

# GREG DOWNING

## PHOTOGRAPHY

### NEWSLETTER 2: WINTER 2002-2003

Produced by Greg Downing and Heather Forcier



Chincoteague NWR, Virginia

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### BOSQUE DEL APACHE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE NEW MEXICO

Winter at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge doesn't attract a large number of photographers every year for nothing. Host to a variety of wildlife including large numbers of Snow Geese and Sandhill Cranes, photographic opportunities are plentiful. Red earth western mountains can serve as a backdrop, and many vantage points have great eastern and western views at dawn and dusk. Accommodations in nearby Socorro are just over an hour's drive from the Albuquerque airport.

The refuge is easily accessed by vehicle, with most shooting possible from within, by car side, or a short walk away. With such abundant wildlife, beautiful backgrounds, and easy access, Bosque is an unforgettable experience for the nature photographer.

As always for nature photographers, mornings begin predawn. Allowing for the half hour drive from Socorro and the time needed to secure a desirable position for daybreak, the first hour is spent in the dark of night at Bosque.

While setting up to view the eastern horizon, light slowly creeps in above the distant mountains across the refuge's marsh. No two mornings seem the same: some are saturated with fiery colors, others are overcast in blue. Waiting along the water's edge as increasing light filters into the sky, geese, ducks, and cranes become visible in the water.

The event that gathering photographers, birders, and other spectators are awaiting arrives with the din of distant Snow Geese. They could be approaching from any direction, with likely thousands flying in to congregate in the pools

ahead. On approach, the sound of their calls combined with the beating of their wings dominate the senses.



Cranes and Eagles at Sunrise

© Greg Downing

During this time, almost unlimited photos are possible, such as mass Snow Geese blur images, sharp silhouettes against a colorful sky, sunrise over the mountains, and cranes lined up in the water that reflects sky colors. With the flurry of goose activity comes a flurry of activity by photographers. It may take several minutes for the geese to land and settle with their already grounded counterparts, or additional flocks may also arrive, prolonging the event. Finally, the noisy snow geese settle in the water; all the while the light is changing, perhaps even unfolding in different ways over the different horizons.

But the event isn't over yet. At some point the geese will arise unforgettably en masse from the water. Thousands upon thousands of geese take flight simultaneously, perhaps even circling back to reland in the same marshes, to do it all again later.

Eventually the birds depart that section of the refuge and redistribute over other areas. The sun has risen, whether clear or overcast, and it is time to search out the other opportunities that Bosque has to offer.

Where to continue on depends upon the light and wildlife activity. Scouting out along the refuge's loops, Sandhill Cranes may be moving predictably from one area to another. A

Roadrunner may be spotted stalking insects along the dirt roads. Any number of waterfowl might occupy the waterways throughout the refuge. Stopping to take photos, most are possible either from the vehicle or only paces away.

The day continues on much like this, contingent upon the cooperation of wildlife, light and weather, until dusk approaches. This could be an opportune time to capture Snow Geese, Sandhill Cranes, and other willing subjects in the golden light of sunset.

Finding and setting up in a position near a field of geese and cranes, the activity doesn't seem to stop, with additional birds coming in while others depart. This could last through the final hours of the day until the light becomes too low to continue on. This day at Bosque is done.



Sandhill Crane in Flight

© Greg Downing

Some of the species at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge:

- Snow and Canada Geese
- Sandhill Cranes
- Roadrunners
- Harriers
- Bald Eagles
- Yellow-headed/Red-winged Blackbirds
- Western Meadowlarks
- Mountain Bluebirds
- A variety of ducks and wading birds

## THE WILD PONIES OF CHINCOTEAGUE CHINCOTEAGUE, VIRGINIA



Wild Colt © Heather Forcier

No one is certain of their origin: the ponies may have swum ashore from a sinking Spanish ship, or perhaps they are descendants of livestock that somehow escaped ownership of the area's original human inhabitants. But today, over two hundred wild ponies inhabit the islands of Chincoteague and Assateague, located in both states of Maryland

and Virginia along the coast. Many of us grew up reading the Marguerite Henry books about Misty of Chincoteague, but perhaps did not truly realize that such a place actually existed, that wild horses in fact roam areas along the eastern coast of the United States.

Surviving in their harsh environment, the ponies ingest a fair amount of salt, both from the salt water and salt in the marsh grasses. This makes their bellies appear somewhat bloated, although with an eleven month gestation period, many of the mares are also typically pregnant, which also accounts for their rounded look.

The herds are maintained by government agencies, and brands can be seen on some of the ponies. To keep populations reasonable, an annual round up of the ponies swims them across at a slack tide (in between high and low tide, when the water currents are most forgiving). This brief event draws in a large number of tourists. Fools are auctioned off, then the mares and stallions are released back to roam the islands again.

Accustomed to tourists, many of the ponies are actually quite tolerant of human presence, although visitors are warned that being wild creatures, maintaining a respectful distance and acting cautiously is prudent.

The ponies share their environment with a variety of other wildlife, including deer, endangered Delmarva fox squirrels, and a list of both resident birds and a number of species in transit during their migration. Of special note is thousands of Snow Geese that congregate in the islands' pools. It is



Willet

© Greg Downing

difficult to go anywhere on the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge and not come across wildlife activity.

## MID-ATLANTIC DESTINATION: CAPE MAY, NEW JERSEY

Text by Heather Forcier

I took up photography years ago to capture images of wildlife and nature. But I discovered on my local outings that wildlife was hard to find and photograph. I passed my time composing scenic images while searching out wildlife subjects, and over the years my focus slowly shifted to scenery until I rarely sought out wildlife at all.

Early in 2002 I found [NaturePhotographers.Net](http://NaturePhotographers.Net) on-line magazine, and was inspired by the wildlife images posted in the galleries. As I began to interact with the other members of the site, my mindset began to change: that perhaps photographing wildlife was really an achievable goal, even for a beginner like me.

To assist me in my renewed directive, I signed up for Greg's workshop in Cape May, New Jersey. Having driven through New Jersey several times, it was hard to imagine the state as a location for an avian workshop, but on the journey there I discovered a part of it that I had never experienced before. Traveling the entire length

of the Gardenstate Parkway to end up at my destination, I was excited to arrive at the quaint seaside town of Cape May.

Despite overcast skies with a light drizzle, plus fatigue from a ten hour drive, I wanted to shoot right away. With Greg's help, we found a congregation of birds on the Cape May Beach just waiting to be photographed! The rain was a good deterrent for other people and the birds weren't too skittish upon our approach from the ground. Skimmers, Royal Terns, Common Terns, Blackbacked Gulls, and other birds faced into the wind and allowed me to shoot to my heart's content.

Increasing rain finally ended the brief shoot, and it was time to indulge in the hospitality that the town had to offer.

Cape May sees its share of birders and other tourists, and is full of shops and restaurants to accommodate visitors. It was easy to find plenty of good food to provide energy for the long days during the workshop. Being September, other tourist traffic was minimal and didn't create congested streets or long waits for meals.

Stone Harbor was a favorite place of mine, about a half an hour north from Cape May. I spent hours along the ocean's edge trying to keep up with energetic Sanderlings, and loved watching the Terns flying up and down the shoreline looking for a meal. A variety of gulls collected around small pools left by the outgoing tide, and provided some opportunities for different backgrounds for birds in the sand.

Gulls may be considered common, but I gained a whole new appreciation for them during my trip. I had never seen Laughing Gulls before and thought they were so beautiful. I took many, many images of them. Gulls seemed more accustomed to human presence and provided

me with great practice for flight shots as well as some nice ground shots.



Gulls and Moon

© Greg Downing

Despite a pessimistic forecast and the weather upon my arrival, the weekend of the workshop had blue skies with photogenic puffs of clouds and wonderful light. I was stunned at the unbelievable sunsets I witnessed from Cape May Beach, and one evening watched a flock of Skimmers pushed up in front of the setting sun by a couple of boys running in the sand.

I learned that my approach in finding wildlife had been misdirected, and my lack of success had discouraged me to where I no longer tried. But that all changed in Cape May. Without question it is a location where I will return for an extended stay, such as one to two weeks, in order to better take advantage of all it has to offer.

## DIGITAL EDITING TIP: PHOTOSHOP SELECTIVE SHARPENING

To sharpen a subject without causing artifacts or outlines in the background, use selective sharpening, which gives the image a clean, crisp look. Please note that this application works best with a clean background and contrast with subject tone. Images with busy backgrounds, or backgrounds with little tonality difference from the subject are not good candidates.

### Step One: Selecting the Background

In an image with a single layer, select the magic wand from the tool bar. Set a tolerance of 30, then click anywhere on the background. You will see a blinking outline of the area the wand picked up indicating a selected area. With a very clean even-toned background, one click will usually render the entire background selected and

outlining the subject. If not, and only a portion of the background becomes selected initially (as indicated by gaps in the blinking outline) then, while holding the shift key down, click on the background again in an area that did not get picked up the first time. This adds the new area to your first selection. Repeat this as many times as you need until the whole background is surrounded by the blinking dotted line, indicating it is all selected. Holding the alternate key and clicking can deselect unwanted areas.

If any part of the subject becomes selected at any time, simply click "undo magic wand" in the edit menu and lower the tolerance before trying again. Only the last selection increment will be undone, the prior selections should still be grouped together and active. The lower the tolerance, the less sensitive the wand is to color differences.

### **Step 2: Inversing the Selection to your Subject**

From the select menu chose inverse selection. The subject becomes selected and the background becomes deselected.

### **Step 3: Sharpening the Subject**

With the subject selected, go to the filter menu and chose "unsharp mask" (USM) and apply as you normally would.

The USM settings you use will vary with the size of the file and its intended use. The following USM settings are suggested for most medium sized JPEG files that are viewed on the internet:

Amount: 100 (varies based on image)  
Radius: 0.2  
Threshold: 0

If additional sharpening is desired repeat the USM process as many times as necessary to sufficiently sharpen the subject without it looking over-sharpened, perhaps two to five times depending on the desired effect. If there are substantial areas in the subject that contain little detail then watch for grain in those areas, or "artifacts", which would indicate over-sharpening. Applying USM multiple times with lesser amounts yields better results than once with greater amounts.

## **WORKSHOPS**

Workshops are customized to the individual participants and photographers of all abilities are encouraged to attend.

### **Florida Avian Photographic Workshops**

Join me and Shoot the Light Photographer Charles Glatzer as we co-host a most spectacular Instructional Photographic Workshop series in Florida this March and May. A comprehensive set of flexible workshops include extensive photographic instruction, slide presentations, personalized image critiques, as well as getting you in the right locations at the right times to ensure we are making the best use of conditions, weather and most importantly, light!

March 4-6	Cape Coral, Corkscrew, Estero Lagoon
March 7-9	Anhinga Trail, Shark Valley
March 10-12	Fort Desoto Park, Venice Rookery
May 24-26	Wakodahatchee Wetlands
May 27-29	St. Augustine Alligator Farm

### **Churchill, Manitoba, Canada Avian Photographic Workshop June 13-21, 2003**

Birds display in their fabulous breeding plumage on the vast and open arctic tundra, making this the opportunity of a lifetime for anyone interested in bird photography on the edge.

### **St. Paul Island, The Pribilofs, Alaska Avian Photographic Workshop July 16-23, 2003**

This is an extensive eight day workshop designed for close-range access to colorful Puffins and a variety of other sea birds. There are also opportunities for arctic foxes with pups, fur seal pups and adults. The island has abundant, tiny wildflowers nestled in lush tundra.

**For more information on any of these or other workshops, go to my web site at:**

[www.gdphotography.com/workshops](http://www.gdphotography.com/workshops)