

Tips and Techniques for Photographing Birds in Flight and Other Fast Moving Animals

If you want to photograph birds in flight (BIFs), consider investing in a lens that will give you a 35 mm equivalent of at least 500 mm, and longer is even better. Certainly, the super-telephotos (500mm and 600mm) lenses are very helpful, but they don't fit into everyone's budget. Teleconverters can increase your focal length and generally still give sharp images. Fast moving animals (FMAs) are generally larger than birds, so the super-telephotos are less important. Don't be too discouraged by the number of unsharp images you're getting at first. With practice, the percentage of sharp images will increase.

Going to remote-controlled airplane fields or ski-jump events can provide good practice for shooting BIFs. School soccer games can be good practice for shooting FMAs.

Most photographers of birds in flight use a Wimberly Head, Sidemount, or Sidekick. Other manufacturers now offer similar gimbal heads. The Sidekick mounts on a ball head, and your ball head has to meet certain requirements, so check before you buy. Also, some say the Sidekick doesn't move as smoothly as the full Wimberly head. A ball head can suffice, since Wimberly heads are expensive.

There may be times when you can get better photographs shooting hand-held than using a tripod. If you can't approach your subject with a tripod or if shooting quickly is important, consider shooting hand-held, but remember that you'll need good light to maintain a fast shutter speed. It's difficult to hand-hold a large lens, but with most lenses of 400mm or shorter, it can be done fairly easily. There are photographers who hand-hold 500mm and even 600mm lenses, but usually shoot from a stationary position and set the camera and lens down any time they're not using it.

Try to avoid white skies in your photographs of BIFs; sunny days with blue skies are all right for birds. A mix of blue sky and white clouds can also be a nice background. Lightly overcast days are better for FMAs, because most of your photographs won't include sky anyway and the overcast light is more even than full sun.

If it is sunny, try to have light at your back so your subject is lit from the front. Backlighting is next best after frontlighting, as the subject is uniformly shaded. Sidelighting gives half brightly lit and half shaded subjects, resulting in undesirable harsh shadows on your subject.

Flash will reflect off the retina of some mammals and turn the eyes yellowish or green. Fill-flash is great for perching birds; it will give a catchlight to the eye and brighten their colors. For birds in flight, however, I think fill flash is of limited use, but if you're set up for fill flash for perching birds, it won't hurt a shot of a BIF, since your shutter speed will be much higher than the camera's flash sync speed (usually $\frac{1}{250}$ second).

If you lose the focus on your subject and your camera keeps focusing in and out searching for it, take your finger off the shutter-release button and refocus. You might have to focus on something about the same distance away just to be able to see the bird in order to refocus.

If you pan with a moving subject to help keep it sharp, the background may be blurred, which can enhance the impact of the subject's motion.

Birds take off and land into the wind. Try to position yourself so they will be facing you when they land and take off.

If a hawk is approaching from a distance, don't move, especially in an isolated area with little else around, or it will likely alter its course to avoid you.

Birds of prey will often defecate just before taking flight, so watch and be ready for their takeoff.

Find a place that birds or other animals move through, and try to position yourself along their path.

Birds have a nictitating membrane, which they use to “blink” without closing their eyes. A dull, cloudy-looking eye may be present in some shots. It doesn't mean you did something wrong.