

Some Thoughts on the Canon 40D

I recently upgraded my camera to the Canon 40D from a Canon 400D, and thought I would share some of my thoughts on it as a wildlife camera now I've had a chance to get to know it. This is by no means a rigorous, scientific test of the camera's capabilities, just my experience using it out in the field.



The Canon 40D

As you can tell from the galleries, I take my kit out in some pretty challenging conditions so I need my camera and lenses to be able to cope in poor weather, often in dull light and to capture fast-moving birds and animals, usually from a moving boat. My main reasons for upgrading to the 40D were therefore based on the improvements in the autofocus (AF), better noise control at high ISO, 6.5 frames per second (fps) shooting rate and the inclusion of spot-metering mode, which was lacking on the 400D.

I've had it out on a few trips with me now, to the Farne islands and the Isle of May, and also out on a fishing boat in the Clyde, as well as some smaller local trips, and I've been really impressed with it. Typically I'll use centre-point focus, spot metering and high speed shooting (6.5 fps), with either a Canon 70-200mm F4 IS, or Canon 300mm F4 IS (with or without a 1.4x teleconverter).

By comparison to the 400D, the AF is a huge step up and really grabbed the subjects I wanted. It's not up to the standards of the 1D range by any means, but it is an awful lot closer. Six frames per second is also an incredibly useful tool for action shots. I can now take two photos for every one I used to take, and that can make all the difference between clipping a bird's wing out the frame or not, or getting the wing posture perfect. It also makes it much easier to shoot feeding gannets while the boat is tossing about!



A northern gannet, just banking into a dive



A puffin in flight, taken at the Isle of May

As far as the noise reduction goes, I have been really pleased with the high ISO performance so far, and while the noise is definitely noticeable (what do you expect at ISO 1600 or 3200 though?) it is certainly not horrible. As with the 400D, the noise tends to appear as bands across the photograph, rather than as a uniform pattern. This is not a huge problem for underwater work, as most of this noise appears in the red channel which contains very little data anyway (red light is filtered out by the water), but is much more apparent in the topside photographs. I believe the noise patterns on cameras like the 1D mkIII are much better, but they are in a different league altogether, and comparisons between professional and ‘prosumer’ level cameras aren’t really fair.

In terms of handling, the 40D is quite a bit chunkier and heavier than the 400D, which is good. I am a small-handed person, but the 40D feels really comfortable to use. It also feels much more rugged and well-built, but it is worth remembering my 400D has been hit (and occasionally swamped) by more than its fair share of waves in its time and has survived perfectly.

I can’t see much difference (if any) in the overall image quality between the 40D and 400D, which stands to reason since they use basically the same sensor. The difference really shines through in the hit rate of good photos. I’ve taken some great shots with the 400D, and will continue to use it as a backup camera, but the 40D will be the body I rely on to get the action shots or when the conditions are that bit more challenging, and I wouldn’t hesitate to recommend it as an excellent camera for the amateur wildlife photographer.