

## Birding head-shots

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I regularly see many photographers posting their birding images on social media, websites etc, in the typical ID pose – full body, cleanish background, head turned slightly sideways to show off the profile of the head and bill, feather detail and colours, and legs with claws. Whilst there is nothing wrong with this, I do it too, there is more to bird photography than just the typical poses.

The detail in facial features and bills of birds are just waiting to be captured. Over the years I have done just that whenever I can. Up close and personal is not always possible out in the wild, but with longer lenses and from bird hides and cars it can be done. Some planning and waiting for the right opportunity might be required. I have at times had to slowly move my car so as to achieve minimum focus distance enabling me to actually focus, the subject being too close to the camera. The opposite also being true, moving closer so get the fullest frame possible. The key word is slowly, followed by quietly so it stands to reason that you won't rev up the engine or brake suddenly.

Long prime lenses and some super-zooms usually cannot focus too close. However the Sigma 150-600 Contemporary and Sport can focus to 2.8m and 2.6m respectively which is quite sufficient for tight framed head shots on larger birds. The Sigma 60-600 Sport also do less than 3m, whilst the Sigma 500 f4 Sport can do 3.5m which is a little better than my older EX 500 f4.5 version at 4m. Same goes for the excellent Sigma 120-300 Sport (or earlier versions) which can very efficiently be coupled with a 1.4x Extender. I used my various Sigma 120-300's to very good effect this way. The Sigma EX 300-800 which was on loan to me from Sigma SA for quite some time also proved very handy, even though its minimum focus distance was in the region of 6m, yet on the larger birds proved very effective on head type captures due to the 800mm zoom capability. My Sigma 100-400 Contemporary with a minimum focus distance of less than 2m is especially handy and I've also used that lens to good effect.

Note that with smaller birds it is very difficult to get head shots without substantial cropping of the frame. That will have you lose out on some finer details, uncropped frames are better.

If you cannot get close enough in the wild, then visiting bird sanctuaries and even rehabilitation centres can be an option. The well-known Dullstroom Bird of Prey & Rehabilitation Centre is one of those, offering the photographer special packages where you can get really close to the birds for some detailed head shots. I made the image of the Verreauxs Eagle here before it did its flight display. (This centre is also very good for in-flight images). Vulpro near Hartebeestpoortdam is another option with various rehab birds in large aviaries which cannot be released back into the wild. There is a number of these centres across the country, a chat with locals and photographers in your area should yield some information. Just be sure to mention the location when you post those images on social media and check on the rules of the group or page that they allow images of captive wild birds. Those images can be presented to look really natural, a f-stop of 2.8 will typically result in a very shallow depth of

field. The Fish Eagle calling is such an example, this bird cannot be released into the wild and is housed in a larger aviary at Vulpro. The rest of the birds pictured with this article were photographed in the outdoors, using lenses mostly on their minimum focus distance, and lots of patience and luck. No cropping was done on any of the accompanying frames.

It stands to reason that you will use the camera orientation which best suits the subject, so consider both landscape and portrait orientation. I generally use the lens wide open or slightly stopped down and aim for a longer distance to the background which will help to blur it out and really make the subject stand out.

Feel free to contact me for any advice or assistance you may require. Happy shooting!



African Fish-Eagle



African Darter



Goliath heron



Helmeted Guineafowl



Verreauxs Eagle

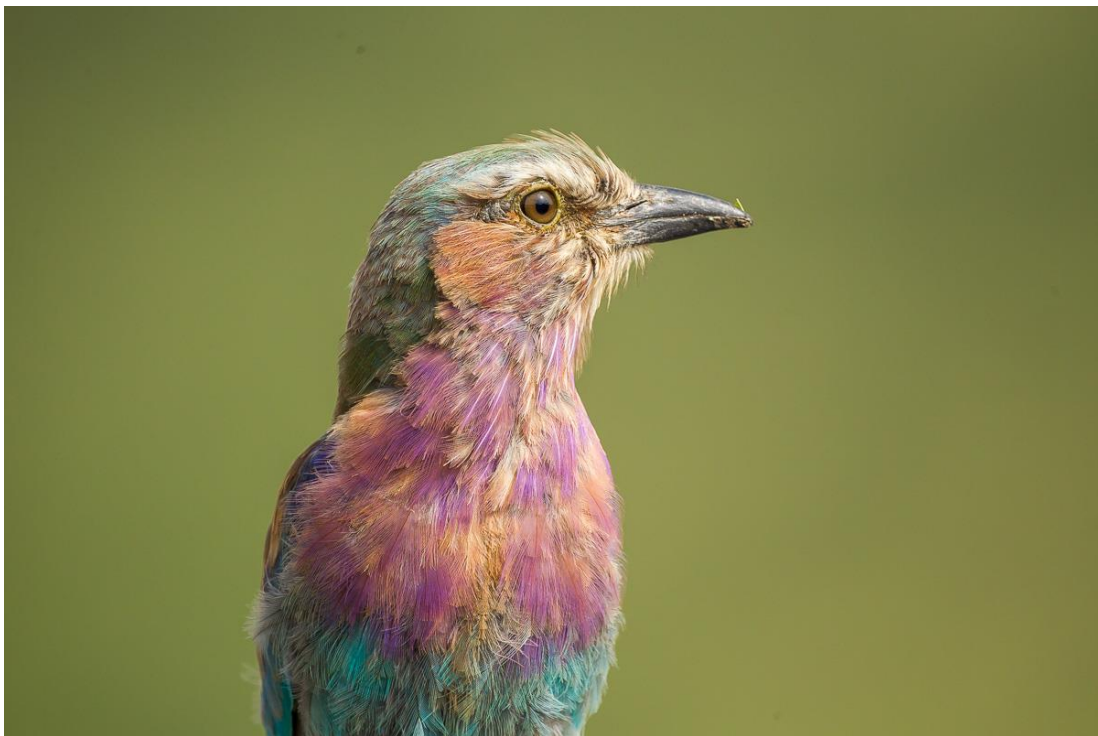


Cattle Egret





Grey Crowned Crane



Lilac-breasted Roller