29 St. Augustine Alligator Farm

Churchill, Manitoba, Canada Avian Photographic Workshop June 13-21, 2003

Birds display in their fabulous breeding plumage on the vast and open arctic tundra, making this the opportunity of a lifetime for anyone interested in bird photography on the edge. Please note that as of April 3rd this workshop has only one space left.

St. Paul Island, The Pribilofs, Alaska Avian Photographic Workshop July 16-23, 2003

This is an extensive eight day workshop designed for close-range access to colorful Puffins and a variety of other sea birds. There are also opportunities for arctic foxes with pups, fur seal pups and adults. The island has abundant, tiny wildflowers nestled in lush tundra. This location is featured in the April 2003 issue of NaturePhotographers.Net online magazine. Be sure to read all about the [Pribilofs, Alaska](#).

Cape May, New Jersey Avian Photographic Workshop September 28-29, 2003

This is a comprehensive weekend workshop scheduled to coincide with bird migration. In addition to two full days of photography, the focus will also be on instruction in composition, approaching birds, digital editing, and more.

Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge New Mexico Avian Photographic Workshop December 3-5, 2003 and December 6-8, 2003

Take a three day workshop or a full six days at Bosque del Apache. The wintering grounds for tens of thousands of Snow Geese and large numbers of Sandhill Cranes, there is also an abundance of other wildlife throughout the refuge, making this one of the most popular workshops.

Other Workshops: Details to be Announced

Chincoteague, Virginia November 2003
Already famous for its wild ponies, Chincoteague is also becoming better known for its birds and other wildlife, including deer and large numbers of Snow Geese.

Southern California January 2004
Workshop location is selected for an abundance of approachable birds, including ducks, Pacific Brown Pelicans, and more.

Barnegat Light, New Jersey February 2004
Brave the cold on the jetty at Barnegat Light and be rewarded with opportunities for Harlequin and Long-tailed Ducks, Purple Sandpipers, Ruddy Turnstones, and other migratory birds.

For more information on any of these or other workshops, visit:

www.gdphotography.com/workshops