

Birding with a camera

As more birders equip themselves with bigger and better cameras, the line between birding and photography is getting more blurred. Nature tour company Tropical Birding has spotted a gap in the market.

The merging of photography and birding

This is a paid advertisement, so let's get the pitch out of the way. Tropical Birding is a birding and photography tour company that runs hundreds of trips all over the world catering to birders, photographers and wildlife enthusiasts. If you are still reading, let's get to the juicy stuff.

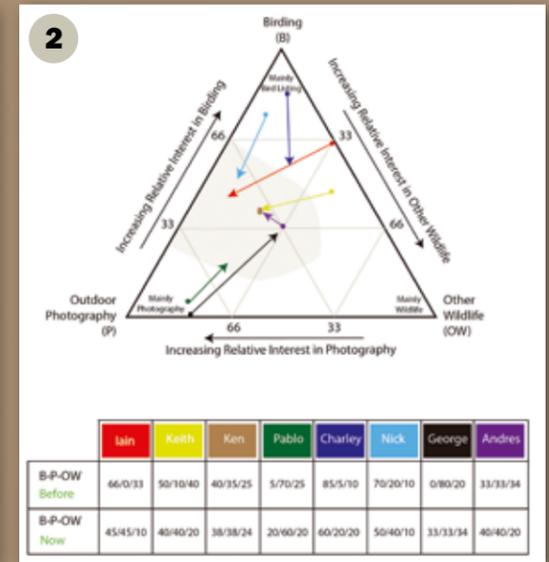
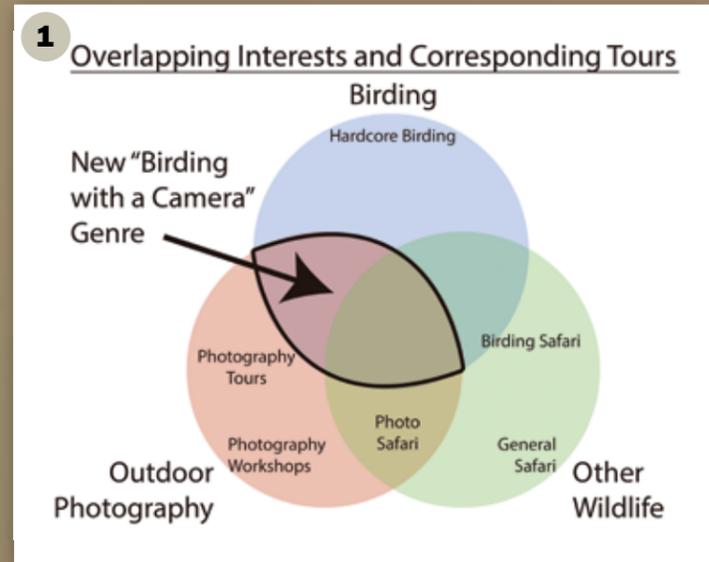
Anyone who has gone out birding recently is sure to have noticed that birders increasingly use cameras in addition to, and sometimes as a replacement for, binoculars. Photographers are also spending more time observing birds and wildlife than they used to.

Although the circumstantial evidence suggests a shift in focus

Advances in digital photography have made it easier to capture images like this stunning Northern Red Bishop.



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within the pastime, at Tropical Birding we wanted to come to a more empirical understanding of the change, in order to best serve our clients. We did this by surveying thousands of people through our mailing lists and Facebook page ([facebook.com/TropicalBirding/](https://www.facebook.com/TropicalBirding/)), and were pleased to get several hundred responses detailing people's changing wildlife-watching and nature-photography habits. The results left us amazed.

Let's start with a Venn diagram illustrating the interests of birding,

wildlife watching and outdoor photography. The types of trips that cater to the various interests and their overlap zones are noted on the diagram. Tropical Birding's current set of tours satisfies several sectors of these diverse groups, and we will always continue to cater to 'pure' birders, which remain a key market of ours. We immediately noticed, though, that there is no trip that caters for people with near-equal interests in both birding and photography – until now! Tropical Birding has introduced

trips that cater for the vacant 'birding with a camera' (BwC) sweet spot.

Changing interests of guides

We also surveyed our guides and trip leaders to see how their relative interests had changed in the last decade. They are all still very keen birders, and enjoy guiding pure birding tours, as well as photography trips and relaxed custom tours.

When they are enjoying nature on their own dime, however, their relative interests have converged into the birding/photography crossover (the shaded zone on diagram above). With the new BwC tours, our guides can now serve the interests of clients who have the same core passions for both birding and photography.

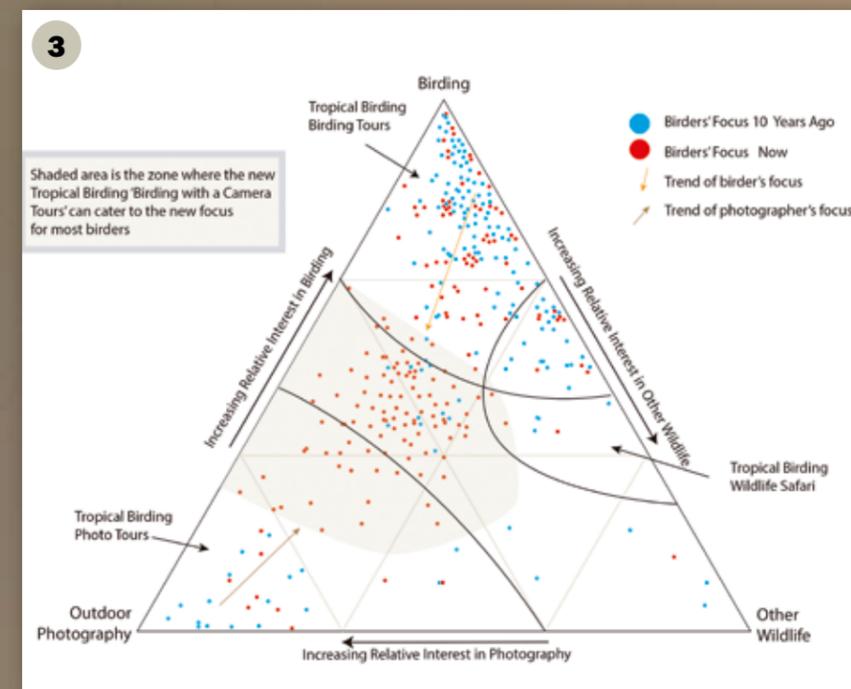
It's not just the guides

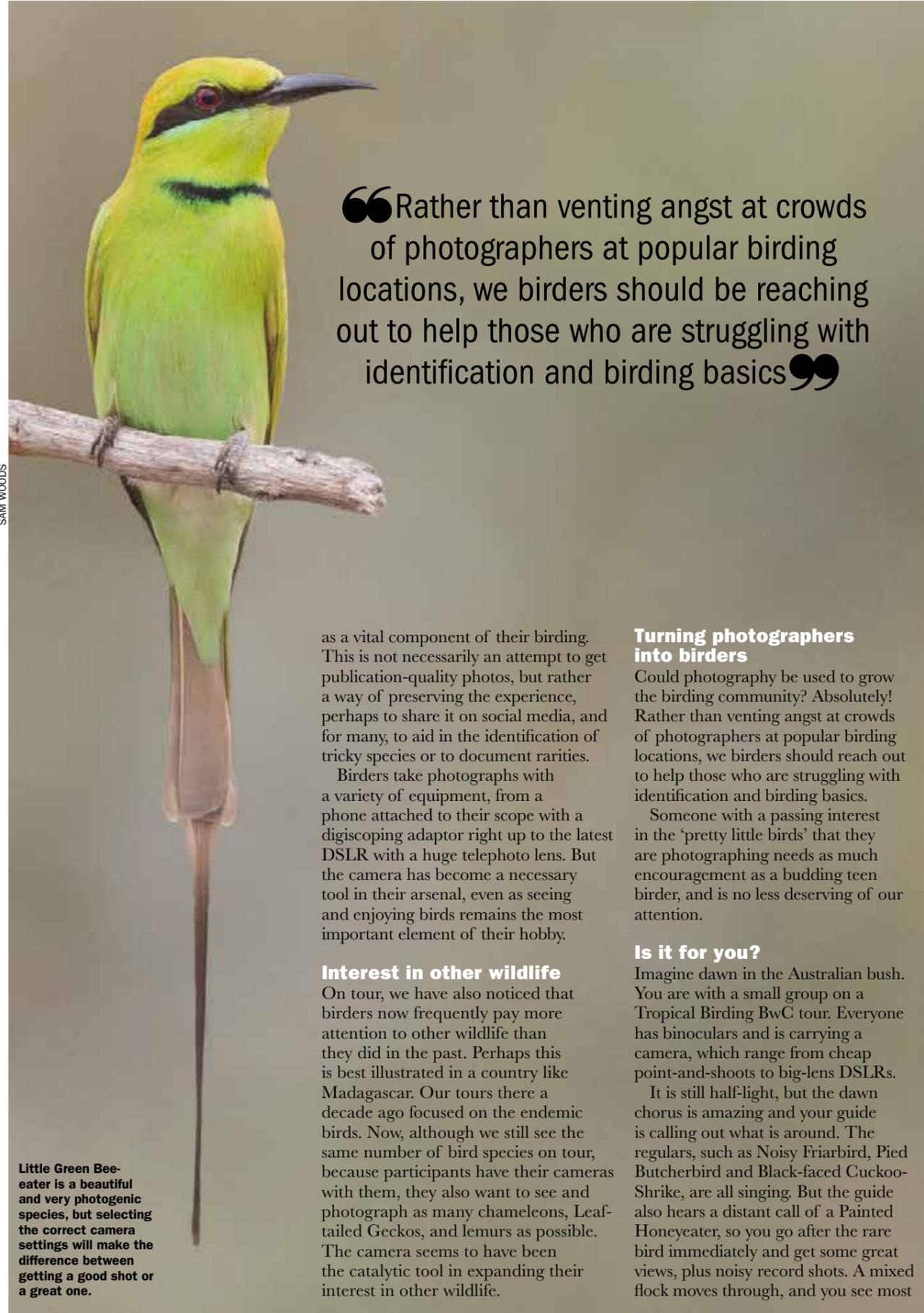
With responses from more than 200 Tropical Birding clients and contacts, we plotted the 10-year change within the broader birding community.

Take a look at graph (left), where you can see the main shift in focus for respondents: from 2008 in blue (mostly strictly birding, though some pure photography as well), to 2018 in red (a birding-photography hybrid). Again, there has been a shift into that crossover.

We are still birders

There has been an undeniable shift in focus for at least 40 per cent of birders, who are now including photography





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“Rather than venting angst at crowds of photographers at popular birding locations, we birders should be reaching out to help those who are struggling with identification and birding basics”

Little Green Bee-eater is a beautiful and very photogenic species, but selecting the correct camera settings will make the difference between getting a good shot or a great one.

as a vital component of their birding. This is not necessarily an attempt to get publication-quality photos, but rather a way of preserving the experience, perhaps to share it on social media, and for many, to aid in the identification of tricky species or to document rarities.

Birders take photographs with a variety of equipment, from a phone attached to their scope with a digiscoping adaptor right up to the latest DSLR with a huge telephoto lens. But the camera has become a necessary tool in their arsenal, even as seeing and enjoying birds remains the most important element of their hobby.

Interest in other wildlife

On tour, we have also noticed that birders now frequently pay more attention to other wildlife than they did in the past. Perhaps this is best illustrated in a country like Madagascar. Our tours there a decade ago focused on the endemic birds. Now, although we still see the same number of bird species on tour, because participants have their cameras with them, they also want to see and photograph as many chameleons, Leaf-tailed Geckos, and lemurs as possible. The camera seems to have been the catalytic tool in expanding their interest in other wildlife.

Turning photographers into birders

Could photography be used to grow the birding community? Absolutely! Rather than venting angst at crowds of photographers at popular birding locations, we birders should reach out to help those who are struggling with identification and birding basics.

Someone with a passing interest in the ‘pretty little birds’ that they are photographing needs as much encouragement as a budding teen birder, and is no less deserving of our attention.

Is it for you?

Imagine dawn in the Australian bush. You are with a small group on a Tropical Birding BwC tour. Everyone has binoculars and is carrying a camera, which range from cheap point-and-shoots to big-lens DSLRs.

It is still half-light, but the dawn chorus is amazing and your guide is calling out what is around. The regulars, such as Noisy Friarbird, Pied Butcherbird and Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike, are all singing. But the guide also hears a distant call of a Painted Honeyeater, so you go after the rare bird immediately and get some great views, plus noisy record shots. A mixed flock moves through, and you see most

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Getting superb photos of a Crescent-faced Antpitta in the difficult forest conditions of Ecuador requires some skill.

things and get a couple of good photos of Rufous Whistler and Jacky Winter.

The light improves and a Spotted Pardalote calls nearby. The guide knows that if she works it, all the clients will get fantastic shots of this snappy-looking bird, so the focus changes immediately. She says: “Guys, this is a tiny bird, but it will probably come in really close when I ‘pish’. It is most likely to settle on these branches at eye-level so get ready for that, and I suggest you set your depth-of-field to be between f5.6 and f8 so you get a good out-of-focus background.”

The bird duly arrives and everyone gets cracking photos. Meanwhile, the guide has noticed a group of Little Lorikeets high in some tall eucalypts, so she puts the spotting scope on them and explains that the backlighting is poor, so it is probably best to just get good looks at these temperamental little parrots, as they might not be seen again on tour. “But be quick,” she says. “I hear a Crested Shrike-Tit singing nearby and we are going to want to see and photograph that.” Sound appealing? It certainly does to us.

Birding with a camera

There will always be those who are not interested in anything other than finding birds. And our dedicated birding tours will continue to cater to

this core interest group. But we also see a need for new trips to provide for the many people whose interests have shifted; not much, but enough to make a difference in the way they want to watch birds and the way that they travel.

Pure birders can celebrate this development, as it means that camera-toting birders are less likely to sign up for a dedicated birding itinerary, preferring our birding with a camera products. Other companies resistant to the changing nature of birding will claim that they have been serving the best interests of birders with a photography bent for years. But that is doubtful.

Eight years ago we noticed tension between pure birders and those who wanted to spend a lot of time taking photos while on a trip. We committed to creating specialist bird photography tours. This served to keep both factions much happier, as we were able to please the photographers away from the ‘pure birding’ tours. In doing so we made all participants more satisfied and gave those with a blossoming interest a new space.

We soon realised the need to further divide our photography trips into pure photography – for the dedicated bird photographer, where the shot is all that counts – and more opportunistic

photography trips, with a greater travel experience component. Now we are again at a juncture where many birders want the very best of both worlds.

Birders who love photography want a trip where they get to see lots of birds and take loads of photos. They want a guide who is top-notch, and who knows the vocalisations, taxonomy and identifying features. But they also want a guide who knows how to photograph birds, who understands lighting, camera gear and can teach basic photo processing. If you have found yourself at the back of the line in a birding group, feeling guilty about trying to get that shot or not wanting to hold the group up, then maybe you’d do better surrounded by like-minded hybrid birder-photographers.

This new genre of trips is going to be branded Birding with a Camera or BwC tours. We will begin slowly by offering around a dozen destinations, and will add more as demand increases. The initial BwC destinations include south-east Brazil, northern Peru, southern and northern Ecuador, Costa Rica, Trinidad and Tobago, Belize, Namibia and Botswana, northern India, Indonesia, Taiwan, Ethiopia, mid-west warbler migration in the United States, the upper Texas coast and Alaska.

When compared to the more than 150 pure birding, other photography and natural history trips we run every year, this may not seem like a massive change for Tropical Birding. But we feel that it will result in a significant increase in satisfaction for the growing number of people who love to go birding with a camera. It is clear to us that many in the bird tourism industry are out of sync with their clients’ interests. So if your last tour just didn’t tick all the boxes, then why not join us on a BwC tour? ■

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