

# Photographing Birds in Flight



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- Photographing birds in flight is the art of capturing birds when they are at their most spectacular.
- Bird flight photography is regarded by many as the most challenging branch of wildlife photography.
- With the right techniques and equipment your hit rate for flight shots can be dramatically improved.

# Equipment

- People often say that it is not the equipment that matters most, but the photographer behind the equipment. Birds in flight might be the exception to that statement.
- Photographing birds in flight poses a real challenge for cameras and lenses. They have to be able to focus on rapidly-moving targets and stay locked on to them long enough to capture the image, even when bird flies in front of 'distracting' backgrounds.
- You have to be able to set the correct exposure with fast-changing lighting and backgrounds and use shutter speeds fast enough to freeze the action.
- To have a good chance of getting a shot with the bird's wings in a decent position, you need to be able to capture a burst of images in rapid succession.

# Equipment Capabilities

- The main factors to consider are lens AF speed and camera body AF ability.
- Some camera and lenses can change focus from the closest to the furthest distance in a fraction of a second, but other gear can take several seconds to achieve this.
- Zoom lenses tend to focus more slowly than fixed focal length lenses.
- Focus speeds tend to be slower when teleconverters are used. This should be taken into account if considering a 300mm lens with a 1.4x teleconverter as an alternative to a 400mm lens.
- The camera body needs to be able to detect your intended subject - so that it can tell the lens what distance to focus at - and to keep track of your subject as it moves.

# Camera settings for flight photography

- In my opinion neither Av nor Tv is ideal for flight shooting, although I know photographers that use both with success.
- For me, lighting varies too much in quality and quantity to get consistent results on days where clouds and differing backgrounds are present.
- I prefer to meter the intended subject manually using evaluative, partial or spot metering.
- Knowing the subject will be exposed correctly regardless of sky or other background variances eliminates one more variable when producing good images.

# Shutter Speed for Flight Photography

- Exactly what shutter speed is needed to achieve a sharp image depends on several factors:
  - the subject's speed
  - subject distance
  - subject's angle of travel relative to the camera
  - effectiveness of your 'panning'
  - amount of 'camera shake' inherent with handholding

# AF Point Selection

- In most DSLRs, you have the ability to focus using a single AF point or with all AF points active.
- In practice, the effectiveness of this feature depends on the AF capability of your camera.
- With a lot of consumer camera bodies, it is best to use just the center focus point. With Canon, beginning with the prosumer 7D and for all of the professional bodies, it is better to use more focus points.

# Back Button Auto Focus

- Back button auto focus involves focusing by pushing a button on the top right back of the camera instead of pushing the shutter button.
- Without back button focus, when the shutter is released AF tracking is interrupted. When you use rear focus, the camera continues to track when the shutter is released.
- Back-button AF lets you stop focus whenever something might interfere with the moving subject you're tracking — without requiring you to stop shooting.
- By being able to activate autofocus independently of the light meter, you can set and check your exposure without having to acquire focus on the subject at the same time.

# Lens Limiter Switch & other Settings

- Many lenses have a distance limiter switch allowing the focus range to be limited to just a portion of the full focal range of the lens.
- If you are photographing birds flying at a distance, setting the limiter to the farthest focus range will reduce the time the auto focus spends “hunting” for focus.
- Some advanced cameras have Custom Functions that determine how quickly an AF point will change focus.
- It may seem best to set this as quickly as possible, but tracking can be lost when the AF point moves off subject or the subject briefly flies behind an object.
- It is best to set this to be relatively slow.

# Basic Techniques for Flight Photography

- A good place to start is to find a place with a steady stream of large birds flying towards you so you can follow the approaching bird with a minimum of panning.
- Pick a bird while it is still distant. It helps to pre-focus at a long distance.
- Place the active AF point on the bird and press the back focus button, or shutter button.
- If the AF loses focus, reacquire as necessary. This is where the back focus technique works great.
- Use the highest frames per second to maximize the chances of getting at least one good shot.

# Tips for Flight Photography

- It is important to always get the bird's head in focus.
- Ensure that there is enough depth of field to get the entire bird in focus.
- Smooth accurate panning is essential and it takes a lot of practice.
- Try to avoid overly cloudy days because it usually leads to dull, unattractive images.
- Generally birds in your images should be facing between directly towards you and perpendicular to you.
- Illumination should be more from the front than from the rear.

# Best Places for Birds in Flight



Jasper-Pulaski Fish & Wildlife Area – Medaryville,  
Indiana

# Best Places for Birds in Flight



Homer Alaska

# Best Places for Birds in Flight



Anchor Point Alaska

# Best Places for Birds in Flight



Ding Darling National Wildlife Area, Sanibel Florida

# Best Places for Birds in Flight



Everglades National Park

# Best Places for Birds in Flight



Venice Rookery, Venice Florida