



# Photographing Birds

## Focusing on the Feathered

By Lisa LaPointe



Birds are an intriguing photography subject: colorful, varied, and active. Most of us have had the experience of encountering an unusual bird on our travels, and perhaps struggling to capture it well. Maybe autofocus failed to find the bird among leaves, or it's blurry once in flight. Bird photography is challenging, but fortunately, birds can be found nearly everywhere, and they all make great practice subjects! You may not find the most exotic species locally, but even common birds will exhibit interesting behaviors. Once you get the techniques down, you'll be ready for that next rare opportunity!

## Locating Birds

The first step to photographing birds is knowing where to locate them. You might start by consulting with local birding clubs, looking for local birding groups on social media, Googling "best birding" for your area, or consulting a guidebook or eBird. Audubon may also have some online information for your area. These sources will help you determine which species you'll see near your home, and their behavior

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[Important Bird Areas](#)

### San Diego Bay - South

California

A map of the San Diego Bay area in California, showing the coastline and surrounding landmasses. A large red shaded region covers the southern part of the bay and extends inland towards National City and Chula Vista. A smaller red area is located further east near Bonita. On the left side of the map, there are zoom controls (+ and -).

Share this Important Bird Area

#### Birds in This Area

A small image of a Northern Harrier hawk standing on the ground.

Northern Harrier  
*Circus hudsonius*

A small image of a Black Skimmer seabird in flight.

Black Skimmer  
*Rynchops niger*

A small image of a Peregrine Falcon standing on the ground.

Peregrine Falcon

A small image of a Brant duck standing on the ground.

Brant

A small image of a Brown Pelican standing on the ground.

Brown Pelican

A small image of a Royal Tern seabird in flight.

Royal Tern

and habitat preferences. Fortunately, birds are present in nearly every community and in every season—look for parks, open spaces, and around bodies of water to start. You may also consider trying to bring the birds to you. Backyard feeders and water features can be great for bringing in birds. If you have land, you may also try increasing the number of natural features that are appealing to birds, such as seed-bearing plants, long grasses, and standing dead trees. Creating your own bird habitat is pleasing in and of itself, but will also help you to control your photographic backdrops. A Google search for “backyard bird habitat” can help you get started.

## Approaching Birds

Most birds tend to be active in the early morning and towards dusk. These are, therefore, the best times to find birds, and to capture interesting behaviors such as feeding or caring for young. Be patient! You may need to wait a while for the bird to relax and demonstrate behaviors, but eventually, they will likely get used to your presence.



Birds have excellent senses and distinct ‘comfort zones’ so they can be difficult to approach closely. Start with birds who are less shy, or more accustomed to having humans nearby. This is where having your own feeders or natural features set up in your yard can be a real advantage! To avoid attracting more attention to yourself than necessary, wear neutral-colored clothing, avoid sudden movement, stay quiet, and don’t stare directly at the bird. Pay attention to the bird’s responses to your approach—if it looks directly at you, stop and wait. For skittish birds, you may wish to consider using a blind. Check if there are already blinds set up in your community at popular birding spots, buy a simple one online, or use your car.

## Tools for Bird Photography

There are many expensive pieces of equipment available for bird photography, but you don't need all of them to get started. Although any modern digital camera with interchangeable lenses will do, for best results, look for a frame rate of at least 5fps, a high buffering capability, and fast autofocus. Most bird photography will require a long lens (100-400mm zoom or similar, or 400mm or greater primes). There are several affordable options from various manufacturers to go with most camera bodies. This may also be a great time to consider renting that long lens you've always wanted to try—just remember you'll also need a sturdy tripod with ball head and possibly a gimbal, especially for heavier prime lenses. A teleconverter (1.4x for most zoom lenses, or up to 2x for prime lenses) can extend your range even further. And don't forget good quality memory cards—look for a high write speed so you can keep shooting quickly.

As you think about equipment, remember that not every bird image is improved by zooming in tighter. While it's true that you'll likely need a long lens for the smallest or shyest birds, they aren't the only subjects available to the beginner. I photographed this portrait of a brown pelican (right) with a 100mm lens. Birds can also be photographed beautifully in the context of their environment using shorter lenses. And it's ok to have to crop it a little later!

## Techniques and Settings for Bird Photography

First, learn your camera well. With bird photography, action happens quickly, and you don't want to miss out while searching for a button. Second, learn your subject's behavior patterns, so you can better predict when action will happen.



Although the ideal camera settings will vary in different situations, the following are some guidelines for getting started:

### **For birds that are perched or otherwise still:**

- Use a narrow depth of field to make the bird stand out from leaves, or a wider one to show an interesting environment.
- Leaves and grasses can trick your autofocus. Use a single focus point to find the near-eye, or at least the head, of the bird. If you are having trouble just finding the bird through the viewfinder, try pre-focusing on something at a comparable distance away then coming back to the bird.
- Get to the level of your bird if you can—especially those on the ground or in water.

### **For birds in flight or exhibiting quick behaviors:**

- For sharp images, make sure your shutter speed remains high—1/2000 second is a good start. You can't fix unintentional motion blur in post-processing!
- Focusing on birds in flight can be challenging, especially with small birds and/or complex backgrounds. Try a multiple point or zone focus area, with the focusing mode set to continuous. Since it's hard to keep your focus point on the head of a flying bird, give yourself a margin of error with a wider depth of field.
- Birds in flight are often small and/or distant, so background may be a big part of the image. Special attention needs to be paid to exposure settings if a bird is flying rapidly between dark and light backgrounds. Using manual exposure settings may be the best solution in this situation.

Bird photography is challenging, so don't be afraid to make mistakes. Keep practicing and learning!

