

## Flash Part 2: Fill Flash By Tom Stephenson and Scott Whittle

In our first article we went over the use of flash as a primary light source for photographing birds. In this article we're going to focus on the use of flash as a supplement to existing light, otherwise known as "fill flash".

There are times when there is sufficient light to properly photograph of a bird but the quality of the light may need some help. For example, maybe the light is so strong it creates unwanted contrast, or maybe there are shadows we don't like falling on a bird. Sometimes we might just want to add a little bit of detail to shadows on a part of a bird or boost the vibrance of the bird's plumage. In all these cases fill flash is the solution.



*The shadows cast on this Great Kiskadee in natural light (on the left) are removed with fill flash (on the right).*

Just as when using flash as a primary light, fill flash benefits from the use of a Better Beamer and an external battery pack. These tools not only increase the range of the flash, but they also speed up the recycle times. That means being able to shoot more consecutive shots with the flash, and can often can make the difference in getting that one extra "perfect" pose from a moving bird.



*This Summer Tanager benefits with a little fill flash to boost it's color and feather sharpness.*



*Canon flash setup augmented with a Better Beamer and external battery.*

As mentioned in the first article, when using flash as a primary light the flash is set to automatic (TTL) and the ambient light is controlled by changing shutter speed and aperture on the camera in order to make the image look more natural.

With fill flash it's just the opposite: we set our shutter speed and aperture to photograph the bird as if we weren't using flash at all (for example, we might use Aperture Priority mode), and then we control the flash output separately by dialing the flash up or down.



*Blue-gray Gnatcatcher shot without flash: note the shadows on the face and body.*



*The same Gnatcatcher with balanced fill flash, which removes the shadows but also flattens the image a bit.*

Let's try an example: here we have an image taken without flash. As you can see some of the shadows are a little harsh, and it would be nice to be able to soften them with flash. My settings for this picture are one 1/250th of a second at F4, ISO 400. My lens has an image stabilizer, and the bird is sitting still, so 1/250th should be ok for shooting handheld...more on that in a moment. I'm not going to change these settings...I'm simply going to turn on the flash in TTL mode.

The second image shows the results. I've removed the shadows from the picture, which is what I wanted. But I've also overwhelmed the natural light with the flash. This has a flattening effect, and it makes the lighting in every full-flash picture look basically the same.

Let's look at another example. In order to preserve some of the natural light in the image I'm now going to turn down my flash. I can do this directly on the flash head by simply setting the flash exposure compensation to -1, -2 and so forth--on Nikon this is accomplished by pressing down on the toggle switch, and on Canon it's done with the wheel--see your manual for the specifics of setting Flash Exposure Compensation on your specific particular flash.

So by using flash exposure compensation I can introduce more natural light to the image and remove that over-flashed effect. Just how much I reduce the flash is something of a personal preference. Some photographers regularly shoot at -2 or more, while others prefer to shoot closer to zero or negative one. As you approach the compensation such as -3 you'll find that the flash is almost imperceptible, but in fact it still adds a little bit of detail to the shadows and on some birds will improve color definition. There are a number of professional bird photographers who regularly use this kind of flash to give their photos that extra little bump.



*Carolina Chickadee shot in Aperture mode with 3 levels of flash compensation: balanced (0), -1.3 and -3. Note the way the branch looks, and the lighting in the face and under the tail.*

One technical note: as we learned in the previous article, if the exposure goes over 1/250th of a second we can have a problem with the flash syncing to the camera. Just as with using flash as our primary light source, when using the flash at over 1/250th, be sure to turn on the high-speed sync feature. This will allow the camera to sync with the flash at any shutter speed. Just be aware that the price for this is greatly reduced flash output, and this is



*Blue Grosbeak with fill flash at -1.7. Subtle fill flash can augment natural light without overwhelming it or making the image look unnatural.*

where using a Better Beamer and a battery pack can really make a difference. Also, be aware that because the flash is not the primary light source, fill flash has the same rules as shooting without flash. That means that you need to use a high enough shutter speed to freeze the action and to reduce camera shake, just as when using no flash.

Using flash, whether as a primary source or as a fill light, can help us make the best of the a situation that's imperfect or improve the a situation that's already good. When photographing birds we're often trying to manage a number of factors and have them all come into place at once: we're looking for the right bird doing the right behavior against the right background

with the right light and wind conditions. For example if we have a bird acting interestingly against a good background but the light is poor, sometimes flash can help us make that into a good picture when it otherwise it would've been unphotographable. At other times, an already good situation can be improved by flash to make something really special. Artful use of fill flash can remove harsh shadows and create images with boosted color and detail, while still maintaining a natural look. In any case, having the knowledge and skills to use flash will give you one more trick in your photographic bag, and will make going out to shoot in any situation more fun and productive.

## Flash Technique Summary

**No Flash** *Sufficient, directional light that allows for handheld shooting without camera shake.*

**Primary Flash** *Low light, as in a forest or darkly overcast day where shooting with ambient light means very high ISO settings or very low shutter speeds; any situation where the lighting is dark enough that creates camera shake.*

**Camera Settings:** Manual mode, starting at 1/250th at f/5.6 Shutter should be 1/250 or lower, and may be adjusted down to allow more ambient light into the image (make the background lighter). F-stop can be increased to lower the ambient light in the image (make the background darker).

**Flash Settings:** TTL flash, which should not usually need adjustment.

**Fill Flash** *Bright, overhead daylight that casts downward shadows on the bird; dappled light that creates overly contrasting bright and dark areas on the bird; low light open shade, where shadows may be odd or colors may be subdued.*

**Camera Settings:** Aperture or other mode, as would be used when shooting without flash.

**Flash Settings:** TTL flash with High Speed Sync on. Flash compensation (set on the flash) adjusted anywhere from 0 to -3, depending on preference. -1.7 is a good starting place.