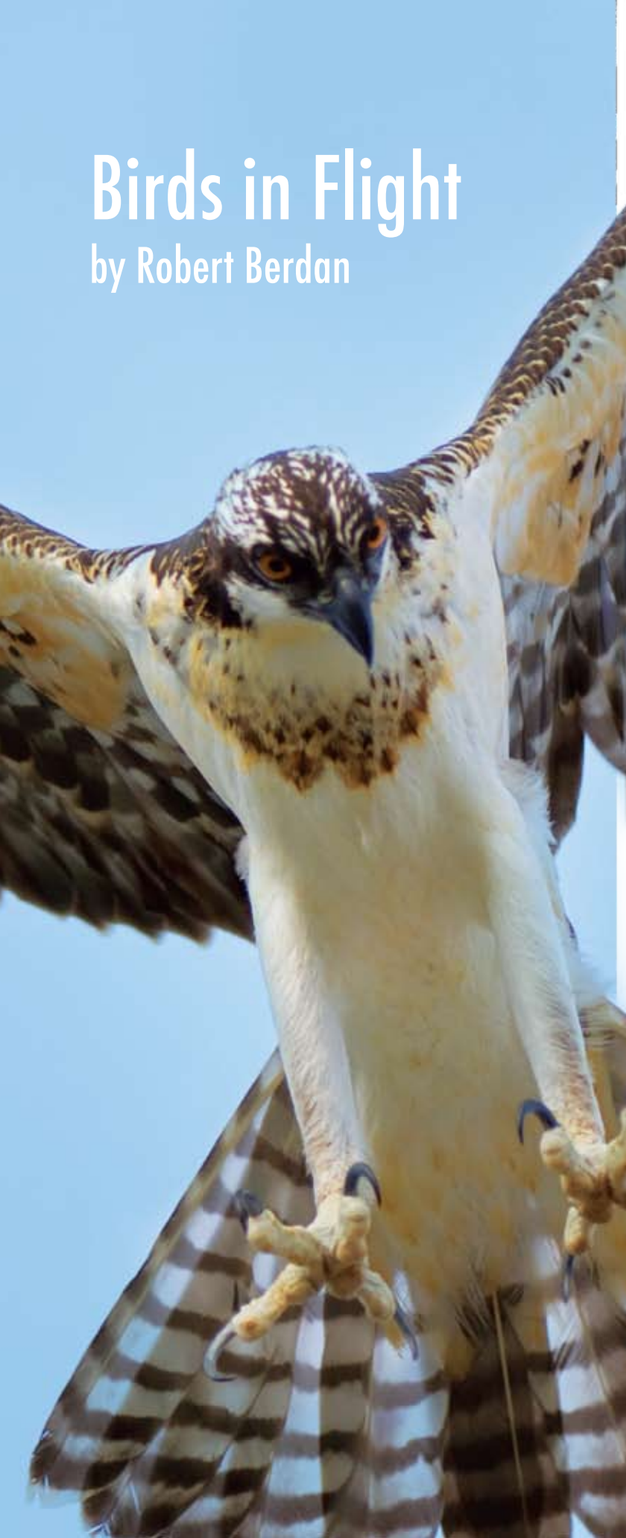
Birds in Flight

by Robert Berdan



Trying to photograph birds in flight can be very challenging, even for a pro, but it's what I love to do. Who ever said that equipment doesn't matter never tried to photograph a bird in flight. not only does equipment matter but so do the camera settings and lens' choice. The best equipment for photographing birds in flight is a digital single lens reflex camera that shoots at a high frame and has a fast autofocus telephoto lens (F2.8 or F4) attached.

Most pro-digital cameras offer a variety of different shooting modes. I set my camera to its fastest shooting mode (CH or continuous high) and use release priority for best results. With my Nikon cameras I set them to 9 point dynamic autofocus and I set focus tracking to short so that when the distance to the subject changes abruptly, the camera waits for a short period of time before adjusting the focus. The faster your camera is able to focus, track and shoot, the better your chances of capturing a great shot. Using high performance lithium batteries is a simple way to increase your digital camera's shooting speed. Another way is to shoot JPEG files which will boost the camera's buffer size so you can shoot a greater number of pictures in a single burst.

I generally shoot RAW files even though I lose a little bit of speed. They provide more flexibility when it comes to adjusting the image exposure and white balance afterwards. My camera meter mode is normally set to Automatic (matrix or evaluative). The intensity of the light will also affect the shooting speed - the brighter it is outside the better, so if you've never photographed birds in flight before, I recommend starting on a bright blue sky sunny day.

The biggest challenge when photographing birds in flight is undoubtably keeping the bird in focus. The wider the aperture of your telephoto lens the faster the lens will focus on a subject. I always use my telephoto lens at its' widest aperture. My favourite "bird" lens is the Nikon 300 mm F2.8 VR lens which focuses quickly even with a 1.5X tele-converter attached. This lens is heavy to hold and some photographers prefer to use a monopod or tripod as a support.

A Wimberley tripod head is designed to swing around quickly with a large lens which some photographers find helpful when photographing fast moving birds. Another favourite lens is the smaller Canon 300 mm F4 which also focuses quickly. On better telephoto lenses there is a distance limiter with two settings: in one setting the lens focuses from it closest point to infinity; in the other setting it has a narrower focus range that goes from about 3 meters to infinity. If your lens offers this feature use the reduced focus range and your lens will focus more quickly on distant subjects.

Never attach a polarizing filter to your telephoto lens if you need speed. A polarizer will reduce the light by about two shutter speeds. Keep in mind that the ability of a lens to focus quickly varies with the camera model it is attached to, generally more expensive Pro camera bodies focus faster. Weather can also affect you camera's autofocus capability, in fog, rain, or snow the lens may not be able to focus at all. The only thing you can do in these conditions is switch your lens to manual focus and try your best.

No camera will do it all for you, skill and practice are still essential. No matter what type of lens or camera you use to get sharp pictures of birds in flight requires a shutter speed of 1\500 of a second or faster. You can achieve faster shutter speeds by increasing the ISO speed on your camera or shooting in bright light. The disadvantage of increasing the camera's ISO speed is that your images will have more grain or noise, but newer digital cameras are capable of creating fine-grained images even at ISO speeds of 1600 or higher.

One of the most difficult tasks will be to keep a flying bird positioned over the autofocus sensors in your camera viewfinder. To improve, practice shooting fast moving subjects and try to anticipate when a bird might begin to fly. It's easier to focus on a stationary bird that takes off then it is to try and lock focus on to a fast flying bird. My camera's autofocus is able to lock on to birds that move horizontally better then when the birds fly toward or away from me. If I know the direction the bird will fly I try to place the bird in the center of my autofocus sensor or on one edge of my view frame opposite to its direction of flight. I can always crop the picture afterwards if I need to make a more compelling composition. If you find your reflexes are not as quick as you remember have a cup of coffee before you go out to shoot, the caffeine will increase the speed of your reflexes by 3-5% – no kidding.

If you are new to photographing birds in flight I suggest starting with big birds, or birds that hover or soar slowly. Hawks, pelicans, swans and Canada geese are ideal. Go to places where birds congregate to improve your chances. Many birds congregate around bodies of water especially during seasonal migrations in Spring and Fall. As you improve at capturing large birds in flight gradually work your way down to smaller birds. Bird feeders are also good spots to photograph birds as they come and go. Humming birds are ideal subjects to capture in this way. If you are able to get close to the birds, you can also try using a flash to help stop wing movement and it will also result in a small highlight in the birds eyes.

Some of my best pictures of birds in flight were taken by observing the birds hunt for food. All that was required was a high speed digital camera, a cup of coffee and 35 years of practice.