

BBC

Wildlife

PHOTOGRAPHY MASTERCLASS

with Mark Carwardine

#4 Backgrounds: 1 of 3 critical elements of a great wildlife photograph (focusing on garden birds)

Artificial backgrounds

Natural backgrounds are ideal, obviously. But if that's not possible – for example, if you're shooting birds in a small garden - or if you're keen to achieve something specific – by all means use or even create an artificial background. There are several ways of doing this:

- Shoot against anything with natural or interesting colours, from a rusty old metal door to a weathered garden fence. This robin was photographed against a blue garage door (1/800 sec, f8, ISO 800, 600mm lens).



- Find an old bed sheet, a piece of wooden board or some cardboard and spray or paint it in natural-looking colours, to replicate foliage. You can stretch it between two bamboo poles or prop it up on an artist's easel.
- Hang some camouflage netting (which is surprisingly cheap).
- Find a natural-looking background – a hedge or a tree, for example – and take an out-of-focus image so that the image is rendered as a nice, soft colour wash. Then have a poster printed (there are lots of companies online that will do this for relatively low cost) or print it yourself. Make sure the poster/print is matt (not gloss – or you'll get nasty reflections that will give the game away) and a sufficiently large size to fill the frame (I would suggest a minimum of 1m² but, ideally, larger).

It's surprising how natural a well-made artificial background can look – once it is out of focus and a lovely smooth colour wash, of course.

There are three critical elements to most great wildlife photographs: the subject (of course), the light (great photographers live by the light) and the background. A bad background can destroy an image, but a good background can make an image and lift it to another level.

What is a good background?

Critically, a good background doesn't compete with the main subject. Even better, it adds to the image and make it even stronger. The best backgrounds tend to be simple, out of focus, perfectly smooth colour washes that separate the subject from all the clutter behind. Far from fighting for attention, they make the subject 'pop'.



Settings: 1/2500 sec, f4, ISO 400, with a 600mm lens (aperture priority).

What is a bad background?

Quite simply, a bad background distracts from the main subject. It's cluttered or has too much in focus, excessively bright patches or any other distraction (such as a branch that cuts through the bird's head). It's anything that takes your eye away from the main point of the image.

A messy background can work – all photographic rules are meant to be broken, of course (you just need to understand the rules before you can break them successfully). But it should add to the picture by showing a sense of place, rather than dominating and taking your eye away from the subject.



Settings: 1/2000 sec, f4, ISO 800, with a 600m lens (aperture priority).

It helps if there is repetition – something of a pattern – rather than one or a few distinctive and distracting leaves or branches. As in this picture of a great tit.

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How do you achieve a good background? There are six main considerations in achieving a good background:

1. The distance between you and the subject

Generally speaking, the farther away the subject, the harder it is to blur the background (because you're shooting towards the infinity end of the lens and therefore the background is more likely to be more in focus). Simply put, it's best to be close to your subject.

2. The distance between the subject and the background

If the background is a long way from the subject, it is easier to blur and turn into a simple, smooth colour wash. If it is really close to the subject, it is really difficult or impossible to blur. Therefore, the greater distance between the subject and the background the better. As a general rule of thumb, it should be greater than the distance between your camera and the bird (to be more specific, at least three times the distance is ideal).

3. The focal length of your lens

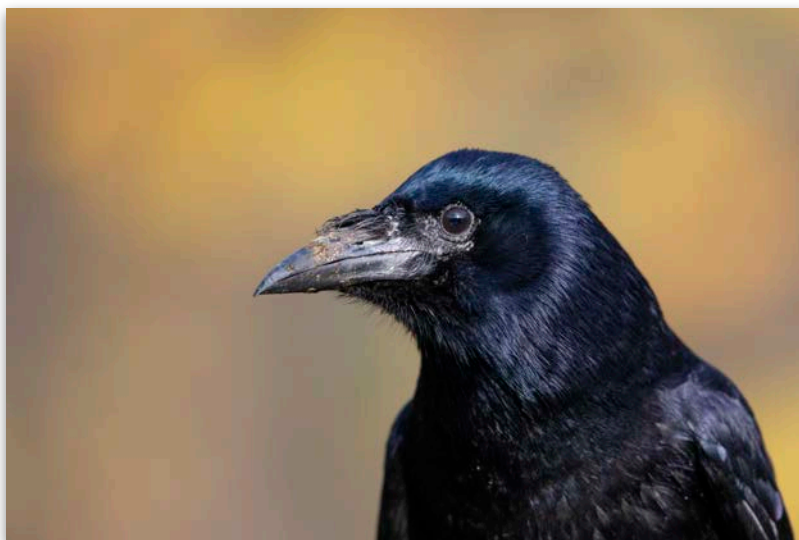
It is much easier to achieve a blurry background if you are using a long lens. Around 300mm or longer is best; 600mm is even better. If you use an extender or teleconverter to extend the focal length that will, by definition, make the lens even longer (and therefore reduce the depth of field – ie how much of the image is sharp in front and behind the point on which you are focusing). It's almost impossible to blur the background using a wide-angle lens, because the depth of field is so great.

4. The aperture

It's best to shoot with a wider aperture. This ensures a shallow depth of field, which helps to blur the background. However, it's a balancing act. If you go too wide (f4, for example) there is a price to pay. First, it requires critical focusing on the subject (there is no room for error – so try to focus on the eye). Second, it affects how much (or how little) of the subject itself is in focus – so the eye might be sharp but the beak or the ears or the feet might not. If the background is distant enough, you might be able to get away with an aperture as small as f8 (probably no more), which will increase the depth of field sufficiently to bring the subject and all its parts into sharp focus while still throwing the background into a blur. But, if you can, take a few test shots to see what the background looks like and adjust the aperture accordingly. There is no right or wrong – the end result is subjective and depends on what you are trying to achieve. I tend to shoot at f5.6 as much I can.

5. The background itself

It doesn't matter what the background is (it could be a grey wooden fence) as long as it's not cluttered. Try to avoid distinct patterns, shapes and lines, and make sure there are no particularly dark shadows or bright highlights. Or simply move your shooting position (often all it takes is shifting a little bit to one side to get a much cleaner background). Try thinking about the colour of the background, too – make use of autumn foliage (as with this carrion crow, for example), or attractive blossoms.



Settings: 1/1000 sec, f5.6, ISO 800, with a 600mm lens (aperture priority).

6. The lighting conditions

The ambient lighting can have a big impact on backgrounds, too. Whether the scene is under cloud cover or direct sunlight can affect the amount of contrast – which, in turn, can influence how hard it is to smooth out and create less distraction. The angle of the light can create more – or fewer – shadows – which also has an impact on how the background looks in the image. The ideal scenario is for the subject to be illuminated and the background to be more shaded (or, at least, darker). This makes the bird stand out more clearly and makes the background less distracting.

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