

 DALMATIAN PELICANS
Nikon D7000, Nikon
AF-S 14-24mm f/2.8G ED,
1/2000 sec, f/7.1, ISO250



CLOSE-UP

DAVID TIPLING

David Tipling has travelled all over the world to photograph birds. He tells Keith Wilson why he prefers penguins to hummingbirds, and why he packs a plastic flowerpot in his camera bag...

Like many children before him, David Tipling was not inspired by what he learnt in school, but from looking out of the classroom window. For the boy David, a nuthatch was the first of thousands of birds that would be the subject of his gaze. Yet for all his passion for his subject, he could easily have been a sports photographer...

How did you become interested in taking photographs?

I think I wanted some form of artistic expression. I had a Saturday job selling eggs door to door. At Christmas the tips were really good and that and a little help from my parents led me to own a Zenith EM camera and then a Vivitar 400mm lens. However, I was keener to photograph motor racing at Brands Hatch. I went regularly with friends as a teenager as we lived close to the circuit.

What sparked your interest in birds?

I remember sitting in class, aged eight or nine, and being distracted by a bird table fixed to the window outside. Every few minutes a nuthatch came. I also remember noticing the redwings that fed along the road we walked to school. My parents then bought me *The Observer's Book of Birds* and I was hooked.

What made you decide to become a professional photographer?

I used to watch the pro motor sport photographers at Brands Hatch and long ▶





 **EMPEROR PENGUINS** Nikon F4,
Nikon 300mm f/2.8 AF, Fuji Velvia 50 film

to be among them – I still would love to shoot sport professionally. I think there is a close relationship between that and bird photography, capturing that split second when many elements come together. By my late teens I was becoming published as a bird photographer and shooting pictures felt natural. I felt I had found something I was really good at and loved doing.

What was your first big break?

In 1992 I was recruited by the Tony Stone Agency. Tony Stone had the ‘less is more’ philosophy to selling pictures, so they only marketed the very best

commercial imagery and those pictures sold multiple times. That same year, a friend of mine David Tomlinson, who had been Environmental Editor at *Country Life* magazine, left to start a picture library, Windrush Photos. From 1993 to 2003, I ran the library representing around 50 wildlife photographers. This gave me a really good understanding of the stock business and I made a lot of good contacts in publishing.

What would you have done if it hadn't worked out?

When I left school I got a job with a bank, then worked as an auditor for a building society. I worked in an office for nearly ten years before taking voluntary redundancy. Up to that point I had not felt I had enough

pictures behind me to really go for it. I never thought about it not working out.

Which assignment stands out as being the most memorable?

Camping on the ice next to an Emperor Penguin colony in Antarctica in 1998. We stayed in the Patriot Hills, rubbing shoulders with adventurers who were walking to the South Pole. We experienced extreme weather, including winds of 110km/h and temperatures of -55°C, and saw the beauty of the colony bathed in summer light at two in the morning.

How did your images turn out?

This trip allowed me to push my photography and come home with



images of scenes and behaviour few had photographed before. It transformed my career. The pictures started to earn me decent money. They were used for advertising campaigns by Wal-Mart in the US, as well as Lufthansa, Disney and Fujifilm. British Airways used pictures of penguins in long lines to advertise their new automated check in terminals! This gave me the income to really step up my travel and build my image library. Some of these images still sell well today.

Is it possible to get great shots of birds without using long telephoto lenses?

Yes, without question. So much of bird photography is about finding the right location, and there are many where birds



EMPEROR PENGUINS
Fuji 6x17, Fuji 90mm,
Fuji Velvia 50 film



SANDHILL CRANE Nikon D300, Nikon AF-S 500mm f/4G ED VR, 1/320 sec, f/6.3, ISO200



BARN SWALLOW CATCHING A FLY Nikon D300, Nikon AF-S 500mm f/4G ED VR, 1/2500 sec, f/4.0, ISO400



SHETLAND PUFFINS Nikon D2x, Nikon AF-S 300mm f/2.8G ED-IF VR, 1/100 sec, f/8, ISO200

are tame or where they congregate in huge numbers. Having said that, for consistent results there is no substitute for a long lens.

So what's your 'desert island lens', the one lens you cannot do without?

My Nikkor 300mm f/2.8. I nearly always leave my 500mm at home and take the 300mm when going abroad. With the latest 2x Nikon teleconverter on the 1.5x cropped sensor cameras, it gives great versatility. It is light enough to use all day handheld, and I often use it on a monopod. A wide aperture is a powerful tool when illustrating a subject, such as a bird, where



you may not have much control over the background. I like the creative dimension using a wide aperture can bring to a shot.

Emperor penguins or hummingbirds?

Emperor penguins, because I love cold places, and the sparse environment in which they live allows a more creative approach. Having said that, who can fail to be enthralled by a hummer hovering a few inches from their nose? I never tire of watching them. But give me a choice and I would rather shiver than sweat.

What equipment do you regard as essential to successful bird photography?

A telephoto lens – and if you live in Europe then a 500mm lens is probably of most use.

It also amazes me how many people forget to carry binoculars when they are shooting birds. I never leave home without them. They are essential to scan and be ready.

What is the weight of your typical day's kit bag?

Fairly light, as I hate being weighed down with too much kit. I normally have a 500mm or 300mm lens attached to a body around my shoulder, or on a tripod. I also take converters and a 24-70mm zoom.

What's the most unusual thing in your camera bag?

Weird and wonderful things in my bag change depending on the seasons. Recently, I had a stuffed cuckoo tucked away,

 SUNRISE, BOSQUE DEL APACHE
Nikon D300, Nikon AF-S 500mm f/4G ED VR, 1/125 sec, f/18, ISO250

PROFILE

Your at-a-glance guide to David's career, from books to international photography awards



■ David Tipling is one of the world's most widely published wildlife photographers, best known for his bird photography.

■ He is the author or commissioned photographer of more than 40 books including the *RSPB Guide to Digital Wildlife Photography*, *Great Birds of Britain and Europe*, and *Seabirds of the World*.

■ In 2002, his photographs of Emperor Penguins earned him a coveted European Nature Photographer of the Year award and he has since won numerous categories in the BBC Wildlife Photographer of the Year awards.

■ David is working with author Mark Cocker to document the cultural links between birds and people for a major book, *Birds and People*, to be published next year by Random House and BirdLife international.

■ Naturalist Sir David Bellamy has described David's photographs as "windows of wonder".



 BIRDERS AT DAWN Nikon D3, Nikon 70-180mm f/4.5-5.6 D, 1/80 sec, f/5.0, ISO640

now I have a customised flowerpot as an extension to my lens hood to help with flare for a shoot where I will be shooting into the sun as it rises.

Can you list the Nikon cameras you have owned and reveal what was the difference each one gave you?

FE2, F4, F5, F-801, D2X, D3, D300, D3s, D7000, D4. Up to the F-801, it was the increase in frames per second, then latterly autofocus capability that were advantageous. Once digital arrived, image quality became the driving factor, along with buffer speed. The D3 suddenly made possible pictures that had eluded me previously. The increased sensitivity of the sensor gave me the ability to shoot birds

“A wide lens aperture is a powerful tool when illustrating a subject, such as a bird, where you may not have much control over the background”

David Tipling *Wildlife Photographer*

in low light. The D3s then took this a step further. I upgraded to a D4 this year, not just for the minor improvements for stills, but for the leap forward in video capability. More of my work now requires shooting video in tandem with stills. I have three

Nikons in current use: a D3s, D7000 and D4, but use the D4 90% of the time.

How are you using HD movies?

I was invited to Cyprus by the conservation NGO BirdLife International to photograph the illegal trapping of songbirds. While there, I met an American film crew covering the story and they invited me to join them in Italy to film migrant birds to be used in the documentary. This was my first commission to shoot an HD movie and I really enjoyed the challenge. I have since shot video for use in AV shows.

So which do you prefer shooting?

A really good still will always be memorable. I think the brain finds it ▶

“A really good still will always be memorable. I think the brain finds it difficult to replay moving pictures”

David Tipling *Wildlife Photographer*



NESTING OSPREY Kodak DCS Pro SLR/n, Nikon AF-S 500mm f/4G ED VR, Nikon 1.4x teleconverter, 1/180 sec, f/11, ISO250

difficult to replay moving pictures, preferring to seize on single images that freeze and encapsulate a defining moment. This is best illustrated by momentous news events, which are defined in our memories by the still images we have seen. It's the same with photography: you can watch any number of amazing documentaries, but it is stills that we remember.

You have shot dozens of covers for books and magazines. What makes a great cover to your eye?

Simplicity and eye contact with the subject. Strong colours and clean backgrounds

combined with the subject doing something dynamic, such as flying. In short, the image on the cover should compel the viewer to want to reach over and look inside.

One of your images was projected in Times Square. What was the occasion?

It was an event sponsored by Sony for the Millennium to celebrate exploration. A number of photographers were asked to contribute and it was an image of my tent in a storm in Antarctica that was chosen.

How many memory cards do you use?

When I am shooting with the D4, just two of the 16GB XQD card and a 32GB Sandisk Extreme. On a trip I take four or five spare 8GB cards. I tend to edit on the back of

the camera during quiet periods. When travelling I download every evening to my laptop and back up to a Buffalo hard drive.

How many gigabytes of pictures do you shoot a week?

It depends on the time of year. I can shoot 16GB a day in winter or spring in Norfolk. But I don't just blast away, so unless I am shooting action I can easily return from a day's shoot with fewer than 100 frames.

What percentage of shots do you delete?

I am quite harsh in my editing because of the increased competition in the market. For example, I spent a couple of days photographing fishing ospreys in Scotland and shot around 400 images. About 150 of

BIRDS & PEOPLE

*Next year will see the publication of **Birds and People**, a book that David Tipling and author Mark Cocker have been working on for the past six years*

Mark approached David to supply all the photographs for the project, which depicts the cultural relationship between birds and communities around the world. With the support of BirdLife International and leading publisher Random House, *Birds and People* will also feature a travelling exhibition...

Who came up with the idea for the book?

■ It was Mark's idea. He is the author of *Birds Britannica* and has always been interested in the cultural link between birds and people. We talked about it and he then asked me if I would like to be the photographer.

It sounds like a big undertaking. How many countries did you visit?

■ I have visited around 35 countries specifically for the book, including China, Japan, various countries in South America, plus Papua New Guinea for the birds of paradise.

Was that your first experience of photographing those birds?

■ Yes. Birds of paradise are hard to see because getting around is difficult and they display only at dawn. New Guinea suffers from poor infrastructure and a fairly lawless society. In the Tari Valley, two clans went to war close to where I was staying. Three people were killed and many buildings burnt to the ground. I spent a stressful night with the door to my hut barricaded in case of attack.

Would you go back?

■ Yes! The birds are stunning and, despite the attack, the people were incredibly friendly and the tribes I visited were spectacular.



HULI WIGMEN, TARI VALLEY Nikon D3s, Nikon AF-S 24-70mm f/2.8G ED, 1/1250 sec, f/2.8, ISO320



FLAMINGOES
Nikon D2x, Nikon AF-S 500mm f/4G ED VR, 1/20 sec, f/32, ISO100



STELLER'S EAGLES, JAPAN Nikon D300, Nikon AF-S 500mm f/4G ED VR, Nikon 1.4x teleconverter, 1/640 sec, f/6.3

them were acceptable, but five frames stood out from the rest so I kept those. I deleted most of the 150 selects, keeping around 30.

How important is it to stay on top of image workflow and how do you do it?

It's a real challenge. I have a backlog of around a year's worth of images at any one time but I fast track the processing of ones that have strong sales potential – I recently spent time photographing fishing kingfishers, and these are very saleable, so I had them processed and distributed within a week of finishing the shoot.

How do you relax?

I have two young children so they take me away from photography. I love watching

sport, particularly motor racing, and we have an allotment that keeps me busy. Five years ago I used the royalties from a book to buy a small piece of woodland on the Norfolk Broads. I use it as an outdoor studio to set up opportunities for bird photography. I harvest the wood for our wood-burning stove at home and manage the patch for wildlife.

What have been the biggest improvements you have seen in photographic technology?

The digital revolution has transformed opportunities. No longer do we need bright,



WREN AT DAWN, NORFOLK Nikon D300,
Nikon AF-S 500mm f/4G ED VR, 1/1250 sec, f/4.0, ISO400



SANDHILL CRANES ROOSTING AT NIGHT Nikon D3,
Nikon AF-S 500mm f/4G ED VR, 5 sec, f/10, ISO250



CURIOS BARN OWL Nikon F5,
Nikon 600mm f/5.6 ED-IF, Fuji Sensia 100 film



sunny days to use high shutter speeds to freeze action. And you can see on the back of the camera what you have just shot. Digital has saved me a ton of money. My film and processing bill for the final year I shot film was just short of £16,000!

“Half asleep, I fumbled for my camera, fell off my stool and the canvas hide collapsed around me! I can still see the picture that should have been”

David Tipling *Wildlife Photographer*

Upgrading a D-SLR every three or four years pales into insignificance.

What has been your proudest moment as a photographer?

This year marks my 20th anniversary as a full-time professional. I'm proud of making it this far in what is a very tough profession. Perhaps my proudest moment was seeing my first book published in 1995. As a kid, I used to wander around bookshops dreaming of having a book published, so when it happened it was a major milestone.

And the worst?

There's a few. I once started falling off the back of an elephant while just a few feet from a tigress and her cubs! In Antarctica

the sea ice we were camping on started to break up and we had to leave in a hurry. One evening, in my 20s, I went out and drank far too much. I had planned the next day to sit in a hide to photograph cuckoos that were coming to a field to feed. Once in the hide and nursing a hangover, I drifted off to sleep only to be awoken by a calling bird outside. There on my perch was a male cuckoo with a scolding robin perched on his back. Half asleep, I fumbled for my camera, fell off my stool and the canvas hide collapsed around me! I can still see the picture that should have been.

What is the biggest lesson you've learnt?

To concentrate on one subject at a time. During my early years I would often go

NIGHT VISION

Despite the difficulties of photographing birds of paradise, David says there is a bird closer to his own home in Norfolk that is an even more elusive subject

Not all birds are active by day. Some species appear after sunset and can only be identified by their call. Trying to get sharp, well-lit photographs of these birds in flight is challenging, but David succeeded...

Which was the most difficult bird to shoot?

■ Five years ago I set out to photograph nightjars displaying at dusk. They do this by flying quickly and clapping their wings together while fanning their tails. Getting a shot like this had been all but impossible before.

What changed to make it possible?

■ The new breed of light-sensitive cameras, notably the Nikon D3. The low light capability and improved autofocus allowed me to take the image I'd wanted. I had always shot nightjars with a little bit of fill flash, but using a high ISO meant that the flash reached further. It also allowed me to select a shutter speed that was fast enough to freeze the movement of the wings and prevent any ghosting.

How many attempts did it take?

■ I visited the heath more than a hundred times over three years. The window of opportunity every evening lasted only five to ten minutes. The nightjar does not stir until after the sun has sunk, but before all colour is lost in the sky, so I normally had one shot at it each evening.

So there were plenty of failures before you succeeded?

■ Often the sky would cloud up at the critical moment, or the autofocus missed as the bird flew past. But one evening everything came together. A big part of bird photography is perseverance and planning.



NIGHTJAR DISPLAYING Nikon D3, Nikon 70-200mm f/2.8 VR, 1/250 sec, f/11, ISO800



OYSTERCATCHER AMID RED KNOTS Nikon D300, AF-S 300mm f/2.8G ED-IF VR, 1/320 sec, f/8, ISO250

out and shoot anything that came within range. I ended up with lots of okay pictures, but nothing outstanding. I then changed my way of working to concentrate on one subject at a time. This approach raised my standard because I kept at it until I had the best image I could produce.

If young David Tipling was starting out today, would he do anything differently?

Not really. My only minor regret is that I should have switched from film to digital two years before I did. I let a couple of my competitors within the bird photography world get ahead for a short period. It taught me to embrace new technology quickly, or at least explore its potential fully and not ignore it.

What is the best advice you can give to an aspiring professional photographer?

Persevere. You will get many knocks back, and you have to believe in yourself. Try and diversify: be able to write to a reasonable standard, speak publicly and, if you are good with people, run workshops. These will all help you make a living. □

Birds and People, by Mark Cocker with photographs by David Tipling, will be published in 2013. To see more of David's work, visit his website at www.davidthipling.com