

General Tips for Point-and-Shoot, Mega-Zoom Bird Photography

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1. Use the viewfinder. It will help you find and keep the target bird in view as you zoom in, and it will help keep the camera stable for better shots.
2. Viewfinders sometimes suck battery life. So buy two extra batteries if you'll be in the field a lot and away from electricity. Avoid after-market batteries: they're hit or miss on whether they hold a charge. And if you're away from electricity, turn off the camera's GPS (unless you need it) because it sucks battery life.
3. Shoot in burst mode. Some point-and-shoots have various kinds of burst mode. The "high-speed" burst might actually be too many frames per second, even for birds, but the "low-speed" burst is sometime too few frames per second. Might as well go high (or go home).
 - Note that your flash won't work in burst mode. (Good point-and-shoot cameras might give you one firing of the flash in burst mode — maybe not). But I can guarantee you that some day you'll turn on your flash and you won't for the life of you know why it's not firing. It won't be firing because your camera is in burst mode.
4. Buy good SD cards that write data fast (because you'll be shooting burst mode).
5. Set your metering to *center-weighted*.
6. Shoot APERTURE PRIORITY (not shutter priority). For birds, open the lens **as wide as it will go**, probably f2 or so. As you zoom, the lens will probably stop down on its own (maybe to f4 or f5.6). But leave the lens wide open when you shoot birds. Here's why:
 - You'll need to gather light for decent photos, and for that you need an open lens. (Don't worry about shallow depth of field with birds at a distance — it's not an issue.)
 - You'll want a relatively fast shutter speed because you're shooting something that moves. In order to get enough light to the sensor for fast shutter speeds, you need a wide open lens.
 - You'll want a low ISO because these are point-and-shoots, after all, whose sensors suck at high ISO (above 400 or so). With these mega-zooms, **you really need to keep your ISO as low as possible**.
7. So, in APERTURE PRIORITY, you'll set ISO somewhere between 100 (if you've got sun) and 400 (if you're in the forest) or maybe 800 or higher (if it's really dark). You'll open the lens. And your camera will then select a corresponding shutter speed for whatever ambient light you've got.
 - For birds, you want the camera to come up with shutter speeds of at least 1/200th. Knowledgeable photographers would say, "No way can he get bird shots hand-holding the camera at mega-zoom at 1/200th. The shots will be blurry." But this notion is incorrect. Here's why:
 - These mega-zooms are basically big lenses with some electronics attached, including **serious image-stabilization**. As long as what you're shooting isn't moving around a ton, you can get good shots in burst mode at crazy-slow shutter speeds. Even less than 1/200th. Especially in burst mode. This Sunbittern, which was walking in this river, is proof — shot at 1/80th and f7.1. No way could you get away with a shutter speed that slow hand-holding a genuine telephoto lens on an SLR camera. But you can do it with these point-and-shoots.
8. Many point-and-shoots have a lot of scary buttons and crazy menus. Some of the buttons are programmable — you can assign camera setting to them. Most also have a quick menu. The key thing to know is that you should never need to get into your *menus* on the LCD screen to change all this stuff I mention here above. You should do it all on the fly with buttons. Don't get bogged down in menus: You'll miss your shot at Ivory-billed Woodpecker (well, actually you won't — because it's extinct, but you get the idea).

