

GREG DOWNING

PHOTOGRAPHY

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Bald Eagle - Homer, Alaska © Greg Downing

EOS 10D, 600/4IS, 1.4TC, two 25mm extension tubes, F/22, ISO 400, flash, cropped slightly at top and bottom for balance.

It was recently said that the often photographed Bald Eagle has been overdone photographically. I say never! Being a lover of the details I decided to go for some in-your-face compositions with the eagles. Finding a clean and willing model was the hard part!

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ON THE BEATEN PATH

Most of us have probably heard how a particular place, or subject, has been "overdone" from a photographic standpoint.

That sounds like a challenge; to find overlooked opportunities, shoot from a different perspective, use creative techniques, and come away with something unique where people least expect it. While we can spend most of our time pursuing subjects in relatively undiscovered locations, don't discount the possibilities that exist on the beaten path.

Bosque del Apache is one such place that some have stopped visiting due to the number of photographers that go there each year. The draw is plentiful, reliable subjects. Sandhill Cranes and Snow Geese, while abundant, are far from the only subjects at Bosque! At each turn on the refuge there is something interesting to frame in the viewfinder, whether a reflection in the water, an American Kestrel perching regularly on its favorite branch, or a herd of deer grazing in a field at sunset.

Perhaps even more important than the subjects are the learning opportunities. A place with ample subjects is ideal to hone your skills in photography: practice and try to perfect what you already know, plus push yourself to do something different. A trip to Bosque in December really helps me prepare for all the work I do in late-winter and early-spring. I also learn to find new opportunities with each visit that I can apply elsewhere.

The same applies to a particular subject, such as a specific bird or landmark. Until I get my photos, it is still new to me even if there are numerous images out there of it! And perhaps I can do something to set my photos apart from the others.

I'll never know if I don't try.

CANON EOS 1D MARK II INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

A few days with Canon's new DSLR isn't long enough to write a comprehensive review, but it is certainly time enough to provide first-hand information on how it does in the field. And the initial impressions are great!

Coming from background of using a number of Canon SLRs and DSLRs, most notably the Canon EOS 1D and the 10D, the Mark II appears to combine some of the best features of these two popular cameras, but with an 8.2 megapixel CMOS sensor and 8.5 frames per second in high-speed continuous drive! And for bird photography, the Mark II's improved auto focus is exactly what we've been waiting for.



Black-crowned Night Heron © Greg Downing

EOS 1D MKII, EF 300/4 IS, 1/1250, f/8, ISO 320, full power flash in high speed sync, central sensor.

Due to the new dual processor AF technology the auto focus operates like a dream come true and is by far the most exciting improvement for photographers specializing in birds.

Tracking is flawless and smoother than ever. When shooting birds in flight the central sensor will give you the most accuracy as long as you keep the sensor on the bird at all times. Multiple sensors still tend to grab busy backgrounds especially in low light.

Auto Focus

The reports are true: auto focus is fast to acquire and maintains well. We first tested it on Black-crowned Night Herons in flight in an area where flight paths were extremely short due to tall surrounding trees and buildings. Handholding the Mark II with a 300 f/4 lens, all it took was initially

finding the bird through the viewfinder and pressing the shutter button to focus; acquisition was virtually instantaneous. There was no problem following birds in front of changing backgrounds using the central sensor in AI Servo as long as the sensor stayed on the bird. Using the 45-point auto focus in AI Servo worked fine for flight paths with clean backgrounds. With such improved auto focus, it appears we are no longer limited by our gear in capturing the flight shots we want to.

On a less positive note, 45-point auto focus had some difficulty locking onto subjects with long focal lengths and teleconverters in low-light situations (evaluated with 500 f/4 combined with 1.4x and 600mm f/4 with 2x). Using a single focus point instead helped to remedy the situation.

LCD

Canon indicates the Mark II's display has twice the resolution of other EOS digital cameras, the benefits of which are evident from the clear and detailed display. While ultimate image quality cannot really be determined from an LCD preview, much more information appears apparent on this new display, allowing informed, real-time adjustments in the field to improve captured photos.

The preview zoom is a useful tool and simple to operate. Once zoomed in, press "Display" again to return to normal viewing size or the magnification preview on an image is maintained when viewing other photos.

The histogram background is shades of gray with pale yellow histogram data; relatively easy to read even in a bright environment. However, the data area is not distinctly framed; the dark edges blends with the display. Also, it is difficult to determine where a thin line towards the extreme right or left of the histogram ends: already a handful of images with minor "blinking highlights" have appeared on the display which could not have been identified viewing the histogram alone. Note we have not yet evaluated the new RGB display mode, where the histograms for red, green and blue are represented individually, only the default histogram.



Chipping Sparrow © Greg Downing

EOS 1D MKII, EF 600/4 IS, 1.4 TC, 1/100, f/9, ISO 500, two flashes in TTL at -2/3, main light on the bird.

Flash use with the Mark II seems very consistent, resulting in predictable control of the final result.

Cropped version is 100% pixel section with no processing applied.

Above ISO 400 noise starts to show gradually, particularly in darker areas and areas with consistent color, however the lack of banding is noteworthy.



Sync Speed and Flash

The camera's sync speed is 1/250th of a second which is disappointing compared to the 1D's 1/500th. However, the camera operates well with the flash and high speed sync can be effectively used for much faster shutter speeds although there is significant loss of flash range in this mode.

Initial experiences indicate consistent results when using the Canon 550EX flash, perhaps due to the improved E-TTL II technology of the Mark II. The clearer image display and histogram on the LCD played a role in judging effective use of flash.

Battery Life

Those familiar with the Canon 1D will be pleasantly surprised with the battery life of the 1D's NP-E3 in the Mark II instead. Specifications estimate a life of roughly 1,200 frames in moderate temperatures for the Mark II. After 800 frames over five days, plus significant image previews, deletions, and menu functions, so far our battery still indicates "full".

ISO

The camera has a range from ISO 100 to 1600 and adjusts in third-stop increments. With ISO expansion turned on, ISO 50 and ISO 3200 are also

available.

It is a pleasure to note no banding is evident even on the higher ISOs! That, and less obvious noise at higher ISOs is one of the incredible features of this camera. Lighter backgrounds and those with more detail seem less likely to show noise. Darker, smoother backgrounds seem to indicate noise sooner. ISO 400 may be appropriate for just about any situation, with careful adjustments from there in third-stop increments as needed, factoring the effects of anticipated noise likely to be visible in the scene being photographed. The higher ISOs are available and seem to work well, but we plan to use them conservatively, as there may be less ability to enlarge higher ISO images without evident noise.

The flexibility to improve shutter speeds and/or depth of field by changing ISO increases opportunities in the field, allowing image captures in lower light situations, greater flash range, use of stacked converters in more situations, plus other possibilities.

Image Processing Software

The image processing software appears to be the weakest link. The camera comes with Digital

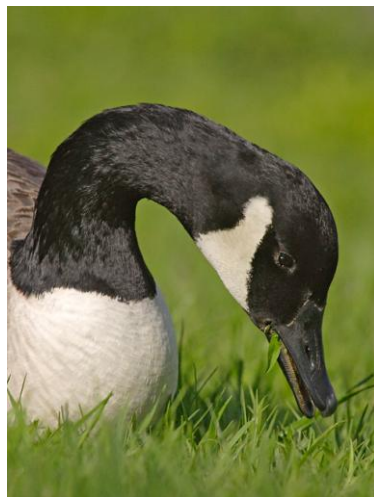
Photo Professional and EOS Viewer Utility. Most of our evaluation has been of the Digital Photo Professional software, which has some neat features, allowing curves and other adjustments to the RAW files for preview.

However, both the RAW file and the JPEG are displayed on the monitor and it takes a while to load thumbnails of the large files, especially from flash cards. When loading an image in PhotoShop it doesn't carry the image number, leaving you to try to figure out later which image you actually worked with. This can be overcome by using the "Convert and Save" feature instead of "Transfer to PhotoShop". And despite our research, we have not yet found a way to adjust sharpening of RAW images at all in this program or the EOS Viewer Utility. Therefore, you are stuck with any in-camera settings for sharpening until the software is updated or other RAW conversion software programs are able to work with the .CR2 files. Due to this fact we are shooting with sharpening turned off or set very conservatively and performing sharpening in PhotoShop. There is also no way (that we've found) to show the focus point(s).

Miscellaneous Notes

Although CMOS sensors reportedly attract less dust than CCDs, both of our cameras have a number of dust spots already. This was unexpected, as the CMOS sensor of the 10D seems virtually dust-proof.

The camera is really quick to format flash cards and even microdrives, noticeably faster than the 1D or 10D. However, it is disappointing that it takes several steps to reach the "Format" function in the menu those moments in the field are sometimes crucial and it would be nice if the feature was more accessible.



Accessories You May Need

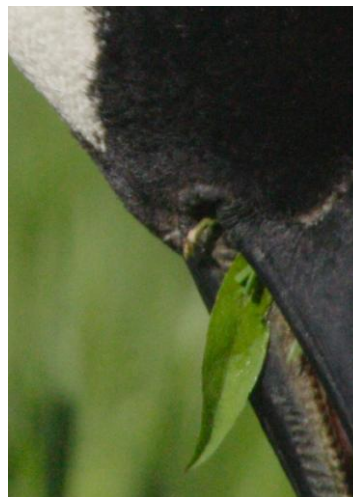
Roughly eighty images fit onto a one gigabyte flashcard when shooting RAW combined with small JPEG, less if you shoot at higher JPEG resolutions or more if you only shoot RAW. Regardless, it doesn't take long to go through a flashcard. We are purchasing more flash cards.

If you have been waiting for an excuse to upgrade or add to some of your computer hardware components, now may be the time. With roughly six to eight megabytes per RAW file, a day in the field could result in almost double the memory required for the same day of shooting with the 1D or 10D. The transfer of data will take longer for the same number of images, so USB 1.0 is frankly too slow. Evaluate your laptop harddrive size before your next trip, as well as your backup procedures to ensure your external harddrive is large enough, or that using CDs, DVDs, or a digital wallet is still feasible.

In Summary

Having used the 1D extensively, our transition to using the Mark II was seamless. We are thrilled with the improvements, which appear to make the EOS 1D Mark II the right tool to capture the nature photos we envision.

An in-depth review of the camera is planned for the June issue of NatureScapes.Net, where more information will be published on the camera's use for the application of nature photography.



Canada Goose
© Greg Downing

EOS 1D MK II, EF 600/4 IS,
2X TCII, 1/1250, f/11, ISO
1000.

Lighter and more mottled backgrounds make the noise less evident. ISO 1000 even produces relatively clean prints.

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.

Cape May, New Jersey Sept. 30-Oct. 1, 2004

Our popular annual workshop in Cape May is a fantastic location for birds. We are offering an extensive two-day workshop customized to your photographic goals. Lenses of 300mm or higher are required as we work with some fairly cooperative subjects in easy to shoot situations. 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 NWR Dec. 6-8, 2004 New Mexico

Once visited not soon forgotten, Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge is a magical place. Each morning brings new opportunities, sometimes with dramatic sunrises of fiery colors and a seemingly endless wave of birds. The workshop is planned just after the busiest week for photographers and during weekdays to avoid higher traffic. This tour should provide great learning opportunities at arguably the best place in North America to hone your bird photography skills, particularly when it comes to shooting birds in flight.

Homer, Alaska Five days: Feb. 4-8, 2004 with Arthur Morris Five days: Feb. 9-13, 2004 All ten days: Feb. 4-13, 2004

Homer Alaska, is the best place on Earth to photograph Bald Eagles. Join Greg Downing and Arthur Morris for a once in a lifetime opportunity to photograph these magnificent birds at close range, perched and in flight, while learning alongside two accomplished bird photographers.

You can expect to get insanely close to these Eagles, providing unprecedented opportunities to make close ups as well as dramatic flight and action images, which would be nearly impossible anywhere else in the wild. Join us in February 2005 to capture some images of your own and hone your bird photography skills with us.

Time is running out and space is very limited for this workshop - between the two there are only five openings. Please check for availability. The first workshop is sold out and we are now starting a waiting list.

Roma, Texas Three days: April 1-3, 2005 Three days: April 5-7, 2005 All seven days: April 1-7, 2005

All photography in Roma is from the comfort of chairs! A number of spacious blinds have been set up at various positions over the ranch with different exposures that overlook water drips and feeding stations which are visited by the birds frequently. Birds flock to the area and the variety of species is astounding.

Two 3-day workshops will be conducted with a limit of only four participants per workshop. A discount will be offered for all six days with an extra seventh day for additional shooting and/or rest. Some slots are already being held so if you are interested please let us know immediately. These workshops will fill quickly!



Black-crested (Mexican) Titmouse © Greg Downing

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