


Birds in Flight

by Dr. Robert Berdan



Trying to photograph birds in flight can be very challenging, even for a pro, but it's what I love to do. Whoever said that equipment doesn't matter never tried to photograph a bird in flight. Not only does the equipment matter, but so do the camera settings and the lens. The best equipment for photographing birds in flight is a digital single-lens reflex camera that shoots at a high frame and has a fast autofocus telephoto lens (F2.8 or F4) attached.

Most professional digital cameras offer a variety of different shooting modes. I set my camera to its fastest shooting mode (CH or continuous high) and use release priority for best results. With my Nikon cameras, I set them to 9-point dynamic autofocus and the focus tracking to short, so that when the distance to the subject changes abruptly, the camera waits for a short period of time before adjusting the focus. The faster your camera is able to focus, track and shoot, the better your chances of capturing a great shot. Using high-performance lithium batteries is a simple way to increase your digital camera's shooting speed, while shooting JPEG files will boost the camera's buffer size, so that you can shoot a greater number of pictures in a single burst.

I generally shoot RAW files, even though I lose a little bit of speed, because they provide more flexibility when it comes to adjusting the image exposure and white balance afterwards. My camera meter mode is normally set to Automatic (matrix or evaluative). The intensity of the light will also affect the shooting speed – the brighter it is outside the better – so if you've never photographed birds in flight before, I recommend starting on a bright, sunny blue-sky day.

The biggest challenge when photographing birds in flight is undoubtedly keeping the bird in focus. The wider the aperture of your telephoto lens, the faster the lens will

focus on a subject. I always use my telephoto lens at its widest aperture. My favourite “bird” lens is the Nikon 300mm F2.8 VR lens, which focuses quickly even with a 1.5X teleconverter attached. Because this lens is heavy to hold, some photographers may prefer to use a monopod or tripod as a support. A Wimberley tripod head is designed to swing around quickly with a large lens, which some photographers will find helpful when photographing fast-moving birds. Another favourite lens is the smaller Canon 300mm F4, which also focuses quickly. Better telephoto lenses feature a distance limiter with two settings: in one setting, the lens focuses from its closest point to infinity; the other setting has a narrower focus range that goes from about three meters to infinity. If your lens offers this feature, use the reduced focus range to have your lens focus on distant subjects quicker.

Never attach a polarizing filter to your telephoto lens if you need speed. A polarizer will reduce the light by about two shutter speeds. Keep in mind that the ability of a lens to focus quickly varies with the camera model it is attached to. Generally, the more expensive professional camera bodies focus faster. Weather can also affect your camera’s autofocus capability. If exposed to fog, rain or snow, the lens may not be able to focus at all. The only thing you can do in these conditions is to switch your lens to manual focus and try your best.

No camera will do it all for you; skill and practice are still essential. No matter what type of lens or camera you use, getting sharp pictures of birds in flight requires a shutter speed of 1/500 of a second or faster. You can achieve faster shutter speeds by increasing the ISO speed on your camera or by shooting in bright light. The disadvantage of increasing the camera’s ISO speed is that your images will have more grain or noise, but newer digital cameras are capable of creating fine-grained images even at ISO speeds of 1,600 or higher.

One of the most difficult tasks will be to keep a flying bird positioned over the autofocus sensors in your camera’s viewfinder. Practice shooting fast-moving subjects and try to anticipate when a bird might begin to fly. It’s easier to focus on a stationary bird that takes off than it is to lock-focus onto a fast-flying bird. My camera’s autofocus can lock onto birds that move horizontally better than when they fly towards or away from me. If I know the direction the bird will fly, I try to place the bird in the center of my autofocus sensor, or on one edge of my view frame opposite to its direction of flight. I can always crop the picture afterwards if I need to make a more compelling composition. If you find your reflexes are not as quick as you remember, have a cup of coffee before you go out to shoot: the caffeine will improve the speed of your reflexes by three to five percent.

If you are new to photographing birds in flight, start with big birds, or birds that hover or soar slowly. Hawks, pelicans, swans and Canada Geese are ideal. Go to places where birds congregate to improve your chances. Many birds congregate around bodies of water, especially during the spring and fall migrations. As you improve, gradually work your way down to smaller birds. Bird feeders are good spots to photograph birds as they come and go, with humming birds making ideal subjects. If you are able to get close to the birds, you can also try using a flash to help stop wing movement, which will also add a small highlight to the bird’s eyes.

Some of my best pictures of birds in flight were taken by observing the birds hunt for food. All that was required was a high-speed digital camera, a cup of coffee, and 35 years of practice. ■

Based in Calgary, Robert Berdan offers a variety of regular nature photography workshops. Contact him for more details: **(403) 247 2457** - rberdan@scienceandart.org www.canadiannaturephotographer.com



Common Goldeneye



Great Gray Owl



Tundra Swans



Rufous Hummingbird



Snowy Owl