Photographing Gannets at Cape Kidnappers

During late March of 2011 my wife and I took an overland 4WD trip with local guides from the outskirts of Napier on the NE coast of New Zealand's North Island to visit the Gannet colony perched high above the cliffs at Cape Kidnappers. It was far from an ideal day with varied cloud cover, moderate winds and regular rain showers. When we finally arrived it was late morning and the light was poor. So the conditions were not exactly ideal. In fact, they were pretty awkward for capturing birds in flight.

So, after a few test shots I set the ISO to 640 and did my best to capture as many images as I could of the birds flying overhead and landing. We were there for about 90 minutes, during which time there were several light showers. I was able, however, to capture over 200 shots. And that was that until we returned home to Brisbane a couple of weeks later.

My first job was to select some images that revealed some of the dynamic qualities of Gannets in flight. For me, part of the sheer delight of this work is that by capturing relatively close up images of birds in their natural element one can begin to see and appreciate their skill, energy and power. Under normal circumstances they move past so quickly, and often at such distances, that it becomes impossible to witness them as they really are. So 'action shots' like this can, in my view, be very special and have a great deal to offer the discriminating viewer. Furthermore, there's a particular pleasure in producing images that show birds at their best.

Figure 1

So, once I'd located some promising shots I processed each of them carefully and produced perhaps a dozen studies of individual birds. One of my favourites is shown in Figure 1 above. It shows the bird slowing down by using its wings as air brakes while scanning the ground for a landing site and beginning to bring the feet forward.

Constructing a multiple image

For some time I simply enjoyed the series of individual birds. In some cases I sampled a more attractive blue colour for the sky from other images and this, I think, heightened the impact of this group. But I also began to think about assembling several images of a bird actually landing. So I went back to my 'negatives', i.e. the original, unprocessed, images to see if there was a series or two that I could use. As it happened there were.

At this point I have to add that I'm not someone who professes to have mastered more than a small selection of available Photoshop tools. In fact I still have a great deal to learn. So no doubt there are plenty of photographers whose techniques for constructing multiple images are more advanced than my own. On the other hand, I thought it worth exploring what I could achieve even with quite limited skills. So basically this is little more than a cut and paste operation. Yet even here there may be some pointers that are useful to others. In order to create the sequence I found I had to work backwards from the last landing shot. So Figure 2 shows this, with the one immediately before it added.

Figure 2

From here it was not difficult to add in three more images. But before I did so I used the 'resize / canvas size' feature under the drop down image menu to expand the picture space. I also checked each image in turn and applied some mild sharpening and cropping as necessary. I only altered the colour balance when it was strictly necessary to fit in with the 'original' sky. The results are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

My next problem was that, in the original 'final landing' shot I only had a few birds from the rest of the colony. In order to make the picture work I had to find some more from other shots and then 'stitch' them across the bottom. I eventually did so (Figure 4) but found them insufficient to go across the whole width. When I could not locate any more I opted to clone part of the existing image and paste that in. With some later cleaning up that seemed to work quite well (Figure 5).

The biggest problem I was left with was how to re-colour the sky. You can see that the variations are still quite obvious in Figure 3. So I sampled what seemed to be the best 'average' colour, used the 'magic wand' to select the upper left and lower right areas and then filled in those areas. After this there was still a good deal of work to do with the clone tool to tone down some of the remaining contrasting areas. Even then, however I was still left with a defect in the original final landing shot. The bird I'd followed down was partly obscured by one standing in front of it. So I again used the clone tool to replace the missing / obscured parts.

Figure 4

Figure 5

The final step – for now – was to make some subtle changes to the colour of the sky so as to give the image a bit more consistency. This I did, and the results are shown in Figure 7, but there are probably other ways to improve on this.

Figure 6

So, overall, what I hope to have shown is that one can produce quite striking multiple images with a combination of careful thinking through of the process, some experimentation and limited Photoshop skills!

A final point – the expanded image is now quite large and will transfer well to an A3 or larger physical print.

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August 2011.

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