An Introduction to Avian Flight Photography

Avian flight photography doesn't have to be an unreachable goal for you. As difficult as it may seem, making consistently good flight images is possible if you practice and keep a few principles in mind.

There are two elements to consider for successful avian flight photography: motor skills and technical skills.

Motor skills refer to quick reflexes, the ability to track the bird and pressing the shutter at the right moment. To practice your motor skills, it would be ideal to find a colony of Gulls where flight is frequent and use a medium telephoto lens to practice tracking them. Super-telephotos will be an additional challenge because of the extremely narrow field of view. If you are using a zoon lens, it's better to acquire the bird in the wider setting and then zoom in to fill the frame once you have it in focus.

Before we get to the technical part, let's talk equipment. You can shoot from a tripod or by supporting the camera entirely by hand. Shooting without any means of mechanical support is easier in some respects because of the freedom of movement and ease of acquiring and following the bird, but it requires a steady hand and strong arms. If you are using a super telephoto, you will need a faster shutter speed to counter act camera shake.

A tripod set-up for flight should have a swivel head that permits panning as well as rotation, such as the Wimberley head, the lighter Mongoose or Wimberley sidekick. The tripod needs to be sturdy enough to hold you gear securely, yet light enough for you to carry it around. Carbon fiber is a very popular material. Leveling the tripod and balancing your lens is important.

Holding medium telephoto lenses entirely by hand should be fairly easy. The challenge is to use the heavier super telephotos, like the 500mm or 600mm.

As a general rule, we recommend the use of a tripod. However, if flight patterns are erratic or unexpected, removing the camera and lens from the confines of a tripod can be beneficial. However, keep in mind that holding a heavy lens for extended periods of time can result in fatigue or unnecessary injury. Additionally, you need a lot of coordination, a steady hand and very high shutter speed. The palm of your support hand should serve as base for the lens tripod collar and you should strive to make panning as smooth as possible. When not shooting, place the lens back the tripod, on a handrail, etc., to avoid fatigue.

Technical skills refer to achieving a perfect exposure with the right shutter speed. For static subjects, you can shoot and look at the histogram, and adjust your settings if necessary. For flight subjects, you only have one chance to get the exposure right.

When photographing birds in-flight while they are banking, flapping or landing, the easiest way is to handle exposure is to use manual metering mode. Once the camera is set to manual metering mode, meter the sky roughly 30 degrees over the horizon and add one stop (meter will indicate 1 stop of over exposure). Providing the bird is under the same light, it will not matter whether the background is sky, clouds or trees - your exposure will be correct. This is the equivalent of using a gray card and the same reading is achievable using green grass. Both will give you an even exposure. The exceptions would be to adjust a bit for a black or white bird – less exposure for black and more for white, or if you are shooting into the light (towards the sun) in which case you will need to add light unless you want a silhouette.

For photographing birds directly overhead, bear in mind that you are shooting the shaded side of the bird. Your normal exposure would be to add one additional stop of light to your base exposure, for a total of 2 additional stops when metering 30 degrees over the horizon. If shooting under heavily overcast conditions you may add up to three stops of light.

Generally you want to be shooting with the sun behind you. Visualizing a clock, shoot between 11 and 1 o'clock to avoid harsh shadows across the body and wings. Early and late in the day, your chances of even light are better. Cloudy conditions, although they require more exposure compensation, are great because of the decreased contrast and lack of intruding shadows.

When the bird is flapping, it is desirable to keep the images with the full wing beat either up or down versus the dreaded hanging wings or flat profile. Birds coming directly at you are the hardest for autofocus systems to track because they are moving rapidly against the sensor plane - you may need to "pump" the shutter button to re-acquire focus more often.

Good flight photography also depends on the wind. You usually want the wind coming from behind you because birds tend to fly and land against the wind. If wind conditions are not favorable there is very little chance of success.

Once the sun begins to set, you still have opportunities to get flight images. This will require a speedlight and a flash extender, such as the Better Beamer, in order to make your light output effective at that distance. For exposure, start by keeping your shutter speed at twice the synch speed of the camera and lens aperture set wide open. Control your exposure by setting the ISO to attain 1 stop of over exposure. Keep in mind that you will have at least one stop difference if shooting east or west. Once the ISO reaches 800, start lowering shutter speed as needed, finishing your session shooting blurs until the lens will no longer focus. This should happen about half an hour after sundown.

Tips to remember:

- Acquire the bird while small in the frame
- If you use a zoom lens, acquire the bird using a wide setting and zoom-in after
- Keep your idle hand under the lens barrel
- Shoot during the golden hours of light – just after dawn and just before dusk
- Overcast conditions? Add more light to your exposure and shoot all day
- Pump the shutter button to reacquire while tracking
- Keep your panning motion as smooth as you can
- And most important, have fun!

Comments on NPN bird photography articles? Send them to the editor.

Alfred Forns has been photographing since an early age, starting out with a Leica lll. His experience includes large format and he kept his own dark room until converting to digital capture. His underwater photos have been published in books and magazines, and nine of his photos were selected for NANPA's Expression '07. For the past 10 years his favorites subjects have been birds and is currently a co-leader for Athur Morris in his Instructional Photo Tours.

Fabio del Alcazar is Alfred's shooting partner and compliments the team with her artistic touch. Fabiola holds a degree in Human Resources from St. Thomas University in Miami and teaches photography courses at Miami-Dade College. Four of her photos are featured in NANPA's '07 Showcase.

You can view more of Alfred's and Fabiola's work on their website ar www.Avianscapes.com.