



# “And they call it puffin love...”

Learn how to photograph puffins and seabirds, as this month's Apprentice spends a day on Skomer Island with up-and-coming Canon pro Drew Buckley

Words Peter Travers Location pictures Jeff Morgan

## THE PRO...

**Name:** Drew Buckley  
**Camera:** Canon EOS 5D Mk II and 7D  
Drew is a 75-year-old professional wildlife, bird and landscape photographer based in Pembrokeshire, Wales. Drew's been a keen photographer since he was just ten years old; he's been semi-pro for five years and a full-time professional since October last year. To see his portfolio go to [www.drewbuckleyphotography.com](http://www.drewbuckleyphotography.com).

## THE APPRENTICE...

**Name:** Keith Gypps  
**Camera:** Canon EOS 50D  
Keith, 52, is a keen amateur photographer from Fowlmere, Cambridgeshire. Managing director of a print business, he's been a keen Canon D-SLR user for two years. He upgraded last year from a 350D to a 50D, but asked for our help to improve his bird photography. We went to Skomer Island, off the Pembrokeshire coast, which hosts over 10,000 puffins – the largest colony in southern Britain. ▶





**DREW'S TIP**

**Plan your day**

"We got the early boat to Skomer Island (leaves at 9am or 10am, depending on the day and demand) in May when the puffins are out preparing nests. Check the map and plan your route to maximise your photography time on the island. Also check with the wardens for the best spots for shooting. We found a beautiful area called 'The Wick' that was great for puffins, lots of birds were burrowing, perching and flying off the steep cliffs," says Drew.

**KEITH'S TIP**

**Skomer Island**

"Get a Skomer guide pack, which has a map, plus a guide to the island's birds. Always stay on the paths to avoid collapsing burrows and squashing birds. Dress suitably for the climate, pack a waterproof layer just in case and wear comfortable footwear, as you'll be walking a lot on the hilly island. Take all the food and drink you'll need as there are no refreshments on Skomer. And don't forget spare camera batteries and memory cards!"



**PhotoPlus Technique assessment**

**Does Keith have puffin power?**

After firing off a few sample shots, Drew suggested a few ways to keep up with the puffins...

**Autofocus mode choice**

"Keith was struggling to focus on the twitchy and inquisitive little puffins, so I got him to switch from the One Shot autofocus (AF) mode, which is suited to stationary subjects, to the AI Servo autofocus mode," advises Drew. "This AF mode will 'follow focus' on moving subjects, as long as you keep the shutter button half-pressed."

**High-speed driving**

"I use my 7D's super-fast drive mode when shooting wildlife, for a better chance of getting the shot. My 7D rattles off a rapid-fire 8 frames per second (fps) when used with a fast shutter speed, such as 1/500 sec or above," says Drew. "I got Keith to use his 50D's High-speed Continuous shooting mode, so he can shoot continuously at a rate of 6.3fps."



Drew uses Canon's full-frame 5D Mk II for his landscape work, but uses a 7D for wildlife shots, due to its fast 8fps burst mode and longer effective focal length, thanks to its 1.6x crop factor sensor. He also carries the following lenses and kit:  
 Canon EF 17-40mm f/4L USM  
 Canon EF 24-70mm f/2.8L USM  
 Canon EF 70-200mm f/2.8L IS USM  
 Canon EF 400mm f/5.6L USM  
 Canon EF 1.4x II extender  
 Benro C257 tripod, J-2 Ballhead and GH-2 gimbal head  
 Lee filters

**EXPERT INSIGHT**

**Correcting composition**

"Although Keith's exposure is good and his focusing on the puffin is sharp (in the shot directly below), his composition is weak – the bird is floating in the centre of the frame. His background choice is also distracting, with the ropes and post behind the bird leading the eye away from the subject," says Drew. "For his

Hot Shot (bottom) his exposure and focusing is still spot on, but now his composition has been much improved: he's placed the puffin to the right, with space for the bird to look into, plus he's positioned himself to capture a much cleaner, less distracting background behind the bird."



**HOT SHOT #1**



Exposure: 1/3200 sec at f/7.1; ISO800  
 Lens: Canon EF 70-200mm f/4L IS USM

**KILLER KIT OF THE PROS #1**  
**Telephoto zooms**

To fill your frame, use a telephoto lens. "You can get close to the puffins, so I use a Canon EF 70-200mm f/2.8L IS USM telephoto zoom.

On my 7D's 1.6x crop factor sensor, the lens at the long end has an effective focal length (EFL) of 320mm. I use a Canon EF Extender 1.4x for more focal length (1.4 x 320mm = EFL of 448mm), but you'll lose one stop (down from f/2.8 to f/4). At slower shutter speeds, bump up the ISO to avoid shake." Keith used a Canon EF 70-200mm f/4L IS USM (around £940).



**Keith's comment**

"Instead of photographing the puffins on the inland side of the path, which meant backgrounds could become cluttered with unwanted objects and people, I started concentrating on birds nearer the cliff edges' burrows. This meant I could shoot better backdrops to help the puffins really stand out in the shot. I used Av mode and an aperture of f/7.1 to capture the whole bird in focus, and with a focal length of 175mm (effective focal length of 280mm on Keith's 50D); the shallow depth of field meant the background greenery is blurred." ▶



**DREW'S TIP**

**Carry your kit like a pro**

"It was interesting to see how Keith carried his kit compared to me!" smiles Drew. "He had his heavy kit bag on one shoulder, his tripod under one arm, and his weighty camera and lens in his hand. I had my tripod strapped to my backpack instead, which was securely carried over both shoulders; then I used my camera strap around my neck to seat my camera comfortably by my side."



**KILLER KIT OF THE PROS #2**

**Sturdy camera backpack**

"I use the Tamrac Expedition 8X backpack; it's perfect to fit two EOS bodies, plus two telephoto lenses, a midrange zoom and wide-angle lens, flashguns and more, plus a laptop compartment. Even when fully loaded, it's comfy to carry. This is important – as a wildlife photographer I'm constantly on the move, following wildlife and birds, and walking to locations."

**Keith's comment**

"Once we'd captured a few full-length shots, Drew encouraged me to get closer to the birds for a classic portrait of the puffins. For this headshot I had to use a midrange aperture of f/8, to ensure depth of field could capture the whole head in focus, from the beak to the eyes. I had to work hard to get this background – it's actually the sea way down below the cliff edge that's helping to lift the bird out of its surroundings."

**HOT SHOT #2**



Exposure: 1/4000 sec at f/8; ISO800  
Lens: Canon EF-70-200mm f/4L IS USM

**EXPERT INSIGHT**

**Puffin personality**

Puffins are proud-looking little birds with wonderfully quirky characters; they make ideal photographic subjects. Watch and learn from their movements and behaviour for the best bird photos. Here are four examples of capturing their unique body postures and poses.



**DREW'S TIP**

**Get in focus**

"Focusing is key when photographing fast-moving birds. Get it wrong and your shots will be worthless. Keith was sometimes relying on his central AF (autofocus) point, but if the birds weren't in the centre of his frame, this would mean his backgrounds were sharp, and the birds blurred," says Drew. "I suggested moving the AF point to suit where the birds were in his frame, to improve his results. For full-length bird photos, focus on the head, and for headshots, focus on the eyes, like you would in a portrait."

**DREW'S TIP**

**Switch IS off**

Drew suggests switching off your telephoto zoom lens's Image Stabilisation (IS) to speed up your autofocus and to increase your hit rate. It might sound counterintuitive, but as Drew explains, "With IS off, it's less for your lens to think about, and I find this speeds up the autofocus and helps me get more good shots. As I'm shooting at 1/1000 sec and above, my shutter speeds are more than fast enough to eradicate camera-shake, so IS isn't necessary for these bird shots."



**DREW'S TIP**

**Bright white birds**

"Photographing white birds in bright sunshine equals burnt-out highlights. Your shots may also be underexposed as your camera overcompensates for the birds," says Drew. "So shoot in RAW and fix these issues in Adobe Camera Raw: use the Exposure slider to brighten shots, and the Recovery slider (set between 15 and 30) to combat areas of blown highlights, such as on a puffin's chest." ▶







## EXPERT INSIGHT

# Birds in flight

For capturing good shots of birds in flight, use Av mode, set an aperture of f/5.6, AI Servo AF mode, and High-speed Continuous shooting mode. Then you need to perfect your panning skills, as Drew reveals. "I explained to Keith the importance of getting a good stance and posture, so you can swing your camera smoothly through a 180-degree arc to track the flying bird in your frame. Keep your arms and shoulders still, swivelling through your hips, and continue turning even after you've finished shooting." By following Drew's advice, Keith was able to capture these three great shots (right) of the seabirds in flight.



### KILLER KIT OF THE APPRENTICE #1

#### LCD sun shield

"It can be tricky to review your shots on your LCD in bright sunshine, so I bought Delkin's Pop-up Shade Pro (DC50D-P for my 50D). It clips over my EOS 50D's eyepiece to shade the screen, so I can check images easily and more accurately. It also serves as an LCD screen protector. I bought mine from eBay for a tenner!" For more details see [www.delkin.com](http://www.delkin.com).



### KILLER KIT OF THE PROS #3

#### Gimbal head

A tripod takes the weight of a telephoto lens and helps avoid camera shake, but adjusting a traditional head is too slow and cumbersome to track birds in flight. "A gimbal tripod head spins a lens around its centre of gravity for greater movement," explains Drew. "I use a Benro GH-2 (around £440, [www.kenro.co.uk](http://www.kenro.co.uk)) with my heavy telephoto lenses."



### KILLER KIT OF THE PROS #4

#### Canon 400mm f/5.6L

"With my telephoto zoom, I also carry a Canon EF 400mm f/5.6L. When I was semi-pro this L-series telephoto lens was ideal for my needs: it has good build quality, autofocus is fast and accurate, it's lightweight and it has a huge effective focal length (EFL) of 640mm on my 7D. It cost just over £1,000, compared to nearly £10,000 for the EF 400mm f/2.8L IS III!"



### HOT SHOT #3



Exposure: 1/3200 sec at f/5; ISO800  
Lens: Canon EF 70-200mm f/4L IS USM

## Your chance to shoot with a pro

### Drew's best birds

Drew shares three of his favourite seabird shots from the past couple of years...

#### Guillemots, Skomer Island

**1** "This shot was taken from the steps, waiting to go back to the mainland from Skomer Island. You can get some great views of nesting razorbills and guillemots from this spot, so a medium telephoto lens can get some very intimate photos."



#### Terns, near Norwich

**2** "I got this shot at Strumpshaw Fen from one of the raised hides on the reserve. It's a good spot for nesting terns. This shows courtship behaviour – one seabird passing a fish to its partner. I used a long lens (400mm) on this one."



#### Puffin feeding, Skomer Island

**3** "We were on Skomer early on in puffin season so the birds were only nesting, not feeding. But if you head over in July you should be able to get shots of puffins feeding, such as this classic shot of a puffin with a beak full of sand eels."



#### ▼ Keith's comment

"During the afternoon on the island we discovered this great spot, which enabled us to shoot the puffins that live on one of the steep cliff faces. The composition was made easy because the burrows were surrounded by flowers, creating fantastic foreground and background texture and colour, and showing the puffins in their natural habitat. I love this shot as the puffin is just peeking up at us, as if to ask 'What are you doing there?'. I was really pleased with my accurate focusing in this shot too, which I achieved by selecting an off-centre AF point." ▶





### Keith's comment

"During the late afternoon, lots of puffins were gathering at The Wick to fly down the steep cliffs and feed in the sea, way down below. It was devilishly tricky to keep up with the birds flying here as they only take a couple of hops, then glide down and go out of sight. The payoff if you get a shot in time, however, is that you get great textured backdrops from the rock cliff face opposite. I've cropped this shot quite severely, but thanks to the large image files my 15-megapixel 50D produces, I'm still left with a usable image size. I also didn't want to lose the sense of scale and impact of leaving the puffin fairly small in the frame."



### Drew's verdict



"This took some brilliant timing to get the shot as a puffin flew down the cliff face, and Keith's position is perfect to get the cliffs in the background [1] to contrast well with the bird. There's a great wing spread [2] and feet tucked neatly behind as the bird floats down, eyeing up where to land in the sea. He's left space around the bird [3] for it to breathe and fly into, plus I like the fact that it's not your traditional shot of a bird heading towards you in flight – it tells more of a story as the puffin flies off in search of fish."

■

### WELL DONE KEITH!



Huffin' and puffin! Deputy Editor Peter Travers awards Keith his hard-earned Apprentice certificate at the end of a long day



Exposure: 1/4000 sec at f/8; ISO800  
Lens: Canon EF 70-200mm f/4L IS USM



### Next issue... Rock photography

Our Apprentice gets expert guidance in professional rock photography, as Ashley Malle shows him how to capture cool live gig shots at the Download Festival in Donington Park.

On sale 27 July 2011

### HOW TO VISIT SKOMER

If you'd like to visit the Skomer Island, found off the south-west corner of Wales, take a look at the excellent information at [www.welshwildlife.org](http://www.welshwildlife.org), and keep up-to-date with current conditions at [skomerisland.blogspot.com](http://skomerisland.blogspot.com). Warden Chris Walker says, "I would recommend staying over so you can get the best morning and evening light and seabird activity for photos. The farm complex on the island has been converted into comfortable accommodation, sleeping a total of 16 people." You should book early to avoid disappointment.



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