

Shooting Birds (with a camera) by James Walden

1. You can shoot birds with most cameras, but the best results are obtained from DSLR's capable of shooting several frames per second, with a buffer big enough to store large numbers of images as you are shooting, and a fast processor that will transfer the images to a storage card before the buffer is filled up. A good bird camera will also have continuous auto focus that will keep a flying bird in focus as long as you are half-pressing the shutter release button or shooting images, and a sensor that produces low digital noise at higher ISO's so you can use fast shutter speeds to freeze action.



2. For birds, a long lens is usually essential for getting close enough to fill most of the frame. Serious bird photographers generally use 600 mm telephoto lenses, which are very expensive. Teleconverters can be added to increase the focal lengths of many lenses, but quality & sharpness will be sacrificed. A tripod & gimbal head are also needed to support these long, heavy lenses, while allowing easy pan & tilt to follow a bird in flight.



3. Another important reason to shoot with a long lens is their shallow Depth of Field, which combined with a wide open aperture and a fast shutter speed, will help put those busy backgrounds of branches & leaves out of focus while keeping active birds as sharp as possible. A bird's eyes are the most important part of the image to be sharp. Out of focus highlights in background = Bokeh. Best bokeh has soft round edges from wide open aperture or high quality lenses with curved aperture blades. The best backgrounds for birds are simple & out-of-focus to help make the bird stand out.

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4. You can still get good quality bird images with a 300 mm lens or shorter if you set up a blind made of camouflage fabric near a bird's favorite perch, or lure them to your position using food or recorded bird songs. I have shot a lot of birds from my SUV while resting my camera on a beanbag support over the driver's side window glass, but the best blinds for birds that are shy of anything human are those that blend into the surroundings. On the other hand, I've photographed flying gulls using a 28-105 mm lens, while sitting in plain sight in a lawn chair in the middle of a parking lot by

Lake Hefner and luring the birds close to me by throwing them handfuls of dry cat food. You can also build portable feeding stations with perches attached to shoot birds on location, or set up food, water & perches in your own backyard, then shoot through a clean window.

5. The traditional preferred style of lighting birds is flat frontal light on the bird when the early morning sun is low in the sky & behind the camera. Of course this is not always possible because most birds don't like to cooperate with photographers. Fill light is a common technique used for many uneven & back-lighted subjects to achieve a more balanced exposure. Using fill flash with a Better Beamer Flash Extender helps with birds, but be careful not to add too much light or the scene will look unnatural. Fill flash set about -1 f stop below background exposure works well for me, but sometimes I like to photograph silhouetted birds as well.
6. I only shoot in RAW format because JPEG's are compressed, and quality is lost every time brightness, contrast, or any other adjustments are made to the image in post production. I process



RAW images in Photoshop Bridge like developing film and then save them as a Tiff or PSD for print use, or convert to JPG for web use & sending images via email, but I always keep the original RAW image files in case I want to process them differently at a later time.

7. Equally important as learning all the technical aspects of photography, is observing and getting to know the birds. I have studied field guides and how to books, attended Audubon Society meetings, posted images on bird photography web sites for critique, and gone on field trips with more experienced bird photographers. Learning bird songs helps me to find and identify birds, while learning their habits gives me a better idea of what to expect. Observing their behavior has also led me to discover what I consider the most fascinating aspect of all, which is that wild birds lead lives that are much more complex and interesting than I had ever imagined. All this information helps me to pre-visualize and plan my images, so I know where to shoot my choice of bird species during the best time of day, using the best camera angle, background, lighting, perches, action, etc.



8. My advice to all aspiring photographers, whether you are shooting birds or not, is to practice with your equipment until using it becomes second nature, familiarize yourself with the subject & location, then plan your shots but be prepared to shoot the unexpected whenever it happens.

9. Good bird photography resources:
www.naturescapes.net -
www.photomigrations.com -
www.naturephotographers.net -
www.okc-audubon.org - Best book: "The Art of Bird Photography" by Arthur Morris.
Best software: www.ThayerBirding.com

10. I hope my presentation has inspired everyone to learn about & photograph our feathered friends with whatever camera equipment you may have, even if you can travel no further than a neighborhood park or your own back yard. It is a real challenge to photograph most wild birds, but that difficulty just makes it so much more satisfying when you capture a good image that makes people say "Wow!".