

13 Essential Tips for Stunning Bird Photos

by Essdras M Suarez/ 2 X Pulitzer Prize winning photographer

1. Whenever possible, use a super-telephoto lens (300mm and above). These lenses naturally compress space and help create separation between focal planes, allowing your subject to stand out from the background.



2. Keep the closest eye to you as the sharpest element in the frame. If the eye isn't sharp, the image won't feel right, no matter how strong the rest of the composition is.



3. Pay close attention to how light hits your subject. Good light can make or break your image. Early golden light adds warmth and texture; late-day light leans toward cooler tones and creates a different mood. This photo of a Yellow Mangrove Warbler was done at the end of the day under the waning light.



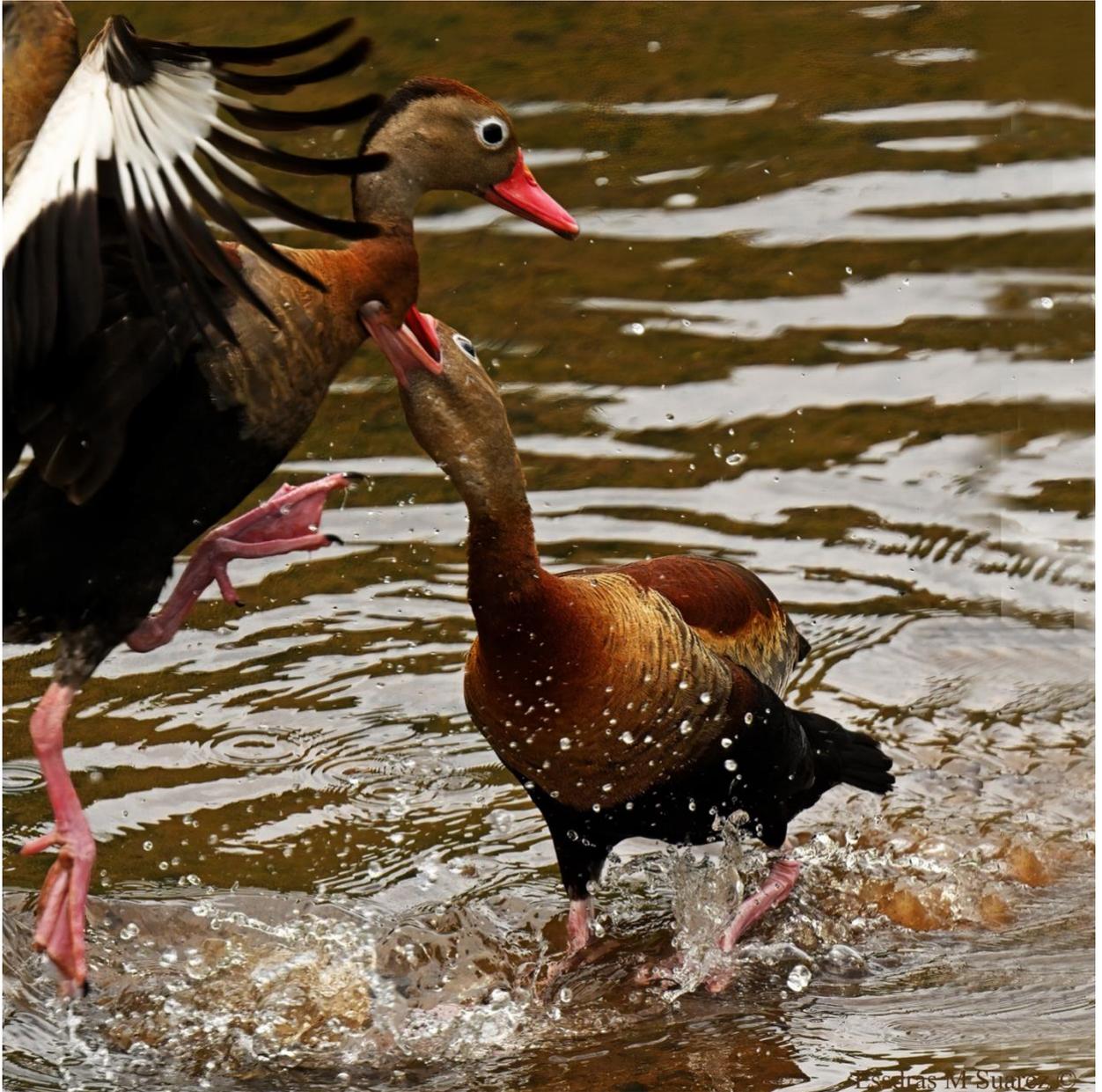
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4. Whenever possible, be at eye level with your subject. Matching the bird's perspective creates intimacy and a stronger emotional connection.



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5. Watch, observe, and learn your subject's behavior patterns. Anticipation is everything. Knowing how different birds move and behave helps you predict action before it unfolds. I watched this very aggressive whistling duck repeatedly attack other ducks that landed near him.



6. For birds in flight, acquire the bird in your viewfinder, half-press the shutter to engage continuous autofocus, and pan smoothly with the subject. Keep the focus plane on the bird and shoot short bursts. Depending on available light, aim for a fast shutter speed—**around 1/2500 sec or higher**—to freeze wing motion.



7. Stay with your subject. Even if you already “have the shot,” keep watching. Unexpected action—fights, displays, stretching, interactions—often produces your best frames.



8. When you arrive on site, settle yourself. Don't rush. Become still and allow nature to get used to you. Once the environment relaxes, real life begins to unfold.



9. If you're photographing birds that fish—raptors, kingfishers, herons, and more—study their specific behavior. Learn which species stalk and which ones dive and try to anticipate where they tend to surface or strike. This lets you aim your lens where the action will be, not where it just happened.



10. Keep your telephoto locked on your primary subject but keep your other eye open. Peripheral awareness helps you catch surprise entries into the scene, such as a bird swooping in to attack or interact. Snail kite being attacked by a southern lapwing after having grabbed a meal.



11. Whenever possible, “zoom with your feet.” Even if your lens has reach, getting physically closer (without disturbing the bird) often gives you cleaner backgrounds and more dynamic compositions. I spotted these baby hummingbirds with my 500mm on a tree nearby and at eye level. I walked closer and switched to my 70-200mm, finally I kept walking closer until I was able to make this photo with my phone.



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12. Be mindful of both background and light. Aim for clean, uncluttered backgrounds, use shallow depth of field when needed, and take advantage of golden and blue hours to add mood and atmosphere. Blue-grey tanager basking on a beam of light.



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Bonus Tip: Once you've mastered the "photo of record"—the classic bird on a branch—start seeking behavior. Focus on action words: hunting, grooming, scratching, bathing, hunting, preening, attacking, interacting, displaying, feeding. Behavior is where true storytelling and your most memorable images come alive.



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