Flights of Fancy

Class notes

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**What attracts us to birds, especially birds in flight?**

Almost everyone is captivated by bright, colorful birds. But what makes them stand out in the natural world is their ability to fly! That unique trait is what I am trying to capture with my cameras.

**What equipment do I need?**

The key thing when picking equipment for flight photography is that you have to be able to move the gear quickly enough to follow a bird in flight. What equipment you choose depends on your size and strength. I know people that successfully handhold 600mm lenses and cameras that weigh 12 pounds or more! I am no longer able to do that and have adjusted my gear to adapt. The last couple of years have brought us many options in lighter weight cameras and lenses and increasing lower prices too. A good starting set up would be a mid-priced crop-sensor camera with a fast frame rate. Two cameras I would recommend for flight photography:

Canon 7D mkII

Nikon 7200

I have photographed flying birds with everything from a 16 mm lens (large flocks taking off) to 1200 mm ( single birds at great distances). If you are able to be close enough to your subjects using a relatively light weight long zoom lens is the easiest to carry and control.

I prefer to use zoom lenses so I can adjust the framing to the size of the bird quickly.

Here are some lenses I have used or have been recommended to me by other successful flight photographers:

Nikon 200-500

Nikon 80-400 Series II

Canon 100-400 Series II (if you are feeling flush)

Canon 100-400 series I (if you are on a budget, a little less sharp than the new one)

Sigma 50-500 or the Sigma 150-500. These have more range but are a little heavier than the other lenses.

Sigma has two new 150-600 zoom lenses out currently. Early reports are encouraging, the lenses differ in largely weight and weather sealing.

Tamron 150-600, another newer lens, roughly the size and weight of the Sigmas.

Many bird photographers use single focal length prime lenses for flight. Lenses from 300 t0 600 mm or longer can offer the ultimate in sharpness and with larger apertures to allow in more light and thus faster shutter speeds. These lenses are often used on tripods with special heads to allow rapid balanced movement. They are wonderful pieces of gear and the size, weight and price reflect it.

I would strongly suggest you visit with vendors (like Hunts Photo here at the show) to handle these lenses before purchasing. I often rent lenses from Lensrentals.com before I buy.

**How do I photograph flying birds?**

Any time you decide to make a photograph you have to make a set of decisions determining how your final photo will look. Flight photography is no different.

First, will you be handholding your gear or using a tripod? Handholding makes it easier to follow moving subjects if you can support the weight of your equipment for a couple of hours. I prefer to handhold but use a tripod with heavier lenses.

You will want to set your camera to its fastest frame rate.

I set my Auto focus to use the center focus point and surrounding points

I will set the aperture to F5.6 or F 8 depending on the amount of light and the size of the bird.

I pick my ISO based on the brightness of the light and how fast of a shutter speed I want. It is easier to deal with noise in a photo than to get rid of blur.

If you wish to stop the motion and show the fine feather detail of a bird you will want to use a very fast shutter speed. I would normally set my camera at 1/!000 0f a second at a minimum. Often with smaller or faster birds I will to 1/2500 or more. To achieve these fast shutter speeds and to have a reasonable depth of field you will need to use higher than normal ISO settings on your camera. Luckily for us each new generation of digital cameras gives us better results at higher ISO’s. Depending on the amount of light I start at 400 in very bright conditions and upward as needed to maintain shutter speed. With my current cameras I often use ISO’s of 1600 and 3200.

If you wish to a sense of motion in your photographs of flight you need to use much slower shutter speeds. Try starting at 1/100 of a second go slower from there based on the speed of your subject and the look you wish to convey in your photo. I find that a 1/50 or 1/60 shutter works well for me. When using a slow shutter speed to produce pans on bright days you need to use a low ISO (100) and stop down your lens to F 16 or F 22 as necessary. An alternative way to achieve slower shutter speeds is to use a polarizing filter or a neutral density filter on your lens to block out some of the light. Learning to pan with your subject, while using slower speeds to show motion and retaining some sharpness requires more practice than trying to freeze the birds in flight. You will need to allow yourself time to adjust to the speed and flight pattern of the bird. My personal goal is to have some portion of the bird sharp (usually the head) when doing blurs, but that is an individual choice.

I set the camera to manual metering for flight photography. In any of the auto metering modes as you follow the bird and the background changes your exposure will change. I want the correct exposure for the bird.

With any type of flight the earlier you can find focus and start to track your subject the more successful you will be. You need to follow through smoothly and not pause when pressing the shutter.

Practice is the only way to improve! For every good flight photo you see there are hundreds or thousands of deleted photos.

**Where are good locations to find birds in flight?**

The key to improving your flight photography skills is **Practice, Practice and Practice**! Here are some great locations to do that:

Lake Michigan shoreline areas that have a groups of gulls on it.

Horicon Marsh NWR in Wisconsin for geese and ducks.

Lock and Dam 14 on the Mississippi River near the Quad cities. Good for eagles in winter on the Iowa side and for pelicans in the spring on the Illinois side.

Jasper-Pulaski wildlife refuge in Indiana for Sandhill cranes in the fall.

Kellogg Bird Sanctuary near Battle Creek Michigan for swans and ducks year round.

Rookeries in Florida, especially the Venice rookery. I also highly recommend visiting Gatorland in Orlando (best in March or April) and the Alligator Farm in St. Augustine in April and May.

Bosque del Apache NWR in New Mexico for Sandhill Cranes and Snow geese. Best from mid-November to mid-Feburay.

*Good luck and Good light*