

**urban JUNGLE** Part 5: **SHOOT WINTER WILDFOWL**

If the thought of spending hours in a hide with a huge lens leaves you as cold as the winter climate, follow **Elliott Neep's** advice and train your lens on a far more accessible subject – Britain's very own urban wildfowl. Mallards, swans and geese have never been so appealing...



**ABOUT ELLIOTT NEEP**

Elliott is a passionate wildlife photographer. Along with British mammals, he travels further afield to shoot images of the natural world. Check out [www.enwp.co.uk](http://www.enwp.co.uk) to see more of Elliott's work.

WHEN I EMBARKED ON my career as a photographer, I began with the basics – pond wildfowl. This is one of the most accessible forms of wildlife photography, as many city parks hold a small population of captive or habituated wildfowl.

Winter sunlight is stunning, especially at dawn when golden light and rising mists produce exceptional and evocative images. This is also a great time of year for bird photography as our resident population is swollen by millions of migrants. These 'truly wild' birds can be hard to approach without field skills, a hide, and a huge lens though – so it is often far more productive to use the more accessible urban wildfowl.

**PREPARATION IS ALL**

Preparation is vital to successful wildlife photography. My brother regularly quotes a great acronym that rings around my head: The five Ps, aka 'Poor Preparation Produces Poor Performance'. Pack your bag the night before so you have film or cards formatted and ready to use. Ensure your batteries are fully charged as the cold will quickly deplete them. If you have a tripod with quick-release plates, make sure they are attached to your lenses and camera. Get a good breakfast inside you as this will fight off the cold and sustain your energy.

Finding a workable location also requires preparation. It is worth visiting in advance just to make a few observations. What species are present? Where do the birds congregate? Where are they fed? From which direction does the sun rise and set? Is there anywhere to get close to water level? With this local knowledge, you can make the most of your limited time.

**WHAT TO TAKE**

For most wildlife, an SLR camera works best as they are superior at focusing on moving objects with no obvious delay in the shutter release. During my workshops, one of the biggest frustrations for those with digital point-and-shoot cameras is that by the time they have pressed the button

and the picture is actually taken, the subject has already left the frame.

I've used every focal length from 16mm to 840mm, but the majority of my images have been captured with a focal length of between 200mm-600mm. Size does matter, but it is not essential, and can even be a hindrance. The longer the lens, the further its minimum focus distance. Habituated wildfowl can approach so close that I have actually missed opportunities by using a prime 500mm or 600mm lens. A 100-400mm range is ideal and a zoom lens will give you the versatility to recompose when they are very close.

In lowlight conditions, support becomes an essential factor. Invest in a quality tripod, preferably one that opens wide for low-level work. A beanbag is a great alternative. Wildlife Watching Supplies stocks a double beanbag, which is excellent for groundwork, car doors, and wooden bird hides. It is big enough to cope with the largest of lenses.

**ON LOCATION**

Try to arrive early. This way you can enjoy the best light, without the crowds, when the birds are hungry after a cold night. On arrival, spend some time assessing the situation. Find a spot where you can get low down to the edge of the water, with a clear view and the sun coming over your shoulder. Use scissors or secateurs to trim away intruding vegetation. If the wildfowl start to move away, simply throw in some food to grab their interest. ➔

**SELECT YOUR FOCUS POINT**

Focusing on a moving object, with wings flapping and water splashing, can be a hard task to master. Try to focus on the head and eye by selecting a specific focus point. If the eye is sharp it gives the impression of a sharp image throughout, even if the rest of the bird is out of focus. Selecting the right focus point quickly can be difficult, but persevere. If you are restricted by the number of focus points you can select, use the centre point and wait until the bird is side-on and parallel to you. This will provide the best chance of rendering the entire bird in focus. If you are shooting still portraits, stop down the aperture to f/8 for a greater depth-of-field.



**MALE MUTE SWAN**

This male mute swan headed straight towards me just as the light turned very warm and pink towards the end of the shoot. I raised the shooting angle to frame the bird and reflection in this wonderful light.

Camera Canon EOS 10D | Lens Canon EF 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6 L IS at 210mm | Exposure Manual, ISO 200, 1/500sec at f/5.6