

Bird Photography – *The Basics (Part II)*

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Introduction

This is the second part of Bird Photography – The Basics and will concentrate on *shooting technique* as well as advances in equipment technologies. Choices of tripods and Long Lens Techniques have already been covered in my last article in HKBWS Bulletin #199.

Auto-focus Advantage

The basic criterion of a good bird image is its sharpness. In fact this applies to any photo takings. In the days of manual focusing equipment, getting a sharp image on action shots such as bird in flight would be an accomplishment in itself. With the advent of auto focusing technology, attaining accurate focus is now routine if not totally fool-proofed.

Current SLR bodies from the major manufactures offer a choice of two focusing modes for shooting static and moving subjects. For example, Canon EOS auto focusing system has what are known as One-Shot (Nikon's Single Servo) AF and AI Servo (Nikon's Continuous Servo) AF modes. Users just select the AF mode to suit the subject and situation.

One-Shot AF

This is designed with shooting still subjects in mind. Pressing the shutter button halfway activates AF operation and achieves focus once. One can then recompose the shot and release the shutter by fully depresses the shutter button to take the shot.

Most cameras now offer multiple focusing points that are user selectable. This avoids centering a stationary bird. Auto focus the bird's eye is the recommended way in One-Shot mode. For hard to focus situation one would resolve into using manual focusing.

AI Servo AF

With moving subject a different approach is required to achieve focus. Predictive focus mechanism is built into this focus mode. The camera can focus track a subject that steadily approaches or retreats from where the shooting occurs. It predicts the focusing distance and sets the exposure immediately before the picture is taken. A number of focusing points, 45 focusing points as in the case of EOS-1D Mk II, covering a large area of the viewfinder is available to ensure a high successful rate. As long as the subject is within the focusing points area, the camera will focus and track the subject automatically.

For the AI Servo to work, you must keep the active AF sensor on the moving bird as you continue to depress the shutter button half way. When photographing a flying bird against a clean background such as the sky or smooth water surface the multi focus points AF system would work well and focus on the subject is maintained. It's good practice to first acquire focus using the central sensor. The system will hold focus thereafter using the other sensors as long as the subject is within the focus area. If the background is featured or has lots of contrast, maintaining auto focus on the subject would be a difficult proposition at best. This is the time when you want to switch to a single focus point.

Shooting Birds In Flight

Taking flight shots remains a tremendous photographic challenge even with the advent of AF technology. The skill of the photographer remains paramount. The ability to track rapidly moving subjects with precision requires lots of practice especially when using a super telephoto lens such as the 600/4 which has an view angle of just a over 4 degree and less so with digital DX format. Panning with the bird in flight is an essential skill one needs to quickly acquire. This can be achieved by practicing on large and slow-flying birds such as the Great Egret initially. Small birds such as Plovers and Sandpipers and birds that are fast and erratic flyers such as ducks and kingfishers require the most skill to capture them in flight. It's become a rule of thumb to use the fastest shutter speed permissible to stop the motion in flight photography. With precise panning I've found that a shutter speed of 1/1000s is sufficient to freeze a large bird in flight and a 1/1600s is the minimum for small bird such as Kingfishers.

Image Design

When I talk about image design I'm actually referring to the artistic and aesthetic expression in a photograph and how you'd place your subject in the frame to achieve it.

Composition

In the last article I talked about the rule of thirds and keeping the subject off center leaving more space in front of the bird for a pleasing composition. This applies nicely with horizontal composition. The other choice you may want to explore is vertical composition. As a general rule birds standing tall fits better and more pleasing in a vertical frame. I'd recommend having extra space reserved at top in case the image makes it to become a cover shot of a book or magazine.

Background

Choose the background and use large aperture to yield a clean, uncluttered with pleasing backdrop in your image. An aperture of f/5.6 or larger would provide the minimum depth of field and sufficient blurring of background. Also important is to avoid any highlight or bright spots behind the subject. Sometimes a simple change of shooting position, moving left or right, would eliminate any distracting elements in the background too.

Not all elements in the background are bad. Natural objects such as rocks, pebbles, leaves etc. can enhance the image tremendously. These objects could well be part of the bird's natural habitat. Some thought process is needed to better positioning them in the frame.

Perspective

It's best practice to shoot birds at eye level. When photographing shorebirds ground level perspective is important. Getting down as low an angle as possible is the way to go and this is what I term as blending with your subject [Photo #1]. Clawing in the mud is fun and rewarding though not practical when shooting at Mai Po Nature Reserve where there are rules to be observed as well as restrictions unfortunately.

Last but not least, careful framing is vitally important. For example, a bird with its feet cut off in a full-length portraiture would be a mistake hard to forgive. Always allows some room for minor crop if necessary later on.



Photo #1

Getting Close

Since wild birds are difficult to approach in the field, my advice for anyone wanting to shoot birds is to learn and acquire the knowledge of their behavior and their habitat. Armed with this knowledge and with good anticipation of what their next move might be you would be rewarded.

Getting close to your subject to fill-the-frame is a goal in achieving good images and the process always excites me. Birds are creature of habit too. They would return to their same perch or roost site time and time again after they take flight. With careful observation and patience you can learn to get close to them. Make a very slow approach to your subject with low body profile, clawing on your belly is an effective choice of approach, and stops at intervals shooting away quietly would allow the subject to get accustomed to your presence. Remember you do this without imposing unduly stress to your subject when you're approaching them.

While its fun to approach the subject in open field this is not always possible particularly if you're shooting around the nature reserve. Shooting from hides and wait for the birds to approach you would be an alternative instead. Picking the right place and time of the day are of paramount important then.

Decisive Moments

Interesting images of bird would include capturing their behavior. Pre-visualizing and pre-empting the action would lead to a successful shot [Photo #2]. Timing is everything and that's what I called the decisive moment. It is over in split of a second hence requires the utmost concentration of the photographer on the subject and react to it quickly.

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Photo #2

Be ready for the unexpected. This is achieved by maintaining focus on the subject all the time. Having auto focus is a huge advantage here and so is the speedy

frame-per-second capability of your camera. It pays to make lots of shots when capturing action!

Conclusion

I've so far covered some of the basics on Bird Photography. As you progress you will learn and refine your shooting techniques. There are number of key locations for shooting varies species of birds here in Hong Kong. My favorites includes, top on my list, Mai Po Nature Reserve and Nam Sang Wai which are renowned for its shore and wetland birds while Tai Po Au is for woodland birds.

My final reminder is this. Always ensure you're totally familiar with your equipment and be ready to take the shot of a lifetime when opportunity presents. Remember the best time to photograph birds is when the sun and wind are right behind you.

Best and Good Shooting to all!

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