

INTERVIEW: GLENN BARTLEY

Canadian nature photographer, **GLENN BARTLEY**, talks to Lorna Dockerill about his life's work capturing intimate portraits of difficult to find birds, from jewel-coloured hummingbirds to one of the rarest owls in the world



Glenn Bartley

You started out as a generalist nature photographer. What drew you to focusing on photographing exotic birds? What is it about them that inspires your lens?

I started out as a lover of nature who, all of a sudden, had a camera and a way of capturing that beauty. It wasn't long, though, before birds took centre stage for me. I love the challenge of photographing birds. It's also amazing that there are more than ten thousand species of birds around the world and they can be found just about anywhere. Perhaps, above all else though, birds are staggeringly beautiful animals that come in such a variety of size, shape and behaviour. I can't imagine a better subject matter to photograph.

You have a Masters of Science degree in Ecological Restoration. How has that impacted your wildlife photography?

I'm not sure that my education has had much of an impact on my photography. On the other hand, being able to write has helped tremendously when it comes to publishing articles in magazines and several of my own books.

It's clear from your portfolio that hummingbirds are a species that light up your lens, which is no surprise given their vibrant plumage and the fact that there are more than three hundred species of them. What interesting aspects of behaviour thrill you about this type of bird?

Hummingbirds are simply mesmerising to observe in the wild. They zip around so quickly and almost never give their audience enough time to truly

appreciate them.

In fact, their wings move so fast that our eyes simply cannot truly see them. I think that is one of the reasons why photographing

them is so appealing. When you capture a great photo of a hummingbird you can stare at it for as long as you want and really soak-up all the stunning details of these spectacular little birds.

Is there a particular species of hummingbird that you're fascinated by?

I love all hummingbirds, but there are definitely a few species that are true showstoppers. With spectacular adornments and incredible iridescent plumage, birds like the marvellous spatuletail, red-tailed comet, tufted ▶▶

In order to photograph more species in a consistent way, I worked hard to develop and perfect some techniques for photographing hummingbirds as they feed from hummingbird feeding stations.





RED-TAILED COMET

▶ coquette and velvet-purple coronet are almost too beautiful to believe. Even their names are incredible!

The wings of some hummingbird species flap up to a hundred times per second. What are the challenges of photographing hummingbirds and how have you learnt to overcome them over the years? Is there a sweet spot in terms of what frames per second you should be shooting at?

When it comes to photographing hummingbirds in flight, there are basically two options that can lead to, what I would consider, a successful image. The first is to use natural light and capture them out in the wild feeding at flowers.

Perhaps the rarest bird I have photographed, is the stunning long-whiskered owlet in Northern Peru. In 2011, I travelled to the region where they live and had a night of photography that I will never forget.

I absolutely love to do this and this style can produce some fantastic images. Unfortunately, this type of photography requires very bright light in order to have a fast enough shutter speed (typically at least 1/2000sec). Light of this intensity and quality can be very hard to come by in the tropics.

In order to photograph more species in a consistent way, I worked hard to develop and perfect some techniques for photographing hummingbirds as they feed from hummingbird feeding stations. In this environment, I can create a little mini artificial studio around the bird feeder and illuminate the scene using artificial light. What we call 'multi-flash' hummingbird photography involves removing natural light from the scene

in order to have complete control over the scene. Because we have control, we can turn the flashes down to a very low power, so that the burst of light is incredibly brief (1/8000 – 1/16,000) and this is the only moment recorded in the image. Even on a dark and gloomy day in the cloud forest, I can still create successful images with this technique.

It is important to note here too, that the wellbeing of the animals must always come first. While the extremely brief flashes don't seem to bother the birds at all, I have seen many cases where photographers take down all

of the feeders in an effort to force the hummingbirds where they want them. Or worse, some people actually capture the birds and

place them in enclosures to photograph them. This is completely unethical, in my opinion, and should be discouraged.

What are the key pieces of equipment in your kitbag that you find are essential to gain exceptional images of birds?

It's definitely great to have a long a lens as possible. For me, this is the 600mm f/4. It's also essential to have a sturdy tripod.

What is in your kit bag and what is your go-to lens for bird images?

Aside from the 600mm f/4, I also think every bird photographer needs a good mid-range lens for birds in flight, or feeder setups. I absolutely love the ▶▶



▶▶ Canon 100-400mm for this. It is so versatile, lightweight and of fantastic optical quality.

How do you manage to create such pin-sharp images of birds?

Definitely the biggest key is shooting from a good quality, heavy-duty tripod. I've had the same Gitzo carbon tripod for probably fifteen years. On it, I use a Wimberley gimbal head. It's a fantastic and very stable combo. Good technique and appropriate settings also are a factor.

What has been the rarest bird you have managed to photograph?

Perhaps the rarest bird I have photographed, is the stunning long-whiskered owlet in Northern Peru.

In 2011, I travelled to the region where they live and had a night of photography that I will never forget.

The long-whiskered owlet is an enigma. The bird was only discovered in 1976 and was then not seen again until 2002. Even to this day, very few people have had a good look at one. At just five inches, this bird is the smallest species of owl in the world. It is so unique that, upon discovery, ornithologists immediately put it into its own genus 'Xenoglaux' which means 'strange owl'.

That evening, I trekked down a muddy trail into the elfin cloud forest and waited patiently to hopefully hear the bird's call. Before long, to my delight, I heard what I believed to be

an owlet calling in the distance. I began to use the bird's call to try to lure him in towards me. Adrenaline and excitement began to mount as I realised that it was working, and the bird was coming closer. I stood motionless. I didn't dare fiddle with my equipment and I didn't dare check to see what insects were crawling up my leg. Heck, I didn't dare breathe!

And then I saw a flash of movement in front of me. The moon was nearly full and there was enough light to just make out the movement. I shone my flashlight in the direction of the fluttering object and there he was, not even twenty feet away on an open branch staring right at

me – the owlet.

As I walked back up the hill, after photographing this incredible bird, I could hardly believe what had just happened.

I think that there are moments in our lives, as photographers, that we will never forget. For me, this was most definitely one of them.

You've photographed bird species all over the world – from Central America to Australia. What is your favourite location for photographing birds?

I absolutely love the cloud forests of the tropical Andes in countries like Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. The forests are so lush and beautiful here, and the species diversity is through the roof; from dozens of species of colourful tanagers to, literally, over a hundred species of hummingbirds, the Andes are a treasure chest of spectacular birds. ▶▶

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►► **What is the next location on your wish-list and why?**

I had planned on going to Argentina and Panama this fall. But unfortunately, the global pandemic has pretty much halted all of my travel plans for now. Once we get back up and running though, I'd love to get in those two trips, in addition to Northeast Brazil, Mexico and more of the Caribbean Islands.

In your experience, what is essential fieldcraft knowledge for budding birders?

I often say to people that when it comes to getting to know birds, the first thing is to know them by sight. Next up, learn their calls. Finally, you need to understand what types of habitat your target bird is likely to be found in. Now, you don't have to know every call of every bird out there, but if there is a particular species that you would really like to photograph, it really pays to listen to their calls before pursuing them. It is so much easier to bird by ear than by eye.

My goal is to photograph as many of the spectacular species of birds that live in the New World as possible, in their natural environment.

Your images have featured in magazines including Audubon, Canadian Wildlife, Birder's World and within National Geographic books. What is your advice for other wildlife photographers with a special interest in a species who dream of getting their work published?

Getting published is a fantastic milestone for any photographer. To do so, you obviously need to become

at least reasonably proficient as a photographer first. Once you are taking some nice images, or if you have a story to tell, the next step is to look for a potential publication to work with, or photo contest to enter. Just be aware that many photo contests are simply a way for publications to have you pay to donate your images to the magazine, or contest, to use for free. Definitely read the fine print!

You recently released your video ebook series 'Process with Me' to help photographers tackle old images with new skills, software and techniques. What tips can you offer to photographers whose travel plans have

been affected this year and how they can breathe new life into their archive images?

Personally, I am always trying to

improve my skills as a photographer. This year, in the field, that has been tricky. But as photographers, I doubt that there are many of us that can't continue to improve our skills in the digital darkroom. I think most photographers really neglect this aspect of wildlife photography and their final images could be so much better if they invested a bit of time to become proficient in Photoshop. It is a very important aspect of modern photography.

Where can people find you during each season when you're in birding mode?

Typically, during the spring in April and May, I want to be in Canada somewhere ►►

▶ out in the woods with lots of birds and few people around. The rest of the year it really depends on what trips I have lined up. I lead a variety of tropical photo tours throughout the year, so I am generally busy with that from September to March. I also try to sneak in at least one good trip every year for me to explore South America on my own.

What's your mission when it comes to your photography?

My goal is to photograph as many of the spectacular species of birds that live in the New World as possible, in their natural environment. One day, I'd love to publish a book featuring all of the most interesting species and ecosystems, from Alaska to Tierra Del Fuego.

What's next for you and your photography projects?

One of the big projects I am working on right now is a hummingbirds book. It is scheduled to come out in the fall of 2021. I'm very excited to publish it, as it's been something I've been working towards for a long time. Other than that, I'm looking forward to being able to travel again and continue to work on my portfolio of South American birds. ●

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INTERVIEW

GLENN BARTLEY

Glenn Bartley is a world-renowned professional nature photographer from Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. He focuses almost all of his efforts on capturing intimate images of birds in their natural habitat. Glenn is especially well-known for his portraits of rare and difficult to photograph birds from the Neotropical region and his portfolio of hummingbird images.

