

How to take Festive Photos of Robins

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Cute, curious and characterful, robins have long been symbolic of the Christmas season. While you'll see them in the garden all year round, their bright red breasts provide a noticeable flash of colour against drab backgrounds or bright snow and frost, making them the ideal bird to photograph in winter.

Attracting robins

Robins' relative ease around humans stems from their natural wild habit of following large mammals as they disturb woodland floors and uncover tasty bugs for robins to feed on. So strengthen this bond by making sure they've got plenty of food in your garden, giving you more photo opportunities. Position some perching props near your feeding station, such as logs, twigs, spade handles or a garden bench, and try concealing food in trees or shrubs for more natural-looking shots. Dried meal worms, crumbled suet cake, sunflower hearts or crushed seeds, crushed peanuts and chopped up fruit (such as apples and pears) all appeal to robins.

What gear?

You'll need a longish lens – at least 300-400mm to get your robin large enough in frame. You could also add a teleconverter as a relatively inexpensive way of boosting focal length. A tripod, monopod or other means of steadying the combination of camera and large lens is strongly recommended to avoid shake ruining your shots. A ball head on your tripod will enable you to change the camera's position far more quickly and up your hit rate, too.

If you've got a Nikon fieldscope or spotting scope, you can also try digiscoping: simply connect it to your camera lens via an adapter to capture super-telephoto digital images in a convenient and affordable way, which works with compact cameras as well as DSLRs.

Where to shoot

With robins being reasonably tame, you'll probably be able to shoot without needing a hide. If you're not a fan of the cold you could also set up indoors as long as you have a window with clear lines of sight to your feeding station and perches – get the lens as close as possible to the glass without touching it, and use a lens hood to minimise reflections. Another option is to set up the camera outside, close to the perch, and then retreat into the warmth to fire the shutter with an infrared release.

Camera settings

If you're hand-holding, you'll need a fairly high shutter speed – around 1/500sec or faster – to avoid blur; slower if you're steadying the camera on a tripod or similar. A lens with built-in vibration reduction (VR) will allow you to handhold at up to four stops slower, enabling a handheld shutter speed of 1/60sec or 1/125sec, which makes all the difference on a dark winter's day. Boost your ISO for a faster shutter speed, but it's good practice to use the lowest you can get away with to get the cleanest image, which can be crucial with a highly magnified close-up.

To capture robins feeding or perching, choose aperture priority mode and use a wide-open aperture like f/2.8 or f/4 for a shallow depth of field which throws the background beyond focus, concentrating attention on the bird and its immediate surroundings. Prefocus on the perch you know the robin favours, so you're ready to shoot when the bird lands on it.

Shooting tips

The low-angled sun of early morning and late afternoon can create the best light for shooting, with softer shadows and warmer tones – and these are also the times robins are most likely to be feeding and active. For the most impact, have at least one of the robin's eyes in focus. And don't forget action shots – freeze a robin taking flight with high speed continuous shooting and a shutter speed of at least 1/1000sec. Nikon 1 cameras are ideal for this type of bird photography, with up to 60fps continuous shooting and super-fastest AF to keep the robin sharp.