

Photo Talk - Taking Bird In Flight Images



BY SCOTT DENNY—WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER

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Birds In Flight Images - A test of skill and patience



"The Approach" -© 2015

American Bald Eagle in Central Wisconsin.

Eagle photography in 2015 was hardly ideal. The weather was either bitter cold or overcast and gloomy.

This image was taken with all the less than ideal factors in place. The temperatures were well below zero and the lighting was horrible.

Canon 7D Mk II

Canon EF 600mm f/4

ISO 800

f/7.1

I began taking Bird in Flight (BIF) images in 2009. Through the years I have learned a few things about increasing the percentage of keeper images and getting the shots I desire.

By no means have I mastered BIF shooting. And, there is really no "one way" to take BIF images.

My intention with an article like this is to share what I have learned, my approach to BIF shots, and offer it to you in hopes it may assist you as you pursue BIF images.

Camera Settings

Shooting Mode

I typically shoot BIF images with my camera set to one of these two settings; Aperture Priority or Shutter Priority.

Aperture Priority - In this mode you control the f/stop setting and allow the camera to select the shutter speed. I like to shoot with an f/stop of f/8 or smaller. I watch my shutter speeds to ensure they do not fall below 1/500th.

Shutter Priority - In this mode you control the shutter speed and allow the camera to select the f/stop. The same rules apply. I like my shutters higher than 1/500th and watch to see my f/stop does not fall below f/8.

Suggested Key Settings:

- SHUTTER PRIORITY
- CENTER WEIGHTED METERING
- ISO 640
- F/8
- 1/1000TH OR HIGHER
- CENTER FOCUS POINT
- CONTINUOUS FOCUS

Metering Mode

I shoot Canon so the metering modes I prefer are Center Weighted Average (CWA) and Spot. In most cases I am shooting in CWA. Seeing as I most often am using the center focus point, CWA does an excellent job in factoring the metering of the center area of the view finder while also factoring in the rest of the view finder. I may lean to Spot Metering when photographing eagles or other birds with a fair amount of white on their body.

Exposure Compensation

Exposure Compensation is a very important adjustment to understand. The easiest way I can explain it is like this:

Compensate Up, or (+) Your metering system wants to expose image at 18% gray. When a bird is in the sky a large percent of the frame is bright, therefore your metering system will adjust darker, meaning your images will be dark. Compensate (+) to expose properly.

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Exposure Compensation (continued)

Compensate Down, or (-) When a bird makes its way to a tree line a large percent of the frame is dark, therefore your metering system will adjust brighter, meaning your images will be bright. Compensate (-) to expose properly.

Focusing Mode

Again the fact I shoot Canon the terminology may be different with Nikon or other camera bodies. With that said, the mode I use for BIF is AI Servo, meaning continuous focus.

Many of the newer camera bodies allow you to choose a variety of focus point patterns. I most often choose a pattern that is fairly condensed and keep the point or cluster of points in the center of the viewfinder.

Another focusing tool in many camera bodies is “back button focusing”. While in AI Servo and using back button focusing, the camera and lens work continuously to keep your subject in focus. When you are ready to shoot simply depress the shutter button.

One big advantage with back button focusing is that your camera continues to focus & meter and adjusts while you move with the subject. By pressing and repressing the shutter button the camera starts its focusing and meter over which can lead to lost opportunities.

Exposure Settings

This is where we talk about the Big Three:

ISO— You want your ISO setting at a level that will allow you to get high shutter speeds and fairly small aperture settings. I currently shoot with a Canon 7D Mk II. Since the camera does a nice job handling higher ISO settings I most often start at my standard setting of ISO 640. High ISO’s can be your friend if your camera handles them well and you expose your images properly.

Shutter Speeds— Depending on the bird I don’t like to have shutters below 1/500th. I prefer 1/1000th to 1/2000th whenever possible.

Aperture - I like to shoot between f/8 and f/11 whenever possible. With big glass (400mm & up) you do need to be aware, the larger the glass the more shallow the depth of field (DOF). Meaning, the DOF at f/4 on a 50mm lens is actually deeper than the DOF at f/4 on a 600mm lens.

(Google some DOF Apps for your phone. They are great tools to have in the field)



“The Score” - © 2014

Bald Eagle in Central Wisconsin.

“THE MORE YOU LEARN THE PATTERNS AND BEHAVIOURS OF YOUR SUBJECT, THE MORE YOU INCREASE YOUR CHANCES OF A BIF IMAGE”



“The Eyes Have It” - © 2014

Great Gray Owl in Northern Minnesota

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Gearing Up

Gear is also a very important part of achieving the kind of BIF images you desire. Gear can become a bit expensive. Although expensive gear is not necessary, there is a point where you get what you pay for, or you will have to invest to achieve the results you desire.

Camera Body

Full frame or cropped sensor? To me it really does not make a difference. I like to use crop sensor bodies because they increase your focal length power. This meaning, a 400mm lens on a full frame body is 400mm. A 400mm lens on a Canon crop sensor body is equivalent to 640mm.

I also like to have camera bodies with high frame per second burst rates. Having a camera with high burst rates can increase your chances of getting some nice shots in a variety of poses.

Lenses

Having a lens with a large maximum aperture like f/5.6, f/4, or f/2.8 will prove helpful in lower light situations. Focal length is another factor. Having a lens with a focal length of 300mm can get the job done. In general 400mm and higher will mean the subject is framed nicely, more often.

Tripod

With today's lenses having some form of image stabilization many people resort to hand holding. I am old school. I use a tripod 95% of the time regardless if I am using a 600mm or 400mm lens. An added bonus is being able to not hang on to your camera. Getting BIF images can take hours!

Make sure you get a sturdy set of legs. In the field I see far too many people that have purchased insufficient tripod legs and defeat the purpose of have solid tripod stabilization.

Tripod Head

Ball head or gimbal head? Much depends on your personal preference and budget. Anything you purchase can get a bit pricey. In general a gimbal head is going to be much more of an investment but in my opinion worth it.

The goal is having a head that is fluid in both vertical and horizontal motion. A ball head will do the trick but it can get a little sloppy to hold steady. A gimbal is specifically designed to offer very fluid vertical and horizontal motion, lens & camera balance, and the ability to let go of your camera and lens and not have to "lock down" the mechanism.



Wimberley WH-200

Gimbal Head

"PRACTICE,
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IMAGES ARE A
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Know Your Subject

Knowing or learning a bit about your subject can really help with anticipating when you might have an opportunity for a BIF photo.

In general bird will take off into the wind. This is critical to know as you position yourself. It is nowhere ideal to have the wind blowing in your face. This means the birds will likely take off and not be facing you. The result is a lot of "butt" shots.

Most of the duck species will position themselves to be facing the wind and also raise their head before taking off. This is very similar with geese and other waterfowl. Also pay attention to their calls. Several species have specific calls before they take off.

Many of the large carnivorous birds; eagles, herons, osprey, owls, etc., will "lighten their load" prior to taking off. I know it can be a little disgusting but hey, do you want to know how to get the BIF shot or not. :-)



"Sticky Green Stuff" - © 2015

Black Crowned Night Heron in
Northeast Wisconsin



Fotos For Phun

"I don't know everything about photography but everything I do know I will share."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT DENNY

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Brief Bio

Scott is an enrolled member of the Oneida Tribe of Indians of Wisconsin. He was born and raised in Green Bay, Wisconsin. Scott is a self taught photographer and has been taking photos for slightly over thirty years.

His passion is wildlife, outdoor, and landscape photography. Scott has been published in multiple magazines, various publishing's, and has images utilized by a number of web pages.

Scott regularly travels the Upper Midwest having photographed wildlife and nature in Wisconsin, Upper Michigan, Minnesota, Illinois, and Indiana. He has also spent time photographing in South Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, West Virginia, and Kenya, Africa.

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Scott's Gear of Choice

Camera Bodies

- Canon 7D Mark II with Canon BG-E16 Battery Grip
- Canon 7D Mark II with Canon BG-E16 Battery Grip (second body)

Lenses

- Canon EF 600mm f/4 L IS USM
- Canon EF 400mm f/5.6L USM
- Canon EF 70-200mm f/4L USM
- Tamron SP 28-75mm f/2.8 XR Di LD-IF
- Sigma 10-20mm f/4-5.6 EX DC HSM
- Canon EF 1.4x Extender

Tripods & Heads

- Induro GIT404XL Tripod Legs
- Wimberley WH-200 Gimbal Head
- Vanguard Abebo Plus 363AT Tripod Legs
- Induro BHL3 Ball Head
- Induro GHBA Gimbal Head



"ARMED & READY"