

BBC
Wildlife

with Mark Carwardine

PHOTOGRAPHY
MASTERCLASS#7 Garden wildlife photography:
perching birds

A nuthatch on a pre-meal landing spot (1/320 sec, f5.6, ISO 800, 600mm lens)

THE BASIC SET-UP: BIRD ON A PERCH

The simplest technique for more natural garden bird photography, away from artificial feeders, is to provide a photogenic, pre-meal landing spot. In other words, you provide a natural perch near the feeders, gently persuade the birds to land on it – and then pose for your prize-winning shot. It's a simple trick that works incredibly well. Most birds prefer to perch somewhere safe for a moment or two, before they summon the courage to fly in to the feeder. And, of course, you can place the perch in such a way that enables you to control the background, foreground, angle of light, angle of shooting, and so on.

2. What to look for in a perch

The perch can make or break your photography. But what is the right perch? What colour is best? What about the shape? How big should it be? Finding a suitable perch is surprisingly difficult – but it's also great fun. You'll find yourself subconsciously looking out for beautifully gnarled and colourful twigs and branches every time you leave the house (especially as you need a ready supply – otherwise all your images will look the same). And you'll be studying other photographers' pictures of garden birds to analyse what looks natural and what looks staged. You can choose whatever perch you like – chances are the birds will oblige and land on it – so don't be lazy. Just resist using any old dead stick, because it will look horrible.

1. Where to place the feeder(s)

First, you need to think about the best location for your 'outdoor studio' (see the last page for my food and feeder suggestions). There are four main considerations: where you will be shooting from, the angle of the light, the background and the safety of the birds (avoiding sparrowhawks and cats). You need to get these right before you set up your feeding station.

Will you be sitting out in the open (garden birds are often tame enough to accept you nearby) or shooting from a hide, the garden shed, the kitchen window, or even your car? Most small garden birds aren't at all bothered about a hide suddenly appearing and, if you are lucky, some may be tame enough for you to work without any cover at all. Where is the most distant and most pleasing background (check through your lens to see what it looks like)? Will you be shooting mainly in the early morning or later in the afternoon (that largely depends on which way your garden faces)? If you have a choice, early morning is best, because the birds are more active, the light is often better and, in winter at least, there is a good chance of frost; but late afternoon is a close second.

Once you've made these basic decisions, place the feeders a couple of metres from a hedge or any other cover (most small birds don't like feeding out in the open – they like to be able to dart to safety if there's any threat of danger). It's better to have two or three feeders, about half a metre apart, to attract as many birds as regularly as possible (this isn't so good for photography, because you have less control over where the birds land, but we'll deal with that in a moment).

Ultimately, during a shoot, the best set-up is a single feeder mounted on top of a pole (with the hanger removed). This has one great advantage: it doesn't provide alternative perches and that increases the odds of the birds landing where you want them to land. Other feeding systems have artificial arms which, thanks to Murphy's Law, the birds inevitably prefer to any beautifully and natural perch that you've provided.

Here's what to look for in the perfect perch:

- **Character.** Anything but boring, straight and featureless (the simpler the perch, the more the picture looks like a contrived bird on a stick). Leaves, buds, blossom, mosses, lichen and small fungi will all help to make the perch look more artful. Look for colour, too. Old and weathered, bends and twists are good. Don't choose anything too bare and dry, unless it has a really interesting shape (twisty vines can work really well).
- **An appropriate size.** The diameter of the perch should be appropriate for the size of bird you are hoping to photograph. It mustn't be too thick and chunky or it will overpower your subject (looking awkward and out of proportion) and it mustn't be too small and flimsy or the birds won't use it. A small bird typically prefers a small perch and, generally,

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A long-tailed tit is even more photogenic perched upon a delicate, lichen-covered twig (1/640 sec, f5.6, ISO 800, 600mm lens)

the more delicate the perch the more pleasing the image. It's a good idea to observe the birds first to see what size natural perches they are using but, as a rough guideline, the perch should be about the same diameter as the bird's grip. The diameter isn't so crucial if you have a vertical perch – which can be delicate or big and chunky (small birds often perch on tree stumps, for example); just avoid a halfway-house vertical perch that is neither delicate nor big and chunky.

- Appropriate habitat. Remember to use perches that are natural to the preferred habitat of the birds you are photographing. Don't use a

conifer branch, for example, for a bird that naturally lives in deciduous woodland. Try and use something local and native.

- **Medium tone.** A medium tone perch (one that is neither very dark nor very light) is ideal. As a general rule, though, too dark is better than too bright – otherwise, it can dominate the picture and create havoc with your exposure control.
- **Simplicity.** There should be nothing too distracting on the perch to take the viewer's eye away from the bird. The fussier the perch the harder it is to compose and the more difficult it is to get the birds to perch where you want them. Try to avoid large leaves – they can be overwhelming – and don't be afraid to pluck off some of the most distracting leaves (or twigs) if necessary.
- **Not too long.** A long perch blows about in the wind (making it difficult to focus and keep the bird sharp) and offers too many potential landing sites
- **No clipped ends.** The branch will inevitably be broken (by you, the wind, or something else) and it won't look natural if the 'cut' is too obvious. So try to keep the broken end out of sight, or break it in such a way that it is hidden by moss or a leaf, for example. Alternatively, you can disguise the broken end (or wherever you've done a bit of 'gardening' to remove distractions) by dabbing some wet mud onto the scars with your finger. When the mud dries, the scars will disappear.

The trick is to get the balance right. Don't do too much staging – or it will make your images look phoney.

Incidentally, you can bring out the natural beauty and full glory of the colours of your perch by spraying it with a little water before you begin taking pictures. And, if you cut a living stem or branch specially, put it in water to keep it fresh for a day or two otherwise the leaves will start to wilt.

3. Where to place the perch

To begin with, it's a good idea to use a temporary, makeshift perch. A stand-in perch, if you like. It doesn't have to be particularly attractive, but it does have to be placed exactly where you plan to put your photogenic perch when you begin photography. Then the birds will get used to perching in the right location and your perfect perch won't get damaged by the weather, squirrels, larger birds, too many tiny feet, and bird poo. When you replace the utilitarian perch with a freshly-cut live one, or any other perfect perch, they'll take to it quickly. You can keep changing it to get different shots and they will usually accept your

offerings within a matter of minutes.

But where to put it? The trick is to place the perch either at the birds' launching point or near a feeder. Try sticking one out of the hedge by about 30-50cm (the birds will land there to survey the scene before they fly over to the feeder) or close to the feeder (the best distance needs some experimentation, and will vary between species, but start at roughly 50cm). Don't overdo it - the fewer perches the better, or there are too many places for the birds to land.

Finally, place your perch slightly behind the feeder. Then the birds are more likely to be looking towards the feeder (and thus your camera) and less likely to have their backs to you.

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FOOD AND FEEDERS

Encouraging birds to visit your garden helps the birds and gives you a ready supply of great photographic subjects. It doesn't have to be a wild jungle – any space, whether it's a rambling estate or a busy family garden, can be wildlife-friendly.

From a picture-taking point of view, the trick is to entice birds to visit locations of your choosing, with clear views, natural surroundings, good lighting and perfect backgrounds.

My feeder recommendations

CJ Wildlife makes the ultimate set-up for bird photography (and it keeps grey squirrels and corvids at bay, too!):

- Garden Pole.
- Pole Stabiliser to provide extra support for the garden pole.
- Adventurer sunflower heart or peanut feeder (screwed directly into the top of the pole).
- Squirrel Guard Baffle (which attaches to the pole, just below the base of the feeder, and actually stops the squirrels from reaching the feeder).
- Graphite Grey Adventurer Cage.

I use this system all the time. Quite simply, it works. It keeps the squirrels and corvids at bay, it's simple to put together and it's easy to move around for photography. But the biggest advantage is that it doesn't provide alternative perches. Other feeding systems have artificial arms – giving the birds too many perching options in addition to the natural perches provided specially for photography.

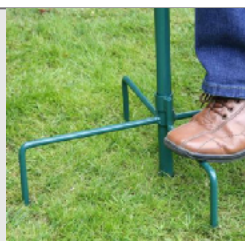


A goldfinch gorging sunflower hearts
(1/5000 sec, f10, ISO 1600, 35mm lens).



CJ's Garden Pole - Green

£14.99



CJ's Pole Stabiliser

£12.99



Adventurer Peanut Feeder

£17.99



Squirrel Guard Baffle

£19.99



A wren eyes up a feeder (1/1250 sec, f5.6, ISO 800, 600mm lens)



Adventurer 4 Port Seed Feeder

£29.99



Large Feeder Guardian Cage

£22.99



Premium Whole Peanuts - Bird Food

from £3.49



Premium Whole Sunflower Hearts - Bird Food

from £2.79



CJ WildBird Foods Ltd
www.birdfood.co.uk

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