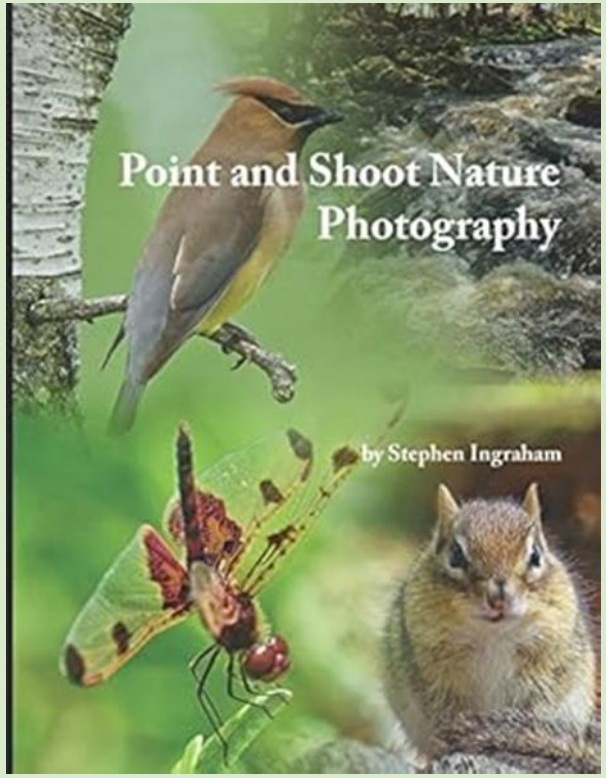
Point & Shoot Nature Photography



Introduction

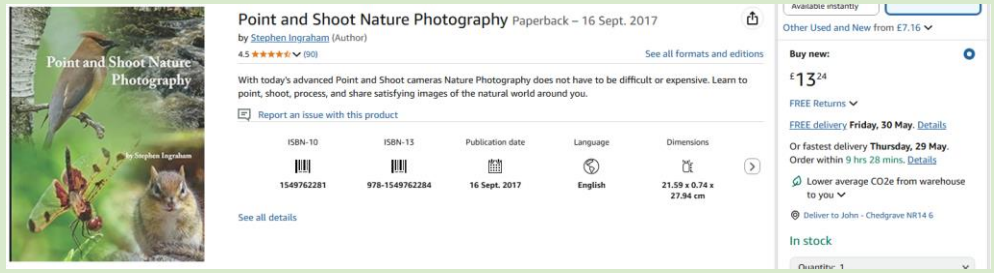
A few year back, I wanted to know how to get the best nature photos from my bridge camera.

I found Stephen's book online and purchased a copy.

You can view some of his photos at https://weiw.lightshedder.com/

Much of what we will cover today is inspired by his book.

The book is available on Amazon for approx. £13, but you are welcome to borrow my copy !



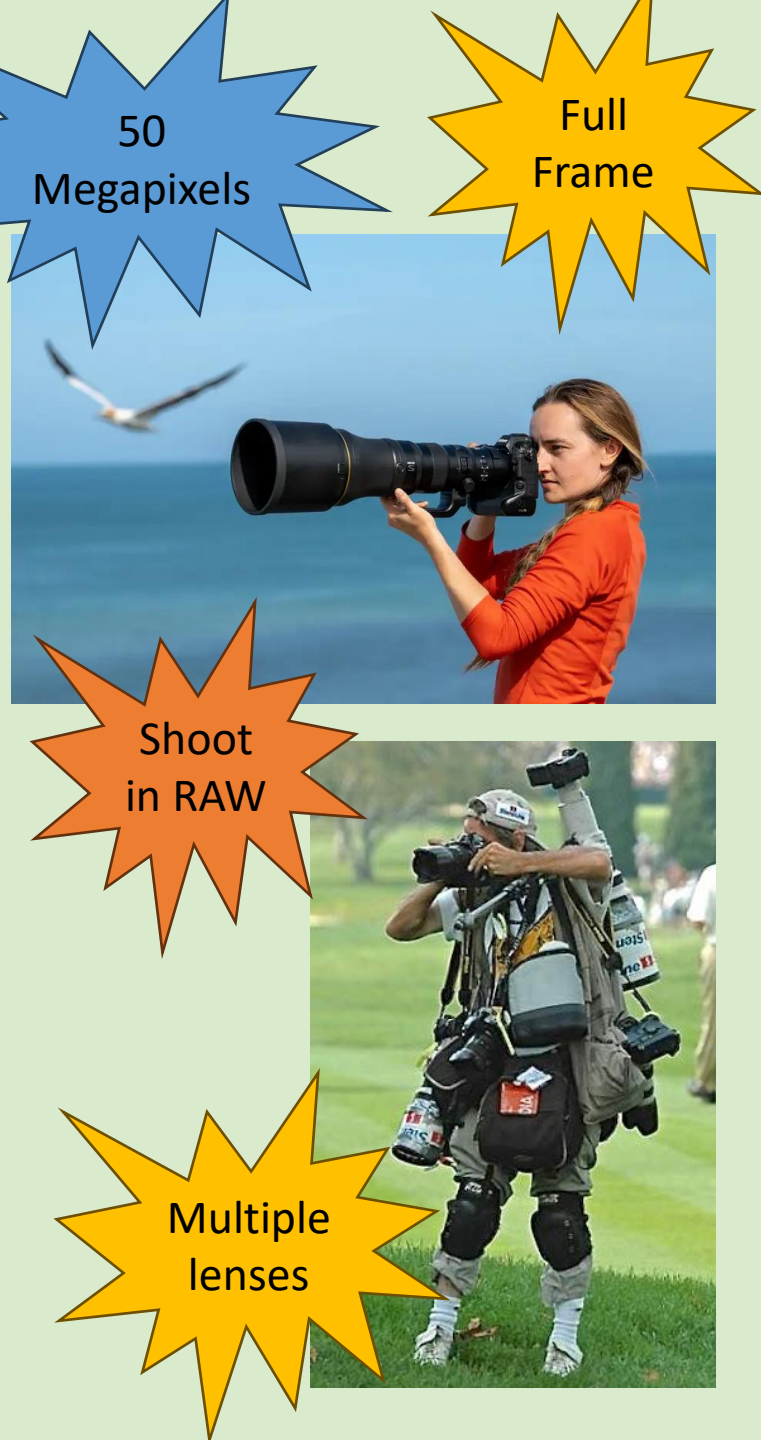
Established Photography view

If you read the Photography press, the established view is that for the best natural images….

- A “Full Frame” (big sensor) is best
- RAW images are better than JPGs
- If you want good results you have to have (lots of) expensive gear

If you’ve already got this equipment, that’s great !

However, today we will consider an alternative approach…..



Benefits of the established approach

Large sensor cameras can have more and/or larger pixels. This allows users to print on larger sizes of paper, to crop in further without losing detail and to have better performance in low-light situations.

Larger sensors are usually in larger camera bodies, so they can support heavier, better-quality lenses, which offer greater levels of sharpness and definition through the aperture and zoom range.

RAW files are uncompressed, so they contain the maximum information from the camera sensor. Processing in an image editor can recover richer depths of black and usually, the details from any over-exposed areas.

Alternative approach - compact zoom cameras

Compact zoom cameras, also called bridge cameras, contain a zoom lens built into the camera body.

To support a longer zoom, they use small sensors.

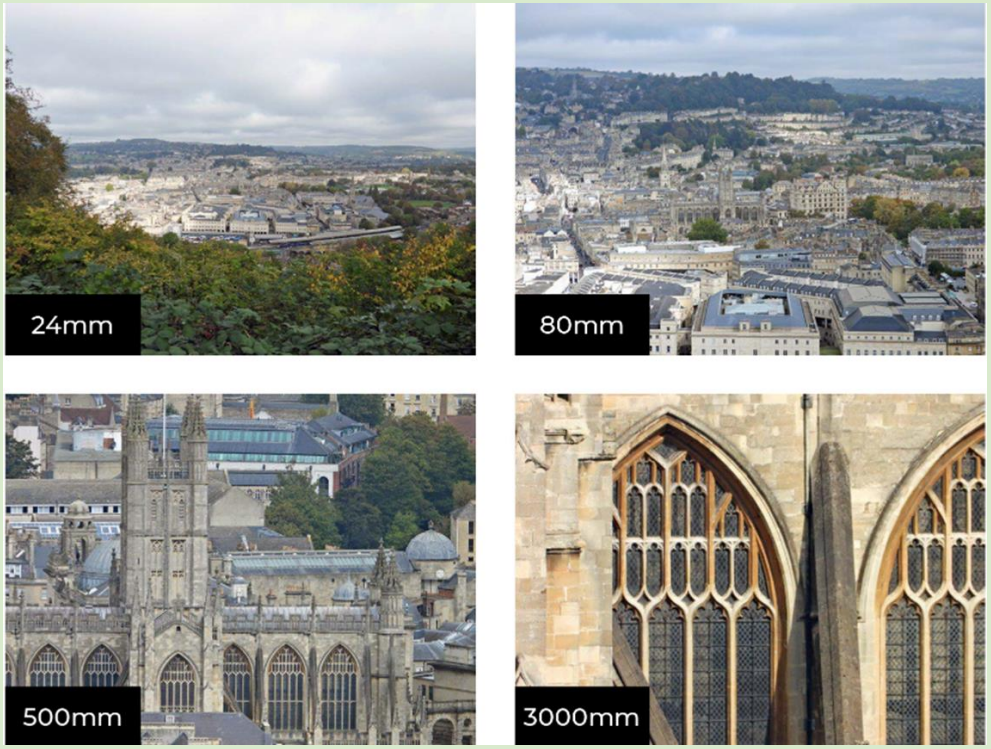
This allows the camera body and lens to be lighter.

Benefits of a compact zoom

Cost – a new compact zoom costs from £250 to £1500

Weight – they are much lighter (600-1100g) and easier to carry, particularly on long nature walks.

Flexibility – having a zoom lens built-in means you can shoot wide-angle, standard images, or zoom deep into far-off objects, without having to change the lens.



What sort of photography do you want to do ?

Low-light / night shots

Large prints / significant cropping

Highest quality output for magazines/competitions

You'll need a larger sensor, interchangeable-lens camera.

Mostly daylight shots

Smaller prints / limited crops

Acceptable quality at normal viewing ranges

You can use a compact zoom camera.

Can I still use my phone ?

Yes, of course you can !

Phones are even lighter than compact zooms and cost about the same – plus you get the phone included ! 😛

Remember – the best camera is the one you have with you when that photo opportunity appears ! 😉

Until recently, phones did not offer optical zooms.

However, recent models from Huawei and Samsung now offer a 10x optical zoom. Apple, Google and others offer 5x zooms.

For burst shots, consider purchasing a “Smartphone Grip”. These attach to your phone and give you a proper shutter button.

Point & Shoot Philosophy

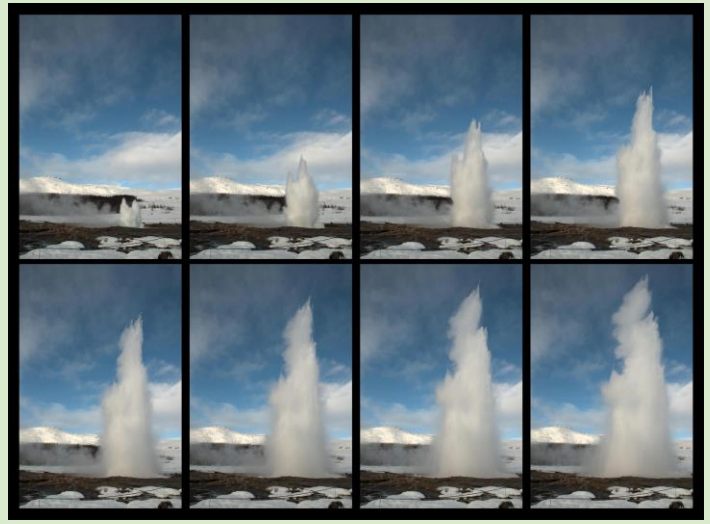
Stephen advocates getting the camera to do most of the work…

- Give the photographer more time to enjoy the view / surroundings / holiday
- Spend time composing great images, instead of fiddling with the camera
- Use consistent settings to achieve reliable, good results every time
- Take advantage of developments in in-camera software
- Easily share your results with friends and family (JPEG format)

Point & Shoot Philosophy

Stephen also looks for

- A tilting, or articulated LCD screen for getting shots close to the ground
- A viewfinder for shooting on very bright days
- In-camera stabilisation, to avoid the need for a tripod
- A fast burst mode for capturing moving animals and birds



Kit for different types of Nature Photography

Landscape shots

1) The established view is a wide-angle lens will let you capture more of the scene.

A wide-angle lens is a camera lens with a short focal length, typically 35mm or shorter. (The view from a Human eye is about the same as 43mm on a full-frame sensor camera).

If you don't want to use a dedicated wide-angle lens, look for a lens with a zoom range starting from 20mm upwards.

Unless you want a specific look, avoid fish-eye lenses with focal lengths below 16mm.

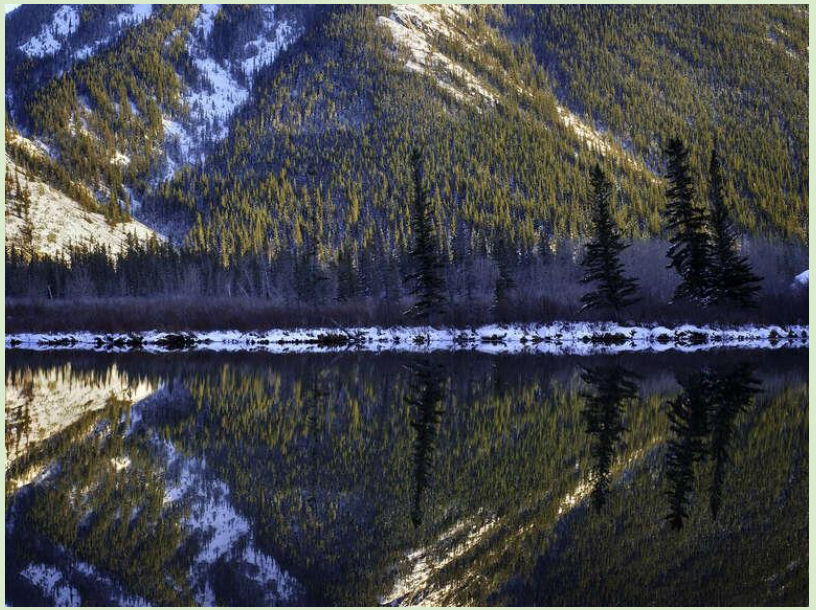
Compact zooms usually start from 20mm upwards.

Most smartphones support wide-angles.

Kit for different types of Nature Photography

Landscape shots

But you don’t need to do this, unless you want to.



If you want a cropped, or even to take a telephoto landscape shot, that’s absolutely fine.

You could also take and stitch together several standard images for a very wide panorama shot !

Kit for different types of Nature Photography

Landscape shots

2) The established view is that you must have sharpness throughout your image, from near to far away objects.

This is where expensive high-quality lenses cannot be beaten. However, unless you are doing a lot of cropping or printing on larger paper, people won't notice if the more distant objects in the image are not quite sharp.

If you think about it, this is how we normally view the scene. Things closer to us are sharp and things very far away are softer, fuzzy even.

Kit for different types of Nature Photography

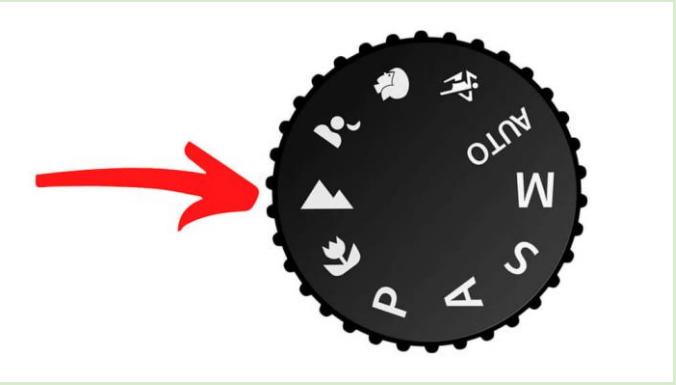
Landscape shots

If you are concerned about foreground sharpness, the established view is you need to calculate the “Hyperfocal distance” for your lens. This is the focusing distance that maximizes depth of field, making both the foreground and background sharp. When you focus at the hyperfocal distance, everything from about half that distance to infinity will be acceptably sharp.

Instead, try focussing on an object about 1/3rd of the way up from the bottom of the image. Usually this will get you a decent result. NB - this is only necessary if you have an object(s) in the foreground which you want to be sharp in the image.

If you want, you can choose a small aperture (f11 or a higher f number), or use the “Landscape” Scene mode on your camera.

If you’re using a smartphone, you can still to the “focus 1/3rd of the way up” technique and let the phone do the rest !



Kit for different types of Nature Photography

Macro

When we talk about Macro Photography, we generally mean taking close-up photographs of subjects, to make them larger than they are in real-life.

The established view is….

Macro means an image where the physical size of the subject is equal to the area of the sensor covered by the subject (a 1:1 relationship)

If you zoom in further, magnification of 30:1 or higher is called “Micro” Photography

Weaker magnification of 1:2 or less is called “Close Up” Photography

Kit for different types of Nature Photography

Macro

The Established View is that for Macro, you'll need a dedicated Macro lens.

Macro lenses are specifically designed to deliver optimum optical performance at very short focusing distances and will usually be sharpest at very close range.

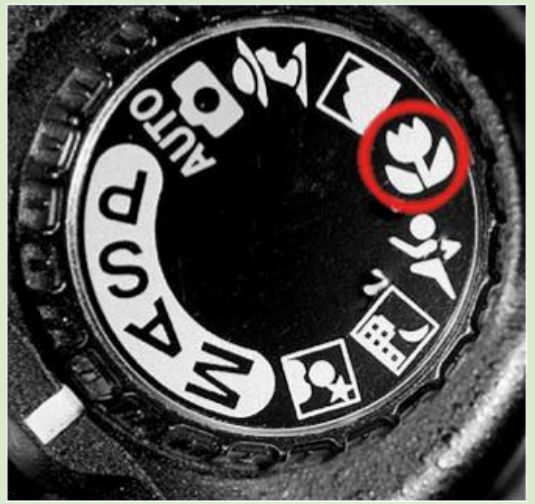
You'll also need to consider your Aperture settings, a light source or a higher ISO setting and possibly a faster shutter speed for subjects which are fast moving.

This is where having a larger-sensor camera with lots of controls has an advantage.

Kit for different types of Nature Photography

Macro

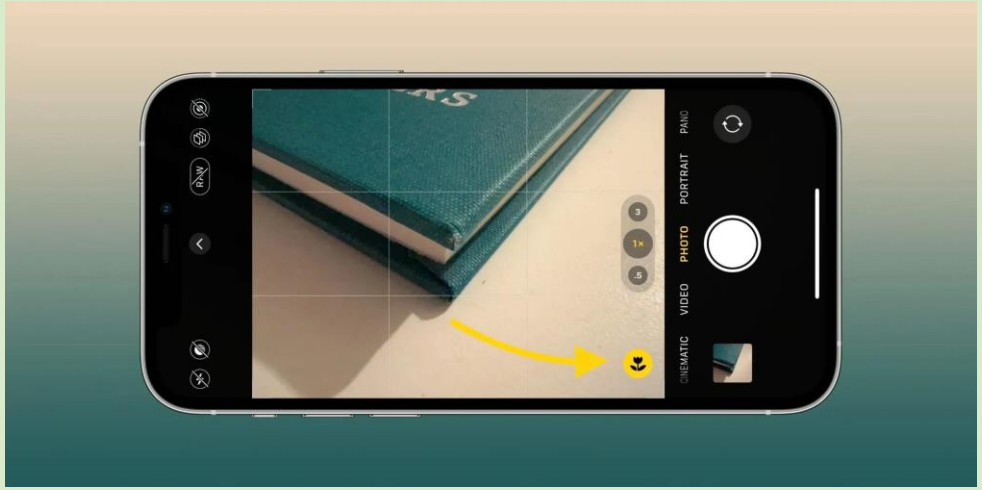
However, you could just use “Macro” mode on your camera, if you have this setting. This mimics the macro lens by reducing your camera’s focussing distance.



Some smartphones may switch to “Macro” mode automatically when you put them close to an object.

Others will require you to set it manually.

Look for the “Tulip” setting on your camera or phone.



Kit for different types of Nature Photography

Macro

You can also purchase additional magnification filters which provide stronger magnification for your existing lens/phone.

These will not be as good as a dedicated macro lens, but they are much cheaper.

They won’t be as sharp and may also introduce vignetting or lens diffraction around the edge of your image. This can be cropped out afterwards.

Some of them also come with a ring light, which can be very useful for illuminating your subject.

Kit for different types of Nature Photography

Wildlife

For wildlife photography, there are many different factors to consider when selecting your gear…

- How large is the subject ? How fast will it be moving ?

Smaller, faster moving subjects are more difficult to photograph and usually require a fast autofocus, preferably with auto-tracking.

- How close will you be to the subject ?

Subjects further away will require telephoto/zoom lenses. To avoid camera shake, a camera stabilisation system or tripod may be necessary.

Kit for different types of Nature Photography

- What is the environment ? Dry/dusty/wet/cold/underwater/night ?

A weather-sealed camera and lens would be sensible.

Underwater photography requires a dry-housing for the camera and lens.

Night photography will require a tripod, or a stable surface, for slower shutter-speeds.

- What sort of image do you want to take ?

A group shot of a distant family of elephants can get away with moderate sharpness. A close up of an animal/bird showing textures needs to be pinpoint sharp.

Kit for different types of Nature Photography

It can be difficult to choose the correct gear in advance of your trip.

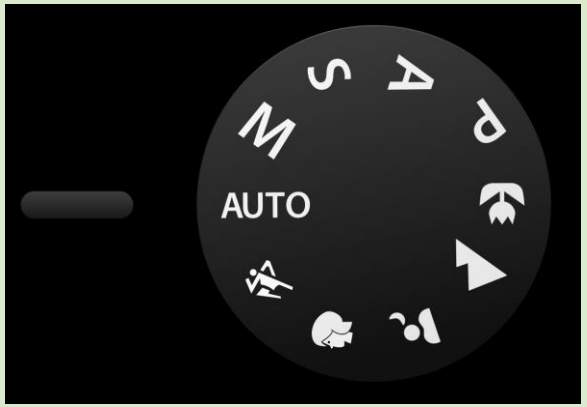
This is where the compact zoom cameras have an advantage, as their built-in zoom lenses can support a range of different scenarios.

There is a reduced risk of dust/water entering the camera – no need to change over lenses.

Plus, they are smaller and lighter, so are easier to carry on longer walks/field-trips.

And you may not want to let the monkeys play with your expensive gear !

Stephen’s Point & Shoot Tips



Stephen often uses Auto Mode

- If possible, he uses “Superior” or “Intelligent” Auto mode (check your manual)
- In this mode, the camera analyses the scene and determines what settings to use
- He uses this at parties, shooting landscapes from a moving vehicle, or when walking around a city
- Any time where the scene (light) is changing rapidly and/or he just wants to concentrate on the image

Stephen’s Point & Shoot Tips

Using Auto mode - disadvantages

- Usually uses wide-area focus, so wildlife subject may not be in focus
- Exposures are normally optimised for human skin tones, not natural world
- May not have fast burst option

So, he also uses “Program” mode

Stephen's Point & Shoot Tips

Program mode – a reminder

- In Program mode, the camera chooses aperture and shutter speed

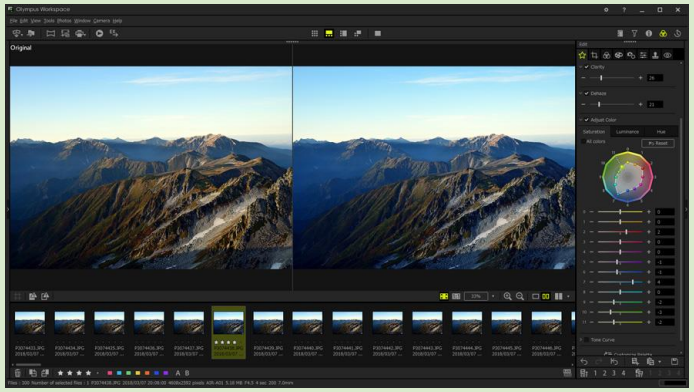
These can be adjusted using the "Program shift" option (check your manual)

- Photographer can alter focus and exposure settings, from wide-area to centre, or spot and also the amount of exposure compensation

- We can also alter ISO, White Balance and perform burst shooting in Program Mode

Stephen's Point & Shoot Tips

Stephen always shoots in JPEG …….because



- This option uses In-camera processing, reducing time and effort in a Photo Editor
- It maximises the number of images stored in the camera buffer during burst mode (more chance of capturing moving wildlife)
- This format is easily shared with his tablet, phone or websites
- Images are smaller, so more images can be stored on his card and individual images can be moved more quickly to other devices

Stephen's Point & Shoot Tips

Stephen also uses 2 special modes

1) For landscapes, he often uses an "HDR" mode

- Stephen has found that the HDR setting allows him to better capture the dynamic range of a landscape, preserving deep shadows and bright highlights

- He uses the camera's in-built HDR mode, but the same result can also be achieved using exposure bracketing

- In "HDR" mode, the camera takes at least 3 images at different exposure settings and combines them into a single image

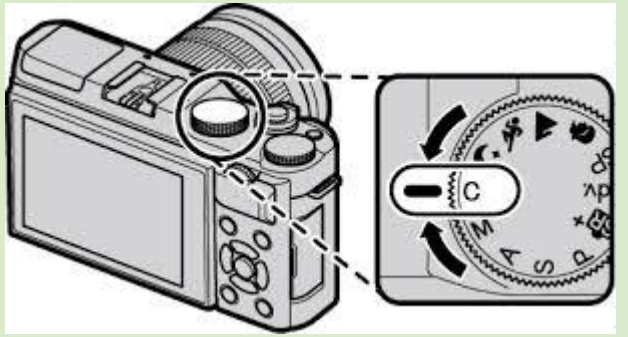
Stephen's Point & Shoot Tips

2) For birds in flight he uses Sports, or Shutter mode, set to high speed

- To capture a fast-moving subject, we need to use a fast shutter speed and ideally have fast autofocus
- He uses at least 1/1000th second, with wide-area, or centre, continuous autofocus
- He also uses burst shooting – you need to experiment with the burst rate and the camera's ability to automatically refocus.
- His Sony camera uses fast phase-detection autofocus

Stephen's Point & Shoot Settings

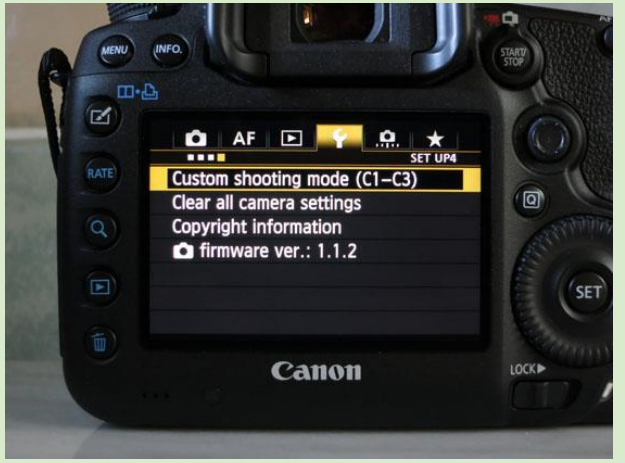
He saves his settings in his camera, to be the starting position each time



- Depending on your camera, it may be possible to do this by activating a "recall last setting" option

- If not, most cameras offer a custom mode (C), where current settings can be saved and then activated by turning the dial to the C position

- You will need to dig out your manual for this !



Point & Shoot Editing

- As with his camera, Stephen uses templates in his photo editor
- These are settings he has used before and saved, so they can quickly be applied to other photos
- His normal edits include
  - Cropping
  - Tweaks to Highlights and Shadows
  - A bit of clarity and sharpening
  - A bit of vibrance boost
  - Sometimes uses de-haze
- He uses the “Polarr” editor on his iPad https://www.polarr.com/

Be realistic about what you'll be able to take !

If you have been inspired to take more nature photos after watching a BBC documentary, be aware that the gear used by professional wildlife cameramen is very expensive !

A typical full-frame video camera and long lens, starts from £8000 upwards and can cost more than £20,000 !

Point & Shoot Summary

- Stephen suggests a method and settings which are in most cases, the opposite of the established approach you will read about in the photography press

- The point of his method is to think more about the composition, instead of the settings

- And to appreciate the beauty of the view and its surroundings, instead of looking in, or through the camera

- Above all, to make it easy to enjoy yourself !

Point & Shoot – some of Stephen’s images