

Notes on 2012 Bird Calendar

The purpose of these notes is to provide some brief contextual background to the images used in the 2012 calendar. Bird photography has been a passion of mine since I lived in Bermuda during 1969 to 1975. That was where I was finally able to get close-up to the natural world, to appreciate its qualities and to satisfy something deep within me that, until then, had been denied expression.

Very briefly, I find it amazing that, given our careless treatment of the environment, many species of birds are even here at all. They are deemed of zero value as seen from within the human economy. Yet they come down to us from primeval times, co-inhabitants of this small planet and no less worthy of being valued and appreciated than we are ourselves. As such I believe that birds put us back in touch with the wellsprings of life within and beyond us. A world without birds would be a world unfit for human life. So these are not just 'pretty pictures,' they are also reminders of this wider world of reference.

Cover image – White Tern

This picture was taken on our first trip to Lord Howe Island in November 2008. We headed over especially for a bird week. I spent many hours among the Norfolk Island Pines around the settlement and along the edge of the lagoon. This bird was most likely investigating possible nest sites. The pines were originally planted for windbreaks and then later colonised by the Terns whose numbers have increased here as a result. They lay a single egg on a branch or occasionally on the top of a fence post unadorned by any nest. They appear unafraid of human beings and can be readily sighted quite low down. The newly hatched chicks are equipped with sharp claws with which they grasp their insecure perch. The species is unusual in that adult birds feed whole fish to their chicks.

Azure Kingfisher (January)

This Kingfisher is one of the brightest and most striking in Australia or, indeed, anywhere in the world. The size of its beak seems disproportionate to the rest of its body. It was photographed from a boat on the Mary River in Kakadu National Park, Northern Territory. This was the last picture taken before the bird flushed.

Shy Albatross (February)

March 2011 saw us in New Zealand for a conference in Wellington. Following that we headed for the South Island and Kaikoura. Here the deep ocean trench is only a couple of kilometres off shore. Consequently here too are the famous Kaikoura Albatross Encounters. We took the chance on two successive mornings to rise early and be out on the open ocean before dawn. I'll never forget the pink dawn light glowing on the pure white plumage of these magnificent creatures. Several species of Albatross were drawn to the 'bait' of fish livers drawn behind the boat. This Shy Albatross lived up to its name and circled the boat shortly before we returned to shore. The picture shows its graceful flight against the backdrop of the spectacular South Island landscape.

Male Regent Bowerbird (March)

The male Regent Bowerbird is one of the shyest birds around and therefore very hard to get close to. This shot was taken in the grounds of a secluded B&B near Maleny in Queensland, about an hour north of Brisbane. This and a number of other Bowerbirds were drawn to the berries on the shrub on which it is pictured. For a few days each year these birds seem prepared to come a little closer to humans before they vanish again into the surrounding bush.

Male Darter (or 'Snake Bird') (April)

Darters are rather like 'high tech' or 'extreme' Cormorants. While swimming only their neck and head show above the water - which makes them look rather like snakes, especially from a distance. Like Cormorants they are fish eaters that lack adequate waterproofing. So when their wings are wet they have to sit in the sun to dry them. This shot was taken from a boat in the Yellow Waters reserve in Kakadu National Park. I liked the distinctive patterns on its tail and wings and the air of veiled menace implied by the spear-like beak.

Alaskan Bald Eagle (May)

This is the first of two images here that were taken at an owl and raptor sanctuary in the New Forest, Hampshire, UK during a trip that my son, Rohan, and I took during mid-2010. The bird was not confined but had been part of a flying display. Afterward it posed on the (shielded) arm of its handler looking both proud and fierce. One can readily see why the species was chosen as the national emblem of the USA.

Eastern Yellow Robin (June)

One of the most beautiful areas quite close to Brisbane is the Bunya Bunya Mountains. Here one can see the impressive Bunya Pines that are remnants of the ancient forests of Gondwanaland. There's also a profusion of birds. A sign there reminds passing humans that the cutting down of such a forest replaces the earlier diverse *volume* of life with mere *area*! This Yellow Robin seemed content to pose for us at the edge of a camping area until flushed by a passer by. The bird was in shadow so the shutter speed was slower than usual. This also meant that the typical flicking motion of the bird's tail shows up rather nicely.

Siberian Eagle Owl (July)

This is another image from the New Forest bird sanctuary. It was taken during a spectacular flying display. Part of the routine was for it to perch on the fences surrounding the display area. The bird landed right in front of us and we were treated to a dramatic close-up view that was not in any way posed!

Egret (August)

The University of Queensland is a place where many different kinds of birds can be found, especially in and around the lake. I've spent many hours there photographing Egrets as they explore the Lily pads in search of food. Since they are too heavy to walk on the pads they often beat their wings to 'walk on water.' The sudden shadows cast by their wings may also startle prey, making it easier to catch. Either way, these birds provide a magnificent sight as they work the shallows. I particularly liked this shot with both wings almost fully extended and the light shining through them from behind.

New Holland Honeyeater (September)

When I lived in Melbourne I often saw these birds feeding in Grevillea or Callistemon shrubs, especially along the Great Ocean Road near Lorne. But, at the time, I was not in a position to photograph them. Then at a friends' farm a couple of months ago I had the ideal opportunity. A shrub planted right by the house was being visited continuously by these and several Brown Honeyeaters (see below). So I cancelled all other activities and spent a couple of days edging ever closer and accumulating some wonderful pictures of these eye-catching birds.

Royal Albatross (October)

This is the second picture in the calendar taken during our 'encounter' trip at Kaikoura in March. It shows the elegant profile of these creatures with the widest wingspan of any in the world. It's not hard to see how they can circumnavigate the southern oceans. What saddens me, however, is the hazards they face from uncaring humans – the long-line fishing, competition for food sources and, of greatest concern perhaps, ever-increasing pollution, especially from plastic detritus that may wound or be mistaken for food.

Brown Honeyeater (November)

This is one of the pictures I'm most proud of. Brown Honeyeaters have a surprisingly loud call. They are also very restless and ever on the move. It's hard to capture them while feeding, let alone on the wing. Unlike conventional wisdom, the 'secret' of pictures like this has little to do with patience. Rather they become possible if you simply love spending time with birds and entering their world (insofar as any human can). Of course your camera also has to become an extension of your nervous system!

Rainbow Lorikeet (December)

This final image was taken several years ago at Lone Pine Koala Sanctuary. I happened to be focusing on a squawking group of birds waiting for one of the regular feeding times. Without warning this bird got into the avian equivalent of an argument. I was able to capture an image showing the beautiful colours not only of the body and head but also of the extended wings. Part of my delight in bird photography is to show birds in action just like this.

I hope the calendar will brighten your year and, as you go through it, inspire a thought or two for the wild world that is so crucial to our own. Next year I may well produce a similar one for sale. *So if you want a very special non-commercial and limited edition 2013 gift for friends or relatives please let me know roughly how many you'd like by next September or October at the latest. Cost would be about \$25 plus P & P.* In the meantime, please enjoy this one.

Richard Slaughter, Brisbane, December 2011.