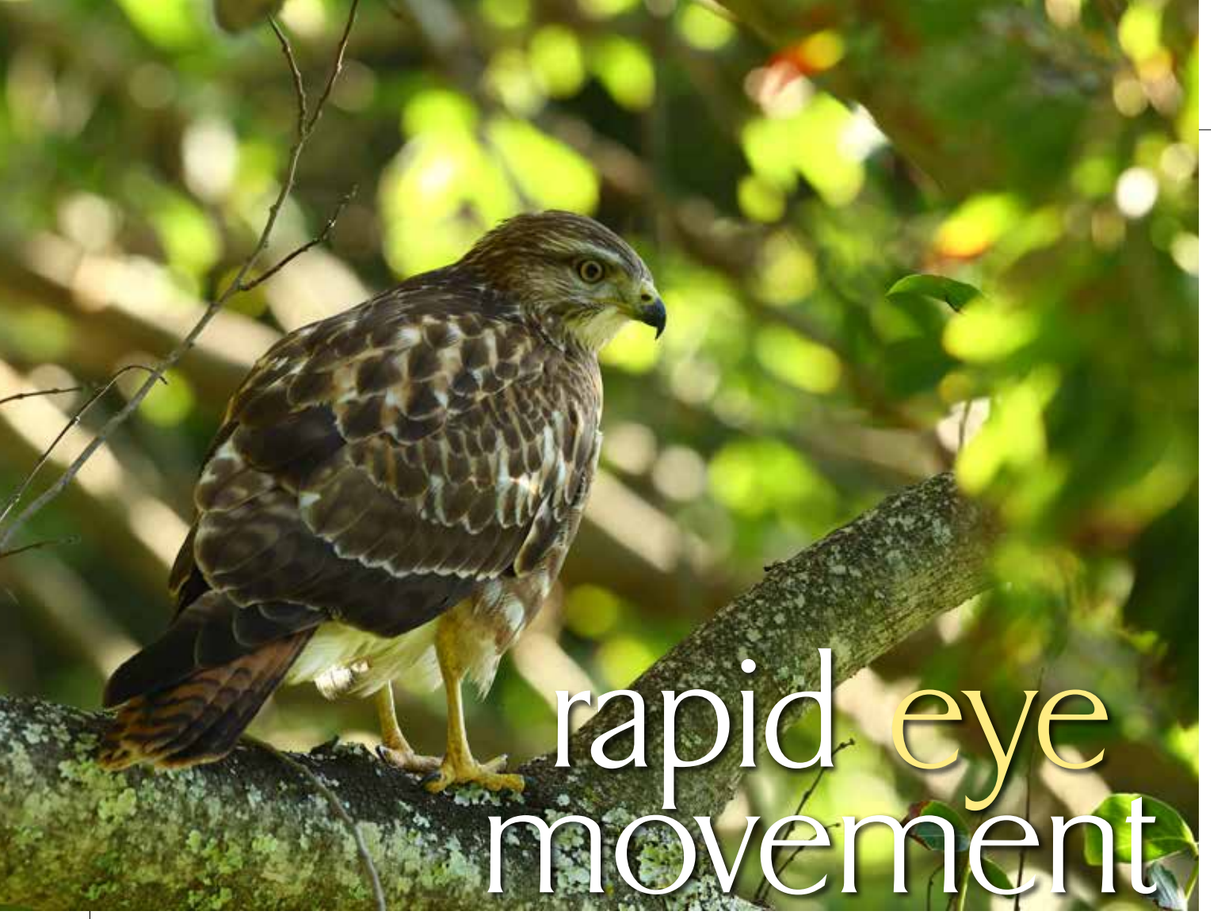


rapid eye movement

Field testing Canon's R3 camera

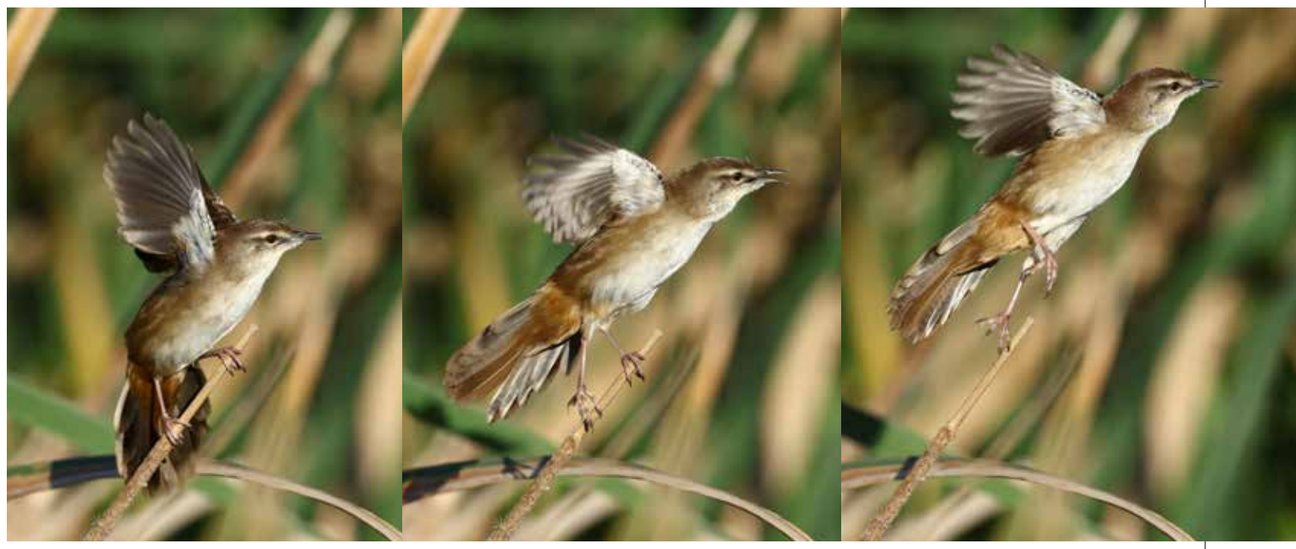
TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS **PETER RYAN**

I was still adapting to a mirrorless camera body and second-guessing my decision to go with Canon's R6 rather than the more expensive R5 (see *African Birdlife* 9(3): 56–60), when Canon announced yet another addition to its mirrorless range. The R3 features an entirely new stacked sensor design, which facilitates faster image processing – up to a blistering 30 frames per second in electronic shutter mode. And the autofocus system, which convinced me to go mirrorless in the first instance, has been further improved. I couldn't wait to try one in the field.

above *The Canon R3 coped admirably with this juvenile 'Cape' Buzzard in dappled shade (EF 500mm, 1/320 sec. at f5.6).*

The most obvious difference between the R3 and the R5/R6 is the larger size of the R3, which accommodates a much larger battery and has dual controls to allow comfortable use in both portrait and landscape orientation. It looks and feels like one of Canon's flagship 1D models and brought back happy memories of my old Canon 1D Mark IV. Indeed, it prompted me to dust off my 500mm f4 lens, which I hadn't used since reviewing the R5 and R6 (testament more to the amazing quality of the smaller and more convenient RF lenses than any inherent issue with the EF lens). The R3 balances nicely on the big f4 lens, but still weighs appreciably less than a 1D, thanks to the loss of the prism and mirror mechanism. At just over a kilogram, the R3 is a third heavier than the R5, but weighs slightly less than the R5 with a battery grip.

Even though the R3 feels as bullet-proof as a 1D, it does not meet Canon's exacting ruggedness standards to warrant being called the R1. The specifications give the operating temperature range as 0–40 °C, the same as the R5 and R6 (although I had no trouble shooting with the R6 well below freezing in the Arctic). Canon is developing an R1, rumoured to feature even higher resolution than the R5 and faster shooting speeds than the R3, but it now seems that the earliest this will be available is late 2023. So is the R3 a viable alternative for bird photographers?

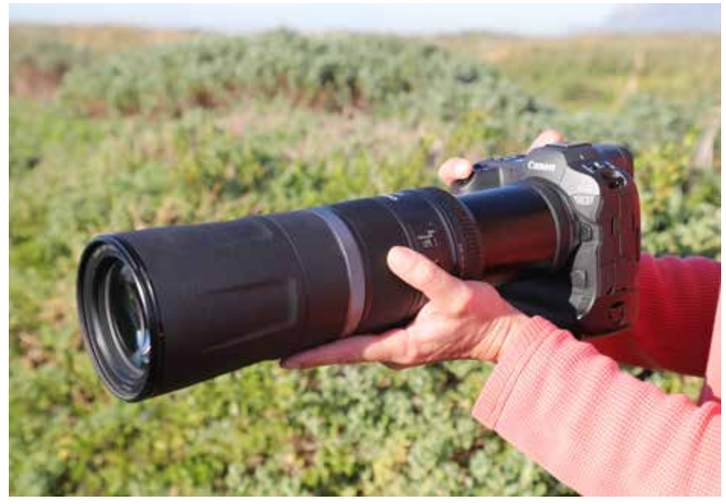


The sensor resolution is a modest 24 megapixels, compared to 45 in the R5, but this enables it to perform better in low-light conditions. Like the R6 (21 megapixels), it has a maximum ISO of 102 400. Of course, you don't want to push it that far, but I found it gave excellent results at 2000 ISO and was only just starting to show some noise at about 6400 ISO. The lower resolution also means longer bursts, even at 30 frames per second.

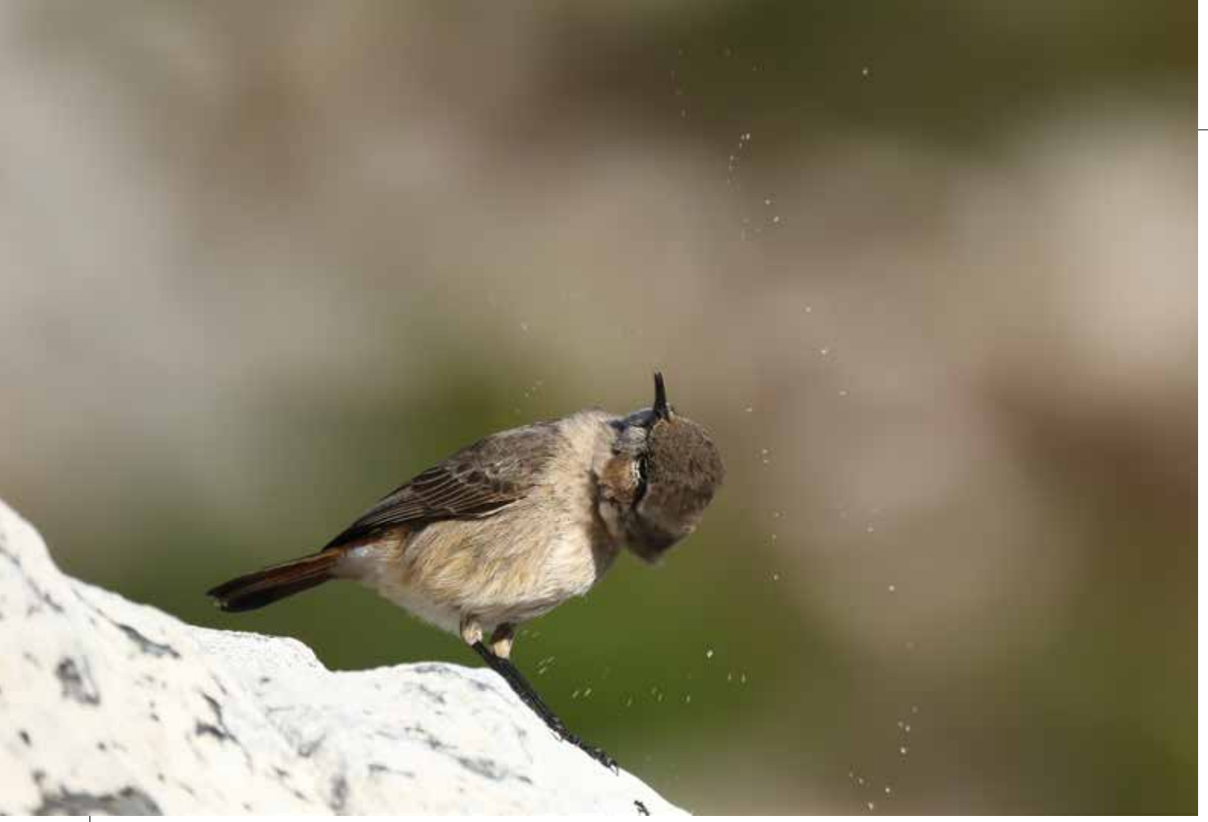
The faster sensor allows for shutter speeds of up to 1/64 000 seconds in electronic shutter mode, eight times faster than the R5 and R6, and more than enough to freeze the fastest hummingbird wingtip. Also, it is the first Canon mirrorless camera to offer a blackout-free viewfinder, so there's no stuttering of the image when you take a burst of shots. With the R3, you have no excuse for missing the action!

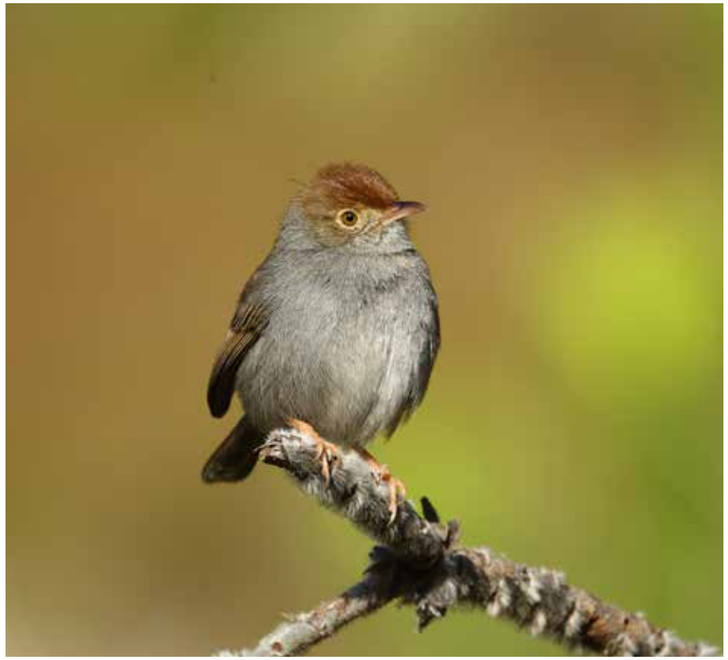
The autofocus system acquires focus almost twice as fast as the R5 and R6 and updates 60 times per second, which means that it tracks your subject even more effectively. Another great innovation is the ability to combine animal-eye autofocus with other autofocus modes, which helps the camera know where to look for the subject. But the most talked-about feature of the R3 is the eye-control autofocus. Infra-red sensors around the viewfinder detect where you are looking and use this information to guide the autofocus system. You have to train the camera to your eye, but once that has been done it is impressively accurate. >

above *At 30 frames per second in electronic shutter mode, the R3 is great for recording birds in action. These three successive images show a Little Rush Warbler starting its display call flight (EF 500mm with 1.4x teleconverter, 1/3200 sec. at f11).*



below *Matched with Canon's plastic RF800, the R3 still makes for a remarkably portable option to record birding encounters.*





Simply look at the bird to guide the focus zone to the right area and then half press the shutter release to enable the camera to take over tracking the selected subject. However, it is distracting to have this feature engaged and the focus system generally is so good that I resorted to eye-control on only a few occasions when the camera struggled to decide among multiple birds in the image.

I tested the R3 on three lenses: Canon's brilliant RF 100–500mm zoom, the budget RF 800mm f11 and my EF 500mm f4 Mark II, both with and without a 1.4x extender. Unsurprisingly, it worked well with both the zoom and the 500mm f4. I was also impressed with how well it coped with the extender on the big prime lens – seemingly better than when I used the extender with an SLR camera. But the biggest surprise was how well it coped with the plastic RF 800mm lens (*African Birdlife* 9(3): 61). I've taken some pretty decent images with this lens on my R6, but the active focus area is restricted to the centre third of the image. This can be advantageous when the bird is quite small in the image, but if it fills most of the frame, there's a good chance that its eye will be outside the focus zone. With the R3, the active focus area covers most of the image, giving greater freedom to compose an image. I loved being able to hike with the R3 and 800mm on a shoulder sling for hours on end, just on the off-chance that I came across something worth photographing.

After a week with the R3, it was a distinct step down to revert to my R6. Do I want one? Absolutely! However, at a shade under R100 000, the R3 is even more expensive than the R5. And while I was waiting to get the review model, Canon announced the release of the R7 – a crop-sensor mirrorless body with many of the features of the R3 for barely a quarter of the price. My decision as to what to buy as a second mirrorless body is going to have to wait until I can test-drive the R7. Watch this space. ◆

left *This Neddicky shows a nicely blurred background despite the relatively small aperture of Canon's fixed f11 RF 800mm lens (1/1600 sec.).*

above *Although 30 frames per second means a lot of images to scan through, it increases the chances of recording unusual behaviours, such as the spray of nasal fluid as this Familiar Chat shakes its head (EF 800mm, 1/2500 sec. at f11).*

A high frame rate also increases the chances of capturing an aesthetically pleasing composition, especially when there are several birds in the field of view, like these three Little Egrets foraging with Hartlaub's and Grey-headed gulls (RF 100–500mm, 1/8000 sec. at f10).