

# Confessions of a Neophyte...

*Or how I learned to photograph wildlife and love the cold.*

David Young

I'm not a "birder". Never was. Not even close. But for the last couple of years I've had great fun photographing wildlife (mostly birds). When people ask me how I got involved in this, after decades of people pictures, I tell 'em the truth... dumb luck.



*Bighorn Sheep - Leica R8 w/ 180mm Elmar*

You see, about 3 years ago, I was driving, near Jasper, Alberta when I spotted a small flock of Bighorn Sheep grazing not far from the road. I stopped, grabbed my R8, mounted the 180 Elmar, and very slowly walked into the flock. To my surprise, though they eyed me with great suspicion, they did not scatter. So I gently squatted down in their midst. I sat, quietly, for about 20 minutes while they milled about, grazing. In that time, I shot a full roll. Not only was there some good shots, but the experience was exhilarating and I got a tiny taste of what the pro's must feel.

Some months later, I was walking with a friend, when a Canada Goose flew in and landed about 10 meters ahead of me. I lay down, prone and very still, and let the Goose walk to me. I was able to get only got one shot, but was great... and I was hooked!



*Canada Goose - R8 w/ 80~200 f4 Vario Elmar.*

**"If you're pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough"** (*Robert Capa*). I quickly discovered the truth in this! For larger animals, you can get by with a 200 or 250mm lens, but the smaller the target, the bigger the lens. For small birds, something 400mm or more is ideal. This is, indeed, the domain of long glass!

I whined until my love bought me a 400/f6.8 Telyt the for Christmas. (*For details on this lens, see The Viewfinder, Vol. 37, Num. 3, Page 37.*) Now, I had to produce!

In trials, I found that the 400/f6.8 with pistol grip & shoulder stock, equipped with a cable release and winder driven R8 is an almost perfect combination for the purpose. Some photographers may work without a motor or winder, but I find stopping to hand wind the film makes it harder to get that 'perfect' shot; and the added motion often startles your subject into a rapid departure.

This lens also works well with my old (11237) SL 2x converter, though there is some minor vignetting and the resulting f13 aperture is a bit limiting. If the sun's not shining, forget it! However, if the light is good enough to warrant a 250<sup>th</sup> shutter speed, you can still get a good success rate hand-holding this 800mm combination! I've even managed to a few shots at 1/45<sup>th</sup> of a second!

I believe the R8/9 or SL are to be preferred over the other R-series cameras, if only because of their brighter finders – working with f6.8 and f13 wide open makes for some dim viewing at best!

**A cheat?** Some who favour shooting larger animals will find a small clearing, or other suitable spot with good light, and place a salt block opposite a good hiding spot. They then return regularly, at hours the animals are likely to be there, hoping to find their 'prey' in a suitable 'pose'. While this would be 'dirty pool' if hunting with a gun, I believe it is certainly 'fair game' when hunting with a camera! The animal gets much needed salt whilst the photographer gets a shot that otherwise might take months of tracking. This is still not an easy game!

**The Sub-Zero Challenge:** On a recent road trip, I had the chance to grab some shots of Magpies, Grosbeaks, Chickadees and a few other, unidentified birds which were congregating in a tree near the home of a lady we were visiting. The distance and angles were good, the light so-so; and so I grabbed my R8 with my trusty 400/f6.8 and went for it.

Now, we'd been traveling - so the camera case had been in car for many hours - and it was a brisk 32

below (Celsius). The lens refused to focus! The grease on the follow-focus rails had virtually frozen solid!

The R8 complained, too. The finder display came on when instructed, but took about 2 to 3 seconds before the numbers became clear enough to read. Amazingly, the camera back LCD display (such displays often give trouble in low temps) worked just fine.

Later... in "the heat of the day" (-27°C) I tried again. This time, the lens focused smoothly, though still a little stiff, and it improved a bit more with use.

The R8 still had trouble with its displays but worked perfectly, though the winder grumbled, taking over a second to wind the film. It was fine, but the batteries sure didn't like the cold!



*A very cold Pine Grosbeak - R8 & 400/f6.8 Telyt  
Hand held at 1/45<sup>th</sup> second.*

**The most important rule.** Ted Grant is right when he says "We are judged not by the photographs we take, but by the photographs we show." In wildlife photography, the success rate is moderate to dismal and the mantra has to be "film is cheap!" I throw away the obvious failures and then about 70% of the sharp, well exposed shots. There is no way to get a bird to pose, so the well composed shots are a combination of your speed and pure, dumb luck!



*Bighorn Sheep - R8 w/ 80-200/f4 Vario Elmar (-20°C)*

The challenge of hand-holding (even with a shoulder stock) a lens in the 400 to 800mm range and producing tack sharp images is daunting. And the



*Purple Finch. R8 with 400/f6.8 & 2x converter.*

smaller the bird the tougher it gets. They move incredibly quickly. It's easy to squeeze the trigger when you've got the eye tack sharp, only to find that, on film, you've got a photo of his tail feathers!

I've stood behind a camera for nearly 40 years, and I can't recall when I've worked harder to get fewer decent shots. And I can't remember when I've enjoyed my Leica's more!



*More Dumb Luck! I'd composed this shot with the Eagle perched on the rock. Suddenly he took to the air! No time to flip the camera to horizontal, but, by fluke, the focus was perfect. A little creative cropping gave a very usable shot! R8 w/ 400/f6.8 & 2x converter - hand-held.*