

## Some Suggestions for Photographing Birds in Motion

Photographing birds in motion (most often in flight) is both a challenge and a pleasure. For some people it is as much sport as skeet shooting, though with memorable images as the reward. There is an adrenaline rush that accompanies quickly firing off frame after frame, trying to get a definitive action capture. But, like any other skill, action photography requires some practice and, for some, modification of shooting techniques. Following are some essentials and some suggestions for capturing birds in motion and producing memorable images.

First, familiarize yourself with elements that make up a “good” image. Frequently, an image with one central subject has more impact than an image with several areas of interest or areas that are “irrelevant” to the story you are attempting to depict.

Always keep the background of your image in mind. A background that distracts and draws attention away from the subject is going to lessen the impact of your image. It is frequently possible to change your location vis-à-vis your subject so that the background does not detract from what you want to express. Feel free to move around, shoot some test shots and look at your LCD to find the perspective you like best. In some instances, however, through the use of a shallow depth of field, you may be able to minimize the distraction of a busy background. (A shallow depth of field will sometimes blur a busy background so that it may even complement your subject.)

Consider shooting outside of the “Program” or “automatic” mode. For some of you, this may mean simply shooting in “sports” mode. “Sports” mode allows the camera to dictate the settings which will allow you to capture an “action” image. Also, do not hesitate to refer to your camera manual. Much of the time, explanations for something about which you are uncertain may be found here.

For those who are more adventurous and willing to experiment, try shooting in either Shutter priority or Aperture priority. These modes allow you to make the decision regarding one of the settings and allows the camera to deal with the other—when shooting in aperture priority, the camera will make the decision as to the shutter speed to use; when shooting in shutter speed priority, the camera will make the decision as to what aperture to use.

A word on shutter speed—HIGH. In order to capture movement, you ought to be shooting at a high shutter speed. At times, 1/500 of a second may be sufficient; more often, speeds of 1/1000 of a second or faster are necessary to capture a sharp image of action, such as bird flight shots.

Feel free to experiment with ISO settings. Learn what ISO levels cause your images to become “noisy” or “grainy.” Do not exceed this level unless you do so with the awareness that the quality of your image may be compromised. Many cameras operate without significant “noise” at ISO 400 or below. Use of a higher ISO may allow a tighter aperture (deeper depth of field) as well as a faster shutter speed.

If you are very adventurous and willing to experiment, try shooting in Manual (manual mode, not manual focus). With this setting, you make all the decisions regarding your settings. You select the aperture you are shooting with as well as the shutter speed. You also dictate the ISO.

Be aware that you will need to be shooting with different settings most of the time if you are making an image of an egret (white) as opposed to when you are making an image of a cormorant (dark gray). Changes in shutter speed and/or aperture can allow you to expose correctly for each of these with minimal time devoted to the process once you are comfortable with manual settings. If you are shooting in Av or Tv (Aperture or

Shutter priority), you will need to familiarize yourself with Exposure Compensation. E.C. allows you to alter the standard exposure set by the camera, by toning down a bright image, or “lighting up” a dark image.

Shoot frequently. Practice in different modes of shooting requires a good deal of experimentation before you will have mastered a new method. See what gives you the best results, but be willing to accept less-than-perfect images as part of your growth. With frequent shooting, your images should improve consistently as you learn and feel more in control of your camera.

If you are shooting with an SLR, you might want to purchase a zoom lens, such as a 70-300mm, 100-400mm, or 200-400mm. Due to their flexibility for distances, zoom lenses are particularly handy when you have birds at different distances.

Be familiar with your subject. This is not always possible, but if you live in the United States, you can certainly become acquainted with the behavior of your local birds and animals. To capture action shots successfully, it helps a great deal to be able to predict when a bird is going to take off, land, pick a fight, carry twigs, mate, etc.

Be familiar with the area in which you are shooting. If you would be facing the sun when trying to capture behavior in a given location during the morning, plan to shoot this location in the afternoon when the light is behind you.

There are exceptions to every “rule”; none of this is written in stone. Explore what works for you and what works in each particular image you create.

In order to improve your images, it is important to have your work critiqued in some setting, and it is important for you to be able to see the work others are doing. Avail yourself of a local camera club where you usually can present a few images each month for an experienced judge to critique. Also, you should consider joining PSA (the Photographic Society of America); here there are mentoring and study groups available to members, as well as international nature competitions in which you might participate to measure your progress. Additionally, you may want to use the internet, with such resources as Flickr.com. On Flickr.com there are special interest groups (such as “South Florida Wetlands” or the “Birds of Africa”) where your images will be seen by people who are shooting in similar locations with similar interests to you. You might also want to join a group which supports the environment and the wildlife you enjoy, such as Audubon or the Sierra Club.

If you do not have one, purchase a Field Guide for birding. It makes life much more interesting to be able to identify what you see and what you are shooting. The field guide published by the Smithsonian in 2008 uses some fine photographs to identify birds and bird behavior, but there are many decent guides available, many of which may be purchased when you are in the locale where you wish to shoot.

But, in conclusion, only do this if it brings joy to your life—the joy of witnessing nature, the joy of documenting instants in time which you cannot otherwise recapture, and the joy in sharing your vision and perception of beauty with others.

Happy shooting!

Michael Rosenbaum