

Interview with Daniele Occhiato

Daniele Occhiato is the first successful bird photographer who was willing to be interviewed for Natuurfotoblog. In fact, the interviewer had a fairly simple job, just mailing his questions, since Daniele was writing the answers himself. Of course we would have been glad to go to Italy to visit him and make a nice portrait of him ourselves. Well, the result of this interview didn't justify to burden him to let him invite us to his hide at Peretola Lake, Florence. Perhaps we will enjoy this in a next life.

Daniele, we know you from your splendid bird pictures on birdpix. Pictures from Tuscany (lake Massaciuccoli and Peretola), and your journeys to Northern Africa, Middle East and Scandinavia. Your style could be characterised as realistic, with the emphasis on depicting the bird in clear light as beautiful as possible. You succeed in this very well, as we can see at the examples here and on your website. That's why we are happy to get the opportunity to hear more from you. Can you tell us about when and how you started birding, when and how you started photography? Did you find examples (people) or did you find out on your own.

First of all I would like to thank you for this interview, it's an honour.

About your questions, I do not remember exactly when and how I started birding; one of the first memory that I have is of me giving some food to the birds at my room's window, when I was only 6 or 7 years old. I also have a picture of me at 9 years out in the field with a bins in my hands. I think that my parents have been very important for the beginning of this passion because they took me very often in the countryside and instilled in me the respect of the nature as a whole. I also have an elder brother with the same passion, with which I started birding out into the field.

I was born in Calabria, in the southernmost Italy, a region completely without birders when I started birding so I can say that we were perhaps among the very few people birding at that time in south Italy ... In time, and after my move to Florence, Tuscany, I met some local birders and started my cooperation with local ornithological institutes, with whom I took part in several scientific researches and projects about birds. My passion in bird identification and rarity led me to become a member and secretary of the COI, the Italian Rarities Committee, with which I cooperated for five years. In that time I also started to write about bird identification with several articles published on bird magazines (i.e. Dutch Birding and Birding World) and on the web.

The passion for photography started when I moved to Tuscany, about twenty-five years ago. Some of the local birders were actually also bird photographers, and the regular slide projections together with the wish to 'capture' on film the local rarities led me to buy my first camera and lens. In that time my only wish was simply to take on film as much birds as possible, did not looking for the quality because I never thought to sell my photographs (but, actually, I did ...). After some time, and after having changed several cameras and lenses, I also tried for a short time the revolutionary 'digiscoping' (in fact, I was one of the first italian birder and photographer who used this new technique, since 2003, and I also wrote several articles about it for magazines and web, notably EBN-Italy). In 2004, I bought my first digital reflex with a professional lens, and create my own web-site, and now I am here ... Again, I was one of the first italian bird photographer who started to use digital.

I understood that you are working in a hospital. Nevertheless your pictures can be found in highly praised books on birds. How many hours are you out there daily / weekly? How do you arrange this (home-work-birding)? Can you name a few of the books?

Yes, it is correct. I do not do photography for living; actually I am a nurse, and I work on a First-Aid Unit in a Public Hospital. This is very important for me, because I have got a lot of time free from work to devote to family (I'm married with Barbara, a fantastic woman, and we have two daughters) and birding/photography. To let you understand well, my work shift develops on five days: day 1-afternoon, 2- morning, 3- night, 4- free, 5- free, so I have two full days and three half-days free from work. Of course I cannot go out birding and photographing all of this time, but I usually manage to do it at least a couple of days out of five (thank you, Barbara!).

About books and magazines ... they are really too much, but I am very honoured to have photos published on the monumental *Handbook of the Birds of the World*, on *Petrels night and day* by Sound Approach, and in *Birdpix* books, to name a few.

How do you achieve that highly saturated light which characterises most of your pictures? Accidentally, only going out in good light? Early morning, late evening? Photo processing?

All of them. Obviously, the best light is that of early morning and late evening (the so-called "golden hours"), but a good post-processing is vital to enhance that light, or to give a little help to improve a medium-quality picture (without distorting the truth!). Bear in mind that I live in a Mediterranean country, and in summer especially, go out photographing early in the morning and/or late evening is often the only way to find something to photograph!

Back on photo processing, it is incredible how many bird photographer, some of them very good, have a bad workflow. It seems almost that they do not understand how great is the role of a good post-processing in the digital photography. This is especially important when you post your pictures on the web, more so if you wish to sell them! It is not important if your original files are perfect: if the images that you post have not been properly processed, they will be a bad visiting card of your photography! Within this in mind, since the start of my "digital days", I tried to improve my workflow, both learning from several sources (books, magazines, internet) and trying out new techniques, especially devoted to the downsized files for the web. Now I know to have acquired a good technique considering how many photographers ask me about it!

In Holland, bird photography is increasingly popular. How about Italy? Do you have an opinion on the situation in Holland and/or Italy?

Not an easy question to answer! The great part of Italians now well know what is Birdwatching, but still very few of them do it. There has been a good 'season' about 15-20 years ago, when a good campaign by media (and by the LIPU – Italian Society for the protection of the Birds) led to a big increase in the number of birders, most of them young or very young. Nevertheless, to the present days, it seems that the greater part of the birders are the same people, only a little older! There has been only a small generational turnover ...

Unlike birdwatching, bird photography is now much more popular in Italy than in the past. I have not a precise idea why this is happening ... Italian people are certainly much more fond of the nature than before and the number of the hunters is at its lowest level ever. Much more people love to go out in the field to photograph than in the past, and a good percentage of these are nature photographers. The problem is that only a few of them are birders too, and the greater part take pictures of animals that they do not

even know! This situation may lead to conservation problems, especially if the number of 'poor trained' photographer will grown still further. There are already some evidence of this situation.

About Holland, I perfectly know the situation and, what can I say ... I envy you! I envy the number of birders in a small country which lead that almost every rarity is found; I envy your birdline and I envy your number of, especially, wintering waterbirds But, as a solitary man as I am, I do not envy the hords of birders that go around everywhere everyday, especially from a photographic point of view! Anyway, there are so many good bird photographers in Holland to be inspired! Ooops! ... and I love Birdpix too!

Apart from your main gear (canon 500 F4, tc 1,4 and tc 2,0 and canon 1D mk ii and mk iii), what is always at hand when you go out?

Apart the carbon-fiber tripod, usually only my bins and scope! I try to be as light as possible, and I usually buy new gears when the manufacturers produce new lighter models, since now I'm forty and I wish to preserve my ... spine for the future! What I do not put on my backpack, I have on my car: various kinds of hides, nets, boots, an Mp3 reader used as a playback for some very skulking species (but rarely used and only as last resort) and so on. I do not usually go out with portable hard-drives or laptops; I prefer to bring lots of memory cards instead. I use a portable device only during the bird trips abroad. My car is a four-drive wheel model, essential in bird photography.

When going on expedition. How do you decide on the place and time to go?

At the modern days, internet is by the far the most important source of information; anyway books still remain very important, sometimes more than internet. Since I still consider myself as a birder lent to photography, I usually choose my next destination on the basis of the birds that I wish to watch and photograph; then I start searching for all the available information about that country (both on internet and buying birdwatching guides) and the more reliable places where to find the 'wanted' birds. The next step is to organize the whole trip on the basis of these information. This program, of course, may change during the trip depending on the success in finding my goals. This is why I do not usually book accommodations well in advance and prefer to find them daily (I slept too much nights in the car because I did not find any accommodation...). Unlike accommodations, I always rent a car well in advance, because it is an essential tool for my photography, and sometimes the only way to find some birds and save time. Generally, I have not problems to choose every month of the year for my trips abroad (keeping in mind the family), but I still prefer to do them on spring and autumn. Summer is generally devoted to the family.

Has there ever been a moment in which photography didn't work out? How did you deal with that?

Yes, there has been recently. I had some very hard personal attack regarding my photographic style on an italian photoforum which eventually led me to leave it. The general point of view of most of the Italian bird and nature photographers is that only action photos have to be considered "true nature photography. For these people, action photos are of first-class (seria A) while portraits are of second-class (serie B). In my opinion, a well executed portrait is as beautiful as an action scene, provided that composition, exposure, light, colour and sharpness are unexceptionable. Further, the statement of fact that there are no possibilities for a bird photographer to live of his work in Italy is more and more discouraging, also as a result of the growing number of amateurs which give their pictures for free.

What do you do to find out if the bird is/will be cooperative or not?

There is no general rule. I know, it's a cliché, but I think that knowing birds behaviour is really very important to obtain good pictures. I can often foretell when and where a bird will take off or land, managing to obtain the picture that I was looking for.

With experience, of course, you may learn some 'tricks of the trade'. Pishing is one of them. It is usually utilized by some birders to attract very skulking birds, especially passerines, from the thick covert; anyway it can be of some aid in bird photography too, if you know how to use it. It must be noted, for one thing, that pishing does not work in every season nor with every bird species, or rather, there are not many species that react well to pishing. Among them, true Tits, Penduline Tit, Long-tailed Tit, some Sylvia warblers, some Acrocephalus warblers, Zitting Cisticola, some Phylloscopus warblers, Goldcrest and Firecrest, Wren, Dunnock, European Robin and a few others are very responsive to this 'technique'. Many other species do not react at all so it is even useless to try it. Further, birds brought to the open generally disappear in a twinkling as soon as they find the source of that strange sound, so one must be very quick to take pictures of them. A good trick is to find a good perch like a lone twig sticking out from a thick bush or tree, then point the lens at it and start 'pishing', hoping that the bird will rest upon it! Nevertheless, some species are so strongly sensitive to pishing that they often came very close to the source, sometimes under the minimum distance of focus.

Apart from pishing, I am used to photograph from the car, trying to approach the birds step by step. I do not like too much to use movable hides; nevertheless, I love to shoot from the beautiful permanent hide at Peretola lake, Florence, my favourite photographic spot. I also take pictures by foot, but this is not always rewarding.

Anyway, I must admit that in Italy birds are generally rather shy, sometimes unapproachable so I had to learn to recourse to various tricks. Outside Italy, especially in those countries where hunting pressure is scarce or absent, birds are fairly tame and I do not usually have particular problems to approach them.

Do you have some pictures with anecdotes, like the Roller that was so very interested when your car got stuck in the sand in Dhofar – Oman?

I have many. One of the constants of my trips abroad is that I **always** manage to get stuck in sand or mud or something else when I go out birding in remote areas. This happened in Varangerfjord, Norway on 1995 when I got stuck in the bank of a river while I was trying to photograph a Snow Bunting (pulled out by a tractor thanks to two birders-policemen that were accidentally looking with a scope from a distance), or at Ras Mohammed Nat Park in Sinai, Egypt, 2004, when I got stuck in the *sabkha* (a mixture of sand, salt and mud) while I was trying to photograph an immature Bonelli's Eagle perched on a shore lake (with Egyptians looking at me and passing by without helping me and pulled out only after five hours with the help of some other birders, almost at dusk) or on 2007, at Al Mughsayl, Dhofar, Oman, when I got stuck in the sand while I was trying to get close to an Eurasian Roller, with the bird perched and looking at me from six meters while I was shovelling the sand behind the car ... And still in Finland on 2008 (thank you old man with the tractor!), again in Oman on 2008 (trying to photograph Asian Desert Warbler at Sun Farm Sohar ...), at Erg Chebbi in Morocco in 2006 while I was photographing a Brown-necked Raven, in Tunisia on 1993 and 2005, several times in Spain, once in Lesvos on 1999 and so on ...

And I did not mention the zillion of times in Italy ... Only one: I got stuck in the sand on a riverbank and so did the road service lorry trying to pull me out so a second lorry was necessary to pull out both ...

But during my trips I also had more serious problems: I risked my life and that of my wife on an serious accident with a lorry in Turkey on 2001, and again in Tuscany falling down from a rock when I was photographing some Alpine Accentors. I have been

almost arrested in Israel on 2007 while I was photographing near a military base, I broke the radiator of my car well into desert during the same trip and I had my hard-disk with all the photos of the trip confiscated, disassembled and carefully scrutinized by military police at Tel Aviv airport looking for strange materials ...

And I could go on for a long time ...

Well, Daniele thank you for sharing... Lets enjoy some shining pictures

Questions: Peter Wijn *Natuurfotoblog*

Answers: Daniele Occhiato