

GREG DOWNING

PHOTOGRAPHY

SUMMER 2003 NEWSLETTER

All Text and Images Copyright
Greg Downing and Heather Forcier, All Rights Reserved



Golden-fronted Woodpecker © Greg Downing

CONTENTS

VISITING THE GULF COAST AND SOUTH TEXAS

TEXAS AREA NATURE PHOTOGRAPHY CONTESTS

TRAVEL TIPS: FINDING THE RIGHT HOME AWAY FROM HOME

TIPS FOR THE FIELD

DIGITAL EDITING TIP: RECOVERING SLIGHT OVEREXPOSURE USING RAW CONVERSION

WORKSHOPS

VISITING THE GULF COAST AND SOUTH TEXAS

The state of Texas boasts roughly 450 species of birds along its Gulf coast. A collaborative effort of agencies produced a series of marked sites called The Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail, a number of "loops" to explore for birds. Many locations are equipped with informational kiosks, trails, boardwalks, and/or observation areas.

A diversity of habitats and a fall-out area for passing migrants, birding along the Texas coast can prove quite fruitful. A notable feature is the approximate three hundred fifty miles of barrier islands. Barrier islands run parallel to the coastline and are of significant ecological importance. Sheltering the mainland from the effects of winds and sea, intracoastal waterways in between also benefit from similar protection. Constantly evolving, barrier island sands are affected by the elements and may be naturally removed or relocated elsewhere. Human trespass and development has promoted their deterioration. Simply walking or driving on the dune vegetation can weaken or kill it, and as the plant roots help anchor the dunes this makes the sand more vulnerable. Signs or literature warn of areas not to walk in order to protect the dunes.



Ruddy Turnstone

© Greg Downing

Our mid-April trip to Texas for bird photography included two areas: the general location surrounding Corpus Christi on the Gulf coast and Roma in the Rio Grande Valley.

CORPUS CHRISTI

This area provided for a broad diversity of habitats. Our initial time was spent by invitation on a private ranch that had been set up for bird photography. The majority of our time off the ranch was spent along the coastal or intracoastal waters. We visited the Packery Channel, Padre Island, Mustang Island, and Port Aransas areas.

Driving on certain beaches is permitted and this was a productive way to scout for bird activity. We were often able to photograph right from the vehicle. This was not only convenient but several skittish birds seemed less so when we remained in the car. In other areas the birds were quite cooperative and we were able to photograph on tripods or from the ground. Birds found along the shorelines included Black-bellied Plovers, Willets, Sanderlings, Laughing Gulls, Franklin's Gulls (brief migrants), Royal, Common, and Least Terns, American Avocets, Black-necked Stilts, Ruddy Turnstones, and others.



We also found a good number of species at the Port Aransas Birding Center. A boardwalk environment with an observation tower, we found Roseate Spoonbills, White Pelicans, Black Skimmers, Least Terns, Tricolored Herons, Common Moorhens, Blue-winged Teals, and more.

We enjoyed our time in the Corpus Christi area immensely and plan a return visit next year around the same time.



American White Pelican © Greg Downing

ROMA

Roma is situated in the lower Rio Grande Valley of south Texas. We had access to a private ranch set up with blinds for bird photography. Feeders at the blinds were maintained daily and water was run in some areas to collect into small pools. These stations attracted an amazing variety and number of birds.

With our choice of any of the blinds we quickly found a favorite and spent the majority of time there when not at the raptor blind. We had the flexibility to set up perches to our liking and after some fine tuning we photographed the birds from chairs inside the blinds.



Sheltered from the sun and a cooler of cold beverages by our side, we took frame after frame of birds as they came in.

Green Jays, Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, Cardinals, Northern Mockingbirds, a number of dove species and several different thrashers were frequent visitors. There were also some unexpected but treasured appearances by a Pyrrhuloxia, Painted Bunting, Plain Chachalacas, and a few different flycatchers.

The raptor blind is set up near one of the highest tree snags in the general area. Crested Caracaras, Harris's Hawks, Ravens, and Turkey Vultures flew nearby and some would stop to perch. We parked our car some distance away and walked up so that our presence would be less noticeable. Some of our best luck came at times when we remained completely quiet.



At one point even an oblivious woodpecker went to work on the exterior of the wooden blind. While there was substantially less activity at this location an investment of a few hours for the opportunity to photograph Crested Caracara and Harris's Hawks was well worth it in our opinion.

Heading back into town each afternoon for lunch we had our cameras in tow looking for what opportunities might present themselves. Seeing the Scissor-tailed Flycatchers perching frequently on the barbed wire fences at ranch perimeters, we took every chance we got to photograph them. Witnessing the grace of these birds in flight, especially with their long, forked tails was memorable. Several of the birds were willing subjects for brief periods, and we ended up getting some images we were pleased with.



Scissor-tailed Flycatcher © Heather Forcier

The town of Roma is small but had all the services required during our visit, including an inn relatively close to the ranch and restaurants open during some of the odd hours we kept during our pursuit of bird photography.

The landowner was a gracious host and our experience at the ranch was fantastic!

To view a small sample of more images taken during our April trip to Texas please visit our respective online image galleries:

[Greg's: www.gdphotography.com/TEX.htm](http://www.gdphotography.com/TEX.htm)

[Heather's: www.hforcier.com/texastrip.htm](http://www.hforcier.com/texastrip.htm)

TEXAS AREA NATURE PHOTO CONTESTS

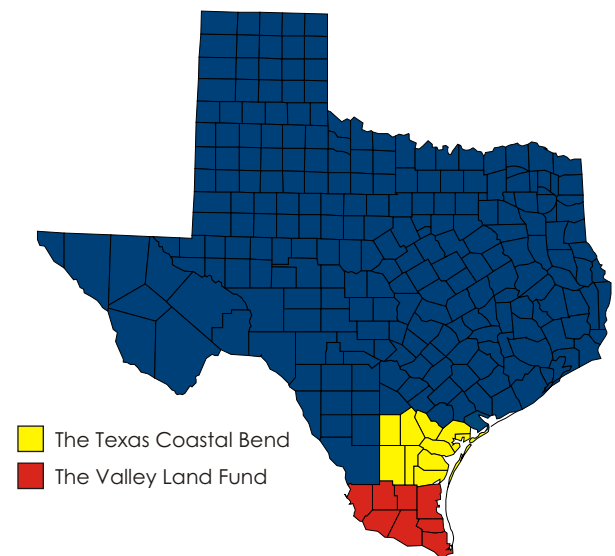
Groups in Texas have creatively established multi-objective photo contests. In the general area surrounding Corpus Christi, the Texas Coastal Bend Wildlife Photo Contest pairs land owners with nature photographers who share in the prize proceeds for winning images. With much of Texan lands privately owned, this partnership helps document the many landscapes, plants, insects, animals and birds that might otherwise be difficult to see. Placement in the contest is prestigious and the resulting published photos provide educational benefit and exposure for nature conservation. The organization that administers the contest also actively participates in land conservation efforts.

Similarly there is The Valley Land Fund covering certain counties in south Texas within the Rio Grande Valley. Established originally to preserve a tract of land, it continues land conservation activities today while also conducting its nature photography contests. Landowners and photographers are again partnered and share in the prizes

For more information on the internet, visit:

[The Coastal Bend Land Trust](#)

[The Valley Land Fund](#)



TRAVEL TIPS FINDING THE RIGHT HOME AWAY FROM HOME

We have been asked with some frequency how we select our accommodations while traveling.

We look for a location central to the area(s) we plan to be photographing. If we know the traffic patterns, we try to factor these in. For instance, we stayed in Bonita Springs, Florida to cover the locations of Sanibel Island, Estero Lagoon, Cape Coral, and Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary. Traffic is notoriously slow at certain times of day along the coastal region. Our southern position gave us an advantage in both morning and afternoon traffic and allowed us back access to Estero.

We try to get a ground floor room unless the hotel has elevators. This makes getting our baggage to and from the room easier.

Rooms with a mini-fridge and microwave prove convenient and can help reduce the costs of eating out while traveling.

Coin operated laundry is available at some hotels and helps us minimize the amount of clothing we have to pack.

While we like finding accommodations that provide high speed internet, it's not always possible. We have a provider that offers dial up service with many local numbers throughout the United States. For regions without local numbers, an optional toll free number is available for a nominal fee.

We keep a mental list of the good and bad hotel stays and stick with several chains where the experiences have been good, even if independently owned and operated.

On another note, we often look up some of our favorite restaurants and write down the information of those close to the hotel. While we enjoy sampling local cuisine during our travels, it's nice to visit a familiar restaurant sometimes to feel a little more at home.

TIPS FOR THE FIELD

Here are some items we have discovered useful for our photography and during our travels:

[Fellowes WriteRight clear display covers](#)

Fellowes offers clear adhesive strips for PDAs that can be cut to size and placed on your camera displays, LCD, and/or flash unit display. While the display slightly darkens, it adds a protective layer convenient to have. This is not permanently affixed and may need to be replaced periodically. We have the covers for the Palm m505.

[Hoodman covers](#)

Hoodman produces a line of screen covers, notably the LCD protector for the Nikon D1 series of cameras. They snap on securely and there's peace of mind that the display is better protected.

BUG SEASON

Besides insect repellent there are a few other things to help keep the bugs away and make time in the field a little more tolerable during bug season.

Latex gloves

While we haven't tried this ourselves, we have photographed with people wearing latex gloves to keep the bugs out. They say it works, but the downside? It can get very hot inside the gloves.

Head nets

The buzzing sound is still there, but it's just noise - only a few of the really tiny bugs can actually get through the netting. Losing a little bit of visibility seems a small price to pay to keep the bugs away. It helps to wear hat under the net to pull the netting away from your skin. Some nets come with hats included.



DIGITAL EDITING TIP: RECOVERING SLIGHT OVEREXPOSURE USING RAW CONVERSIONS

While this technique cannot salvage areas of severe overexposure, it is possible to recover highlights overexposed by up to about one stop.

The process combines two images, a normally converted RAW image with a linear converted image. The linear method should be an option in software that processes for RAW conversion. A linear converted image will appear grossly underexposed and dark.

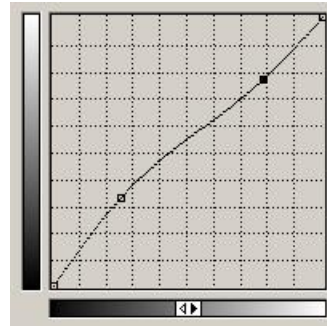
Convert the image twice in 8-bit mode: one normal and one linear conversion. Save to a directory under different file names. (BreezeBrowser does this automatically by adding "L" to the linear file name.)

Open both images in Photoshop. Take the linear conversion and "Select All" (Control-A), then "Copy" (Control-C). Go to the regular conversion and "Paste" (Control-V). This places the darker linear conversion on top (as Layer 1) of the overexposed image (as Background). At this point the only image you will be able to see is the darker one.

Go to the layers palette (Windows>Layers) and adjust the opacity of the darker image until it has blended appropriately with the other image. With blown out whites in the image a low opacity like 15 or 25% may be a good place to start but can be much higher on some images. Opacity should be adjusted to taste.

Once the overexposed whites have been corrected you can create an adjustment in curves (Image>Adjustments>Curves) to bring some of the darker areas up if needed without affecting the repaired whites.

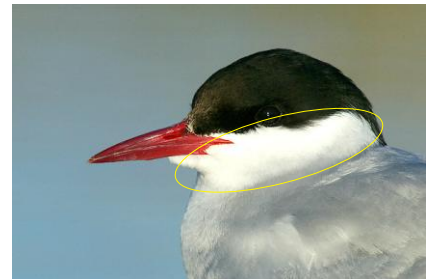
Note that this can also be used with two scanned images when one has been exposed for highlights, the other for the shadows. In this case the one exposed for the highlights is darker and is takes the place of the "linear conversion" image.



Curves: The upper portion of the diagonal represents the highlights, the middle the midtones, and the lower portion the shadows. Each image is different; find where parts of an image fall using the eyedropper tool and holding the Alternate key. This "S" curve adjustment maintains the highlights while brightening areas of shadow.

Step 1: The RAW file is converted like normal. Several highlights may be overexposed up to about one stop.

STEP 1



Step 2: A linear conversion is performed with the same RAW file and saved under a different name. This file is copied and pasted over the first image.

STEP 2



Step 3: Adjust the opacity then the curves to reduce any shadows for a final product.

STEP 3



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. 27-28, 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.

Chincoteague, Virginia Nov. 15-16, 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.

**Bosque del Apache NWR Dec. 3-5, 2003
New Mexico and Dec. 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.



Bosque del Apache offers different colors each morning
Snow Goose blast off © Heather Forcier

Barnegat Light, New Jersey Jan. 17-18, 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 wintering birds.

Homer, Alaska Feb. 5-9, 2004

One of the best places to photograph Bald Eagles, this workshop is a fantastic opportunity to photograph these majestic birds at close range, perched, and in flight. Co-hosted by E.J. Peiker.

Florida March 2004

Go where the birds are abundant and approachable! While the final details are still being arranged, likely workshop locations include Fort Desoto, Cape Coral, Sanibel and Captiva Islands, Estero Lagoon, and the Everglades.

Texas Gulf Coast April 5-7, 2004

The workshop will focus on the diversity of birds and environments available in the Corpus Christi area.

Rio Grande Valley, Texas April 9-11, 2004

The majority of photography takes place from photography blinds on a private ranch in Roma. A wide variety of birds are possible subjects, with the potential for migratory fall out activity as well. Part of the workshop will include setting up perches for the best possible photo opportunities with birds.

Churchill, Manitoba (Canada) June 12-19, 2004

Focus during this workshop is on a limited number of special species: possibilities include Arctic Terns, Pacific Loons, Common Eiders, and more. Approaching the time of the summer solstice, extended daylight hours provide more potential for opportunities in the field.

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

www.gdphotography.com/workshops.htm