



The Power of Water to Attract

Birds

Friday, November 13 2009 Alan Murphy



When it comes to attracting birds into camera range, nothing is more effective than water. Only a limited number of species come to feeders to eat seed, fruit and nectar, but all birds come to water to bath and drink. Using water for bird photography can be especially powerful if you happen to live in the drier climates of the west or near a good migrant trap (migrant traps are locations where birds congregate during migration to rest and feed).

When I am using water to photograph birds, my goal is to capture the images as the birds make their way down to the water and not while they are bathing or drinking. For this I set up a small drip pond. This can be as elaborate or simple as you want to make it. I travel a lot to photograph birds so I like to keep my set-ups portable and basic. Creating a small pond can be as simple as scooping out a shallow hole in the ground, placing a small piece of pond liner over the depression, and filling it with water.



If you are creating a small pond in your backyard, you can use a garden hose to fill it. It is best however, if the water is dripping because the sound attracts the birds and lets them know the water is fresh. To fine tune the dripping you can purchase a small drip hose from a department store and attach it to your garden hose. Some models even come with a small spigot so that the drip rate and volume can be adjusted

When there is no running water nearby, I use a five gallon jug that has an adjustable flow lever. A camping jug will last two days with a steady drip. I support the jug with a photographer's backdrop frame that folds up into a bag that you can travel with. If you can't find a camping water jug, a gallon milk jug will work. Create a small pin hole in the bottom and it will drip for most of the day.



When setting this rig up, I always place it near trees and vegetation so that the birds feel safe making their way down to the water. Then I introduce several tripod-mounted perches to the set-up.

If I plan to photograph at the same location for more than a day I elevate the drip pond so that it is about two feet off the ground. I place a three foot square of plywood atop an upside down five gallon bucket, put stones around the edges, and then place the pond liner on top. Raising the set-up in this manner will effectively move the background (usually the ground itself) farther away and yield soft, pleasing out-of-focus backgrounds.



Use no more than four perches, place them close to each other, and arrange them so that they lead down to the water like a stairway; the birds will use them readily. If you put up too many perches and spread them out too much, it is likely that you will scare the birds when you pan the lens to find your subject.



Water drip photography is not always as fast paced as working with bird feeders, but the real power using water comes when difficult to get species show up. This is my favorite type of bird photography and I am sure once you experience your first images from this kind of set-up it will be yours too.



Alan Murphy's
Guide to Songbird Set-Up Photography

In this eBook, Alan shares all of his tips and tricks of bird photography that he has learned over the past 15 years.

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Alan Murphy is a full time bird photographer living in Houston, Texas. His work is widely published and has appeared in National Geographic, Birding, Birders World, WildBird, Bird Watcher's Digest, North American Birds, Texas Birds, Texas Parks & Wildlife,

Texas Highways, British Birds, and many other publications. His photographs appear in a number of field guides, books, CD-ROMs, and calendars. Alan has authored two books on bird photography. In Alan's new e-book, [*Guide to Songbird Setup Photography*](#), offered for sale in the NatureScapes.Net store, he shares the details of the many techniques used to photograph songbirds. Alan also offers several bird photography workshops each year. For more information on Alan's photographs, workshop offerings, print sales, and more visit his website www.alanmurphyphotography.com and blog alanmurphyphotography.com/blog.