Wader Photography; My insights and experiences

Wader Quest Article number 14: 30/01/2021

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Black-tailed Godwits © Dylan Parry-Davies

WADER QUEST

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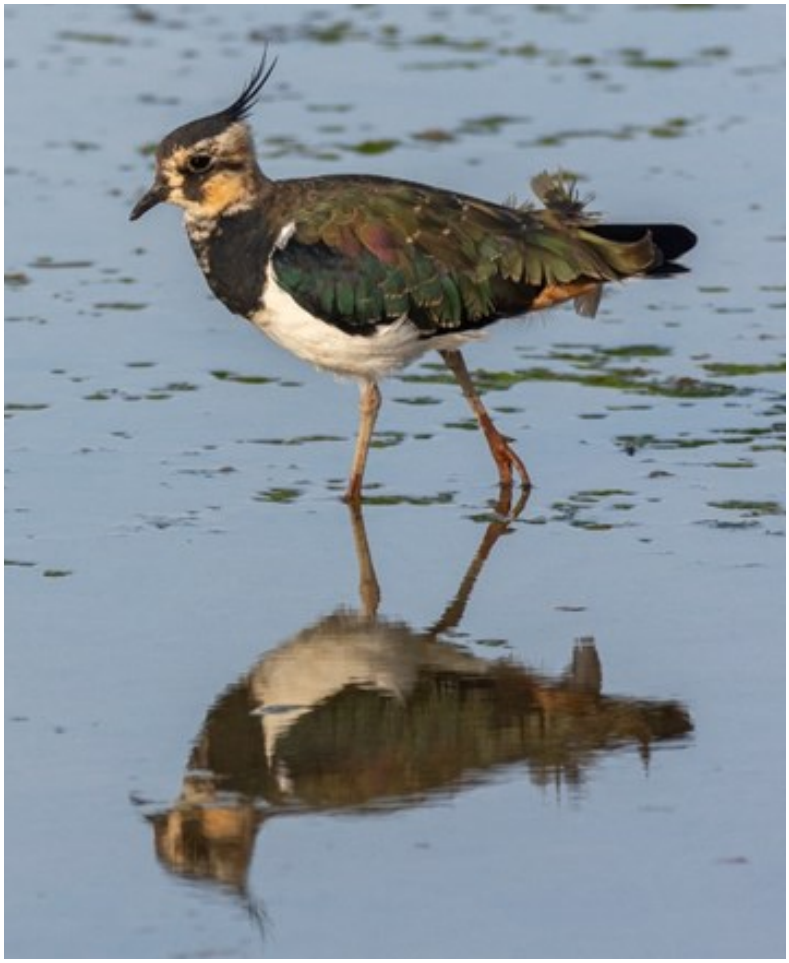
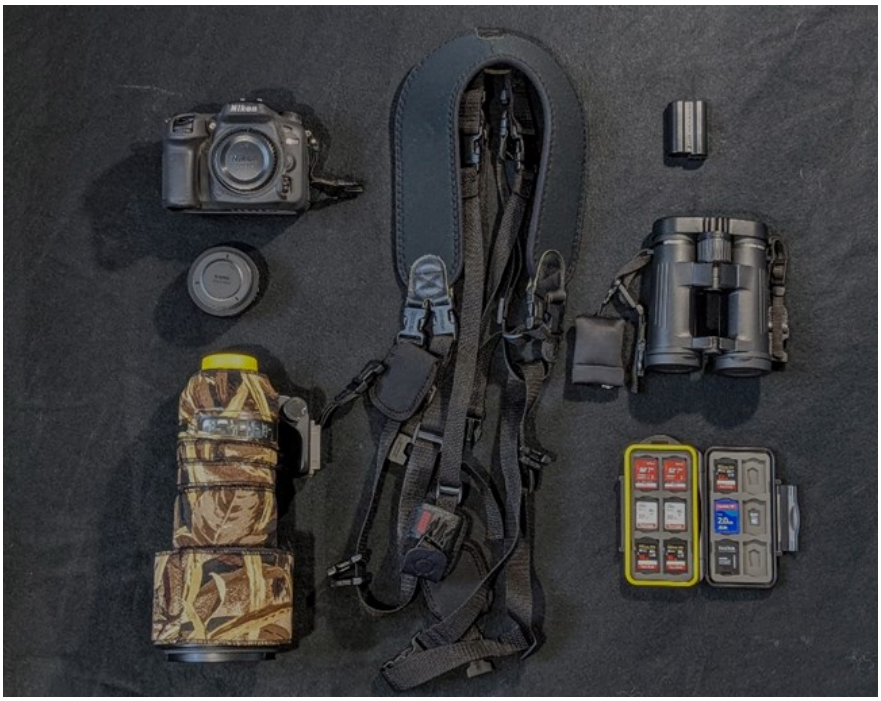


Northern Lapwing Titchwell Marsh © Dylan Parry-Davies

I have to admit to being slightly taken aback when Rick first proposed the idea of me writing about wader photography. Not through any feelings about not wanting to do it, but more about whether I could do the subject justice. One of the most rewarding aspects of being part of Wader Quest and the Wader Quest Executive Committee is witnessing, and being part of the drive, passion and incredible talents of its collective members. My abilities as a photographer are modest by comparison, but I count myself lucky to be able to contribute in any way I can. What follows then is not by any means the definitive guide on wader photography, but more so a collection of experiences, thoughts and things I've learned along the way.

I spent over 20 years living in North-East Essex, photographing birds along the Colne and Stour Estuaries, saltmarshes and reservoirs. It should then come as no surprise that waders formed a big part of my subjects – wintering Black-tailed Godwits *Limosa limosa* along the estuaries, European Golden Plovers *Pluvialis apricaria* and Northern Lapwings *Vanellus vanellus* roosting in their hundreds along the banks of Abberton Reservoir, the spring movements of Eurasian Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* along the coast while Eurasian Curlews *Numenius arquata* and Common Redshanks *Tringa totanus* were almost a given on any day out.

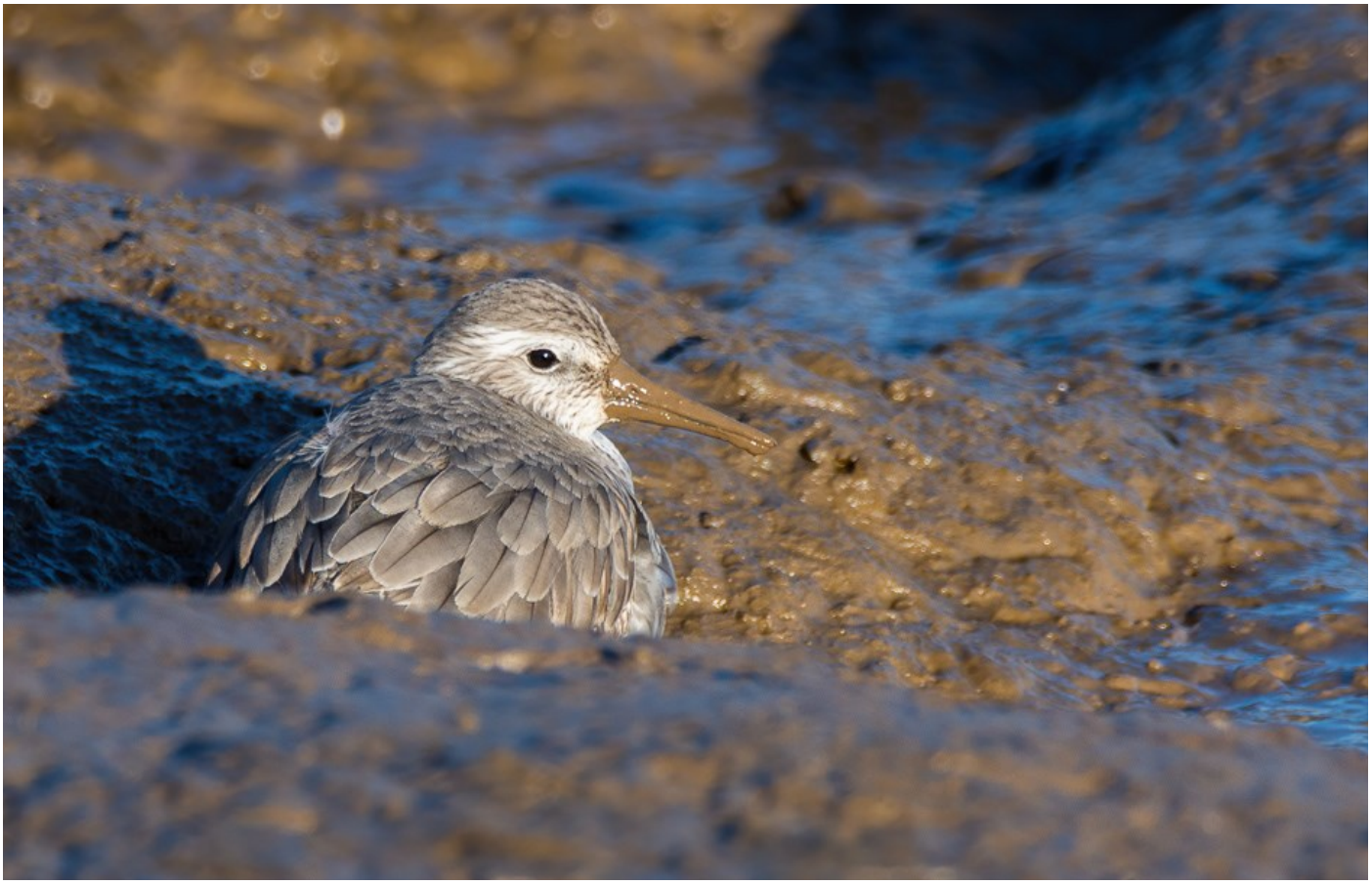
Bird photography in general is very challenging, wader photography even more so. Something I can attest to, now living in the comparatively sparce birding region of the Oxfordshire/Warwickshire border. Wader photography for me, and I suspect a lot of people who don't have the great fortune of living along a migration corridor, breeding ground or other birding hotspot, isn't easy. This doesn't mean it's impossible however, you just have to work harder for it.



My typical kit – Nikon D7500/D7200 DSLR, Sigma 150-600mm lens and 1.4x teleconverter, binoculars, OP/TECH harness, spare battery and memory cards © Dylan Parry-Davies

For me, bird photography falls into two areas; spontaneous opportunities and pre-planned trips where I'm going to see a specific bird or species. I am not a hardcore twitcher by any stretch, but if something interesting crops up fairly close to home or on a weekend away (not possible now unfortunately!) then I'll always make time to try and get some pictures.

Whether planned or off the cuff, some things never change. I always try to have my camera with me. As a long-time DSLR user this



Red Knot, Titchwell Marsh © Dylan Parry-Davies

isn't always easy. Advancements in digital camera technology mean that SLR type cameras don't hold the advantages in autofocus and image quality that they once did over the smaller bridge type cameras and the newer mirrorless cameras. Old habits are hard to break, however and making the switch gets harder when you are tied into a particular brand's ecosystem with multiple camera bodies, lenses and accessories.

Regardless of which brand you use one thing is for certain – the best camera is the one you have with you. And you can guarantee when you don't have your camera with you, you will see something spectacular or rare!

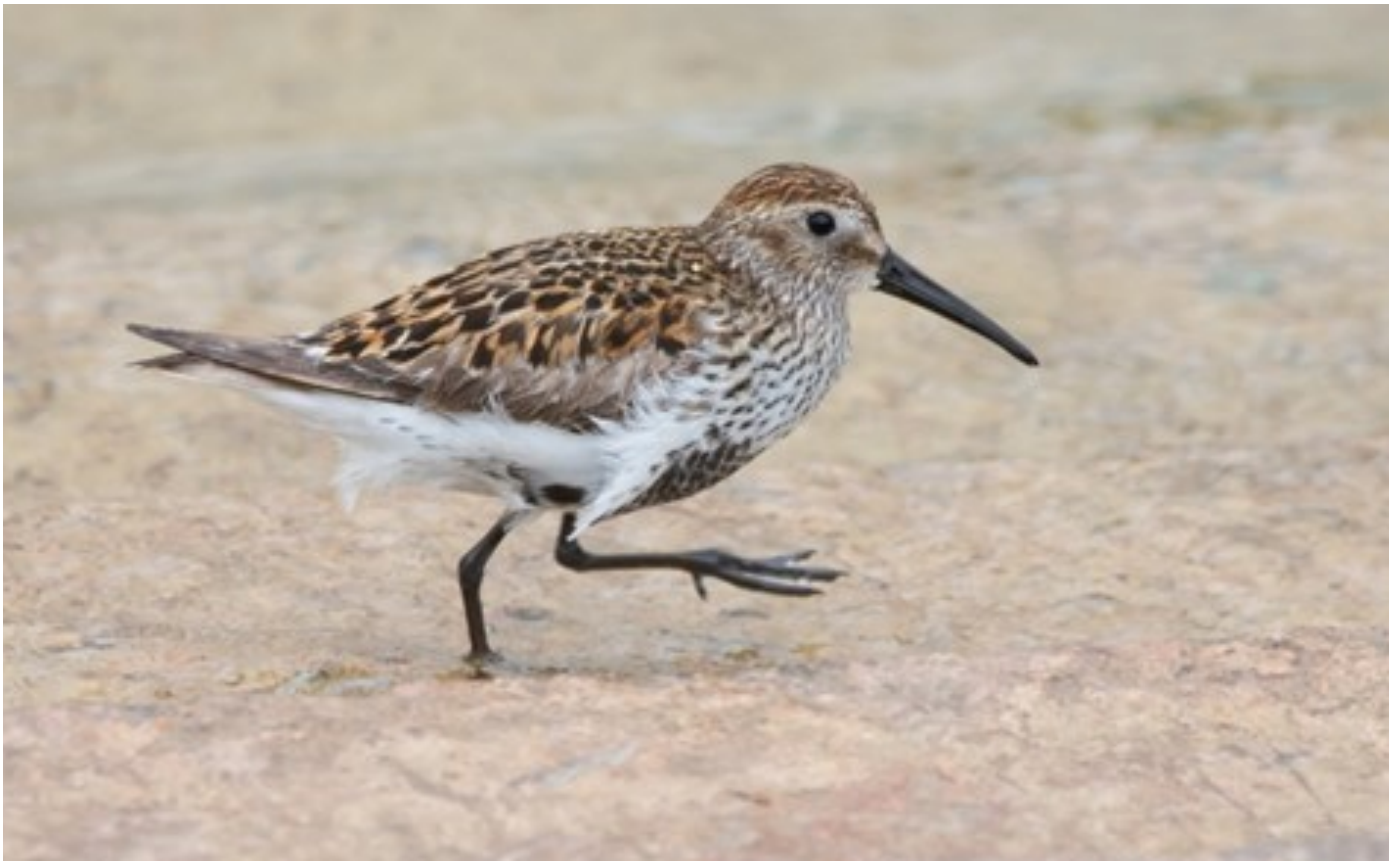
For me, watching the natural behaviours of waders is what makes them my favourite group of birds. Turnstones rummaging along the high tide line, Sanderling *Calidris alba* scurrying along the shore, Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta* sweeping back and forth as they feed. Capturing these habits and mannerisms is part of what makes wader photography so rewarding but also rather challenging.

Waders, like most wild birds are naturally timid and opportunities to get close to them will be few. This is where a long lens like a telephoto is your friend. "Phonescope" adapters which connect your mobile phone to the eyepiece of your telescope help to cut down on having to carry extra kit and can yield surprisingly good results for a very modest investment. The ability to distance yourself from your subject while still getting a photo which captures the essence and character of the bird leads directly to the golden rule of all avian photography – the bird always comes first.

This may seem like common sense to most but is often forgotten by some in the quest for a better picture. Intentionally pursuing or flushing birds not only prevents you from capturing their natural habits, it prevents them from feeding, resting, courting or worse, nesting.

With over 30% of all wader species classed as Threatened or higher by the IUCN, taking any action that might increase the number of challenges these birds already face is not only damaging, but incredibly selfish.

This should go without saying, but knowing your subject and location before you start will increase your likelihood of success exponentially. This is not to say that great pictures don't happen spontaneously, but some preparation is always better than none.



Dunlin, Cheddar Reservoir © Dylan Parry-Davies

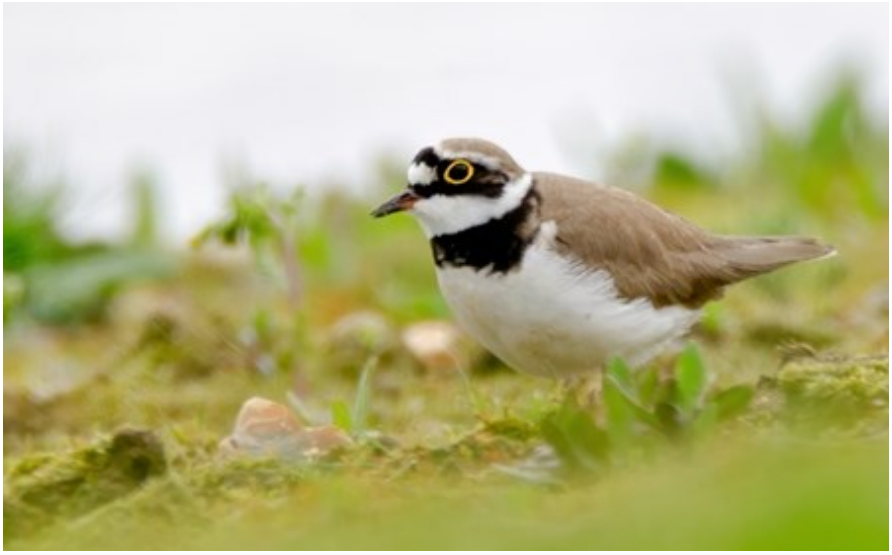
So if you can't risk disturbing birds in their natural behaviour, what can you do? When in doubt, the best thing to do is nothing. Waders can be surprisingly tolerant of people, provided you are patient. Anyone who knows me will attest that patience is not something that comes naturally. Despite this, some of my favourite images have come after waiting many, many hours for a bird to appear. I noticed this Dunlin *Calidris alpina* (above) on an early morning walk around Cheddar Reservoir. I first spotted it through my binoculars, foraging along the water's edge at least a hundred yards away. Seeing that it was slowly moving closer, I crouched down next to the path. Within ten minutes, it was within feet of me, aware of my presence, but only looking up occasionally on hearing my camera shutter.

Getting low down has a number of benefits. It helps to blend you into your surroundings, making you appear less threatening to birds and will help them get accustomed to your presence. Being at (or close to) eye level with the bird helps to create a connection with your subject and draw your viewer into the subject's world.

Of course, being low down also brings you into contact with the ground, be it mud, sand and rocks but there are ways to make this more comfortable to you and less damaging to your equipment which we will cover in another instalment.

Lying on the cold, wintry UK coast, staving off biting winds may not sound like the most enticing of pastimes but witnessing this diverse and remarkable group of birds up close is one of the most rewarding experiences birding has to offer!

For more of Dylan's work, visit www.dpdnature.co.uk



Little Ringed Plover, Abberton Reservoir © Dylan Parry-Davies