

Birds in Winter

It's easier to get out there with your digital camera and photograph wild birds than it is to photograph wild mammals. As well as the resident birds there are a few that have come from the north for a couple of months, though Spring and Autumn are better for migratory birds. You should still see lots of wetland birds unless it's a really cold spell. Use these top 10 tips for the camera gear and techniques you need for 'quacking' (sorry...) bird photos.

For 'serious' bird photography, you need all the reach you can get. A lightweight 300mm lens fitted to a digital SLR which has a sensor that's smaller than full frame (that's most cameras, then...) will give you an equivalent focal length of 450-480mm. This is a great starting point.

Telephoto lens buying advice for bird photography: when choosing a telephoto lens - or any lens, for that matter - one of the prime considerations is the lens 'speed'. We're not talking focus speed here, but how much light they're capable of capturing in relation to their focal length.

'Fast' telephoto lenses are lenses that have wide maximum apertures - around $f/2.8$ for 300mm and 400mm lenses and $f/4.5$ for 500mm lenses. They can capture more available light, so they offer a brighter viewfinder image and enable you to use faster shutter speeds in low light without having to increase the ISO setting on the camera. They also offer faster focusing, enable you to use a very shallow depth of field (think beautifully blurred backgrounds) and generally have better optics (so sharper pictures). The problems with fast telephoto lenses are that they're ludicrously expensive and relatively heavy.

'Slow' telephoto lenses have comparatively smaller maximum apertures - around $f/5.6$ for 300mm and 400mm lenses and $f/6.3$ for 500mm lenses. They don't allow as much light to pass to the camera sensor as fast lenses do, so to be able to achieve action-stopping shutter speeds you may have to increase the ISO. Thankfully, higher ISO settings in the latest digital SLRs give far superior results compared to high ISO film. Slower telephoto lenses are lighter than fast ones though, which can make them easier to hand-hold for flight shots.

Zoom lenses obviously give you more framing options when shooting opportunities present themselves. Very often, these opportunities happen in concentrated bursts, and being able to react quickly is essential. Something in the 100-400mm range is perfect (which is why Canon makes a 100-400mm and Nikon an 80-400mm). Zoom lenses are superb for flight shots as well, as you'll be able to move from tight, single-bird shots to group shots and back again. The drawback with most zoom lenses - except the very expensive ones - is that they tend to be only $f/5.6$ at the 'long' end. That's quite slow and you'll need to be shooting at higher ISOs to give you a better shutter speed. You'll also have a deeper Depth of Field - more will be in focus, front to back, and it's difficult to make a distracting background blur enough.... though that can be rectified, to an extent, in post-processing.



2. Use a sturdy tripod

It's become a cliché to say it, but a sturdy tripod will improve the quality of your photographs. Not only can it lead to sharper shots, but it will slow you down and encourage you to give the framing of a scene more consideration. You don't have to buy an expensive carbon fibre model - an aluminium one with foam padding around the legs to protect your fingers in cold weather is affordable and effective - and don't forget you'll have to do some carrying. A carbon fibre model will be considerably lighter though, and arguably provides more of a 'damping' effect for vibrations.

Tripod buying advice for bird photography: When choosing a tripod, look for one that extends to head height without you having to raise the centre column. If you don't and have to wind up the centre column every time you want to shoot from a comfortable height, you're effectively turning your tripod into a mono-pod. This just isn't as stable. Try one with as few leg sections as possible - 3, rather than 4 - as this will also improve stability when the legs are fully extended.

To get eye-level shots of swans, ducks and geese, you're likely to want to get down close to the water. Choose a tripod that allows you to quickly spread the legs flat and adjust or remove the centre column to allow you to do this. Alternatively, keep it simple and choose a tripod without a centre column at all.

Use a ball-head rather than a three-way head to support your camera on the tripod legs. Ball-heads offer flexibility when it comes to tracking birds in flight, particularly if they've got a panning base. More expensive ball-heads will enable you to adjust the sensitivity of the ball movement, to compensate when you change from a light lens to a heavy lens. Do check that the ball locks into a rock-solid position when tightened and doesn't allow the

lens to 'creep' away from the focal point.

Finally, consider a quick-release mounting system for the ball-head. Some come with this as standard, while others can be retro-fitted to an existing head. Quick release systems means you don't have to spend time unscrewing a lens from the ball-head, then screwing another back in - and missing the shot in the meantime.



A beanbag provides excellent camera support when you're working in a small public hide, or behind a fallen tree or a rock. Rotate the tripod collar of the lens so that the beanbag can cushion the lens more effectively.

3. Don't forget the extras:

Beanbag

Although we love a solid, sturdy, well-built tripod, sometimes it just gets in the way. A beanbag will cushion the lens and provide more stable support in circumstances where using a tripod is impractical. It'll certainly make life easier when shooting from a purpose-built hide window, where setting up a tripod next to the opening can be difficult. It can also be used to rest over a tripod-mounted lens to dampen vibrations. If you can find one, a beanbag with a strap will be less of a burden when you're trying to juggle lenses, tripods, bags and other kit.

Gel hand warmers

Photographing wintering wildfowl generally entails a lot of hanging around in exposed, wind-swept locations. Staying warm soon becomes a top priority! Hand-warmers can help thaw frozen fingers. Gloves can be a nuisance at times... either they're warm and thick, and therefore difficult to use your camera controls, or they're too thin and your fingers freeze. I was given a pair of lightweight leather workgloves at Christmas and I was surprised

at how they did a reasonable job of keeping my hands warm and yet I could get to the camera controls with them.

Scope

More of an additional lens than an accessory, a scope can get you shots that you wouldn't otherwise be able to without investing in considerably more expensive lenses. You'll still have to part with a large amount of cash for a decent scope though, and the converters cost as much as a decent zoom lens too! So I won't go into them any further.

Camera protection from low-flying birds...

Photographing birds in flight, particularly with the numbers and proximity of Canada Geese in some areas, means being prepared for bird splatter! Make sure your camera bag is zipped up and that you've got an old T-shirt or cloth handy to de-gunk your kit (the droppings can be quite acidic). Use a lens hood to protect the front element and consider fitting a skylight or UV filter if you're taking shots of birds flying directly overhead...

4. Know your subject

You don't have to read countless natural history reference books to take better pictures, but just spend a little time watching how the birds move in front of you. Also, keep an eye on which direction the wind is coming from. This makes a difference for flight photography, as you'll be able to position yourself in the right spot for capturing birds taking off or landing. Like other birds, swans, geese and ducks usually 'empty' themselves before they take flight - get ready for action when the guano hits the floor...



Shoot in RAW so that you can preserve quality during processing and rectify errors in exposure and white balance. Stick to the highest continuous shooting rate so that you can follow any action as it happens.

5. Know your camera

In order to improve your bird action shots there's no substitute for knowing your camera. You need to know how to switch to high-speed shooting, quickly adjust your auto-focus settings so you can track a flying bird's motion, and highlight the right auto-focus sensor (or sensors). Make all the auto-focus points active if you're photographing a bird or flock against a clean background (such as the sky). Be more selective if the background is detailed, otherwise the lens will 'hunt' for a focal point and may end up locking onto the background instead. Here are the typical camera settings you should consider:

Camera settings for bird portraits/'birdscapes'

- **Auto-focus:** Single shot AF
- **Focus points:** use a single AF point for accuracy. Try using the centre focus point, locking focus on a bird's eye and then re-framing for the best composition
- **Exposure mode:** Av or Manual - use wide apertures to blur distracting backgrounds
- **ISO:** depends on the light levels. Keep it low for quality - 100 or 200, ideally

Camera settings for birds in flight

- **Auto-focus:** Continuous AF
- **Focus points:** make all points active if the background is 'clean', otherwise use a single point and position that over the bird's head/neck. This will take some practice!
- **Exposure mode:** Aperture Priority - you're likely to be working with the aperture wide open when trying to achieve action-stopping shutter speeds
- **ISO:** depends on the light levels. Be prepared to increase it to enable faster shutter speeds for fast-moving birds
- **Image stabilization/VR:** make sure this is set to 'panning' setting, if your camera has it, so that the system only compensates for movement in one direction. Otherwise, switch it off when using a tripod.



Keep an eye out for waders when you're out photographing swans, geese and ducks. Large flocks of these birds taking to the air make excellent subjects for creative slow shutter speed shots and will test your panning skills.

6. Learn how to pan

To get sharp shots of birds in flight, you'll need to nail the art of panning. The best way:

- Stand facing the direction in which you want to take the shot (find the best background)
- Hold the camera at eye level with your elbows tucked in and one hand under the lens to support it
- Without moving your feet, twist your torso around to the left or right to begin tracking the bird
- Follow the bird through the viewfinder, twisting your torso to keep the bird in the same position in the frame. Just before the bird's directly opposite you at the point your feet are facing, start firing
- Keep panning with the bird as it moves past that point - but stop shooting (you'll just waste frames on shots of birds' behinds...)

You'll need to do this panning motion smoothly without jerking the camera up or down. To help reduce any vertical movement, use the image stabilization setting on your lens that only corrects for movement in one plane (this is the IS 2 setting on Canon IS lenses, for instance). Instead of using the fastest shutter speed possible, consider slowing it down in order to blur the background, while keeping the bird sharp. Go for very slow shutter speeds to create abstract blurs of bird and background.

7. Don't spend all your time worrying about the exposure

When confronted by a white swan sailing across a dark lake or sky, it can be tempting to spend a lot of the time 'chimping' and fretting over highlights on the camera's histogram. (I think that if we spent half this time concentrating on the composition of a picture instead, this would make the biggest difference to our pictures!) Shoot in [RAW](#) to give you a little room for adjusting exposure errors in software - but attempt to get the exposure right in-camera. As a rule of thumb, big white birds may need some positive exposure compensation to ensure they're rendered as white, rather than grey. However, be aware of adding too much, and causing the highlights to 'blow'. Multi-pattern metering systems (evaluative in Canon, matrix in Nikon...) measure all areas of the frame, so the size of the subject and the tone of the background can have a dramatic influence on the initial exposure. A large-ish white bird framed against a dark background may need no exposure adjustment at all, as the tones balance each other out.

8. Be prepared to get dirty

Wear old jeans or waterproof trousers when heading out to photograph wildfowl - if you want the most dramatic pictures, you're going to have to get down and dirty. Get the camera low and at eye-level with the birds and you'll invariably get more dramatic pictures. By using a long telephoto lens at a wide aperture, you'll be able to increase the presence of the bird in the frame by heavily blurring the background and foreground details. Alternatively, use a wide-angle lens to place the bird in context with its surroundings (although you'll need to be close to the bird to make it large enough in the frame).



Interesting light, whether it's vibrant and golden or gently diffused by fog, will add a distinctive quality to your photos. Here, I used a relatively long exposure to emphasise some of the bustling quality of this cool, misty scene.

9. Wait for the right light

In the right light, anything will look good. Even the dabbling ducks at your local pond will look more dramatic if you shoot them during the golden 'happy hours' of dawn or dusk. On cold winter days, don't go home at sunset. The purple and pink colours of the afterglow can transform a scene - this is a superb time to shoot atmospheric, long-exposure birdscape. If you want to shoot close-up detail shots of plumage, head out on bright, overcast days when contrast levels are low. Alternatively, photograph birds in the shade.

On sunny days, look for colourful reflections to add interest to images of dull-coloured birds (the combination of blue skies and the reds and yellows of autumn foliage is particularly effective). Reflections can also be used to make birds appear twice as big in the frame. Head out on calm days for mirror-like reflections, and consider splitting the frame directly across the centre to enhance the effect. Try not to crop off any part of the reflection and be prepared to do some cleaning up in Photoshop - there are likely to be distracting feathers and other items floating on the surface.



As well as enabling you to make a bird appear larger in the frame, a telephoto lens's narrow field of view means it will take in less of the background. Wide-angle lenses take in more of everything, including distractions.

11. Forget the subject - look at the background

Never forget how important composition is. Rarely does a scene present itself where all the elements are falling perfectly into place - the perfect bird in front of the perfect background in the perfect light. (If it does, fill up your memory card!). Great photographs are created, not taken. You're in charge of what ends up in your photograph and what's excluded from it. It's down to you to pick the best angle for the shot so that the point of the picture is clear. Here are some questions you may want to consider before you press the shutter release:

- **Is the background free of distractions?**

Keep an eye out for out-of-focus white birds in the background or bright patches of sky showing through trees - any elements brighter than the bird you're photographing will take attention away from it.

- **Is there anything 'growing' out of the bird?**

Watch out for branches and reeds that appear to sprout from your subject. Wetland areas tend to be busy places, so be aware of legs and heads of other birds sneaking into the frame, too. Try and shoot birds at the edge of a flock.

- **Is the horizon in the right place?**

Avoid placing the horizon line so that it cuts through the long necks of swans or geese - consider getting lower or higher so that it's not splitting the bird in two! Make sure the horizon is level as well.

- **Is there enough space?**

Consider leaving more room in the frame in front of a bird than behind it for a more natural feel. This is especially true when shooting action - leave more space for the bird to move into, and less behind it. A traditional 'rule' - but it works.

- **Vertical or horizontal?**

A fact of life: not enough pictures are taken with the camera held vertically. Would the scene look better as a tall shot - or would it at least have a different feel? The elegance of long-necked birds can be emphasized in a vertical shot - for tighter head shots, try a horizontal picture.

Enough! Now get quacking!