

PHOTO MASTERCLASS PART SEVEN

BIRDS IN FLIGHT

in association with
TAMRON®



Just as you're mastering the art of taking well-composed images of wildlife, we're presenting you with an even greater challenge: capturing moving targets. But if you follow our experts' advice on fieldcraft, good technique and equipment, you may surprise yourself.

WITH WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER MARK CARWARDINE

IT'S ALL VERY WELL taking technically perfect portraits of birds doing nothing much at all. The real challenge is to take great pictures of birds doing what they do best – flying.

But capturing that brief moment when the wings are in an aesthetically pleasing position is just the beginning. Overcoming camera shake while you track the bird, and making the image pin-sharp by freezing its rapidly flapping wings, merely add to the challenge. The light, too, needs to be just right to avoid unwanted silhouettes and shadows. So, perhaps not surprisingly, the 'hit rate' in photographing birds in flight is low compared with many other forms of wildlife photography.

But the good news is that birds generally use quite predictable roosting, feeding and nesting sites and it's often

possible to get close to them. You can also keep shooting until well after the sun has set: take pin-sharp pictures if the light is good, but as it gets darker and you're forced to use slower shutter speeds, try more imaginative, artistic shots with blurry wings to give a feeling of movement.

Perhaps most importantly, there are many potential subjects in the UK – everywhere from the Somerset Levels (wheeling and turning starlings coming in to roost) to Bass Rock (breeding gannets), and from seafronts (feeding gulls) to town lakes (landing ducks and swans) up and down the country. It's just a matter of getting out there, experimenting and practising. It'll certainly be worth it – well-executed flight shots make some of the most exciting wildlife photographs.

▲ A massive flock of starlings momentarily takes on the shape of a giant, mythical bird as it swirls in ever-changing shapes before settling down to roost. This shot was part of a sequence taken by Manuel Presti in Rome that also contained the winning image in last year's Wildlife Photographer of the Year Competition.



MEET THE EXPERT...

Every issue, our world famous photographers share their knowledge and skills.

MANUEL PRESTI ITALY

A nature photographer since 1985, Manuel Presti was the winner of the 2005 Wildlife Photographer of the Year Competition with his image of starlings pursued by a peregrine.



Manuel Presti is an engineer by profession and juggles a full-time job with award-winning nature photography. This summer, he has been setting his alarm for 3.50am to photograph bee-eaters and hoopoes before work. "It's not a problem," he jokes, "because we have espresso in Italy to keep us awake." Manuel shoots until the light is too harsh for taking pictures and then heads to the office.

"I like to pick a subject and work it well," he explains. "That's what I did with the starlings, which I photographed every evening after work in the centre of Rome. I was actually standing on the pavement, watching the swirling flocks expand and contract, looking for interesting patterns in the sky. It was an unusual scenario for wildlife photography, because most evenings I was surrounded by curious people. Many of them were taking pictures, too – with their mobile phones."

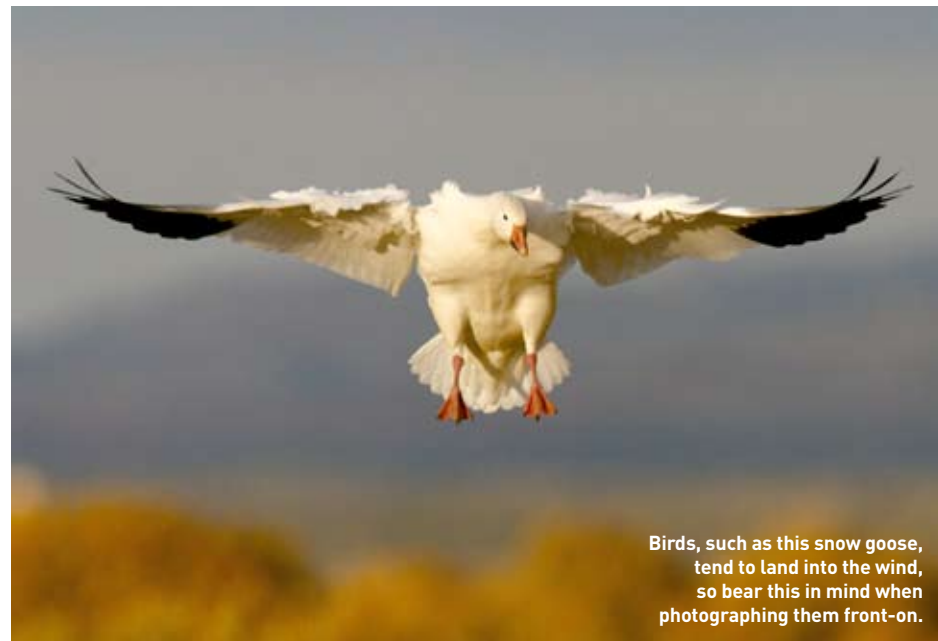
Familiar subjects hold the key to many great pictures – though I do travel, I adore working close to home.

Manuel believes that familiar subjects hold the key to many great pictures. He travels far and wide for his photography – two of his favourite places for birds in flight are Florida and Bosque del

Apache in New Mexico – but he adores working close to home.

He often plans his images in advance and has a list of dream shots. "I was lying in a poppyfield the other day, photographing the brilliant red flowers against a dark blue sky, when swifts started flying overhead. I thought it would make a wonderful shot and now have this perfect picture in my mind's eye. It'll be a challenge, but not impossible. Besides, it's good to push the boundaries."

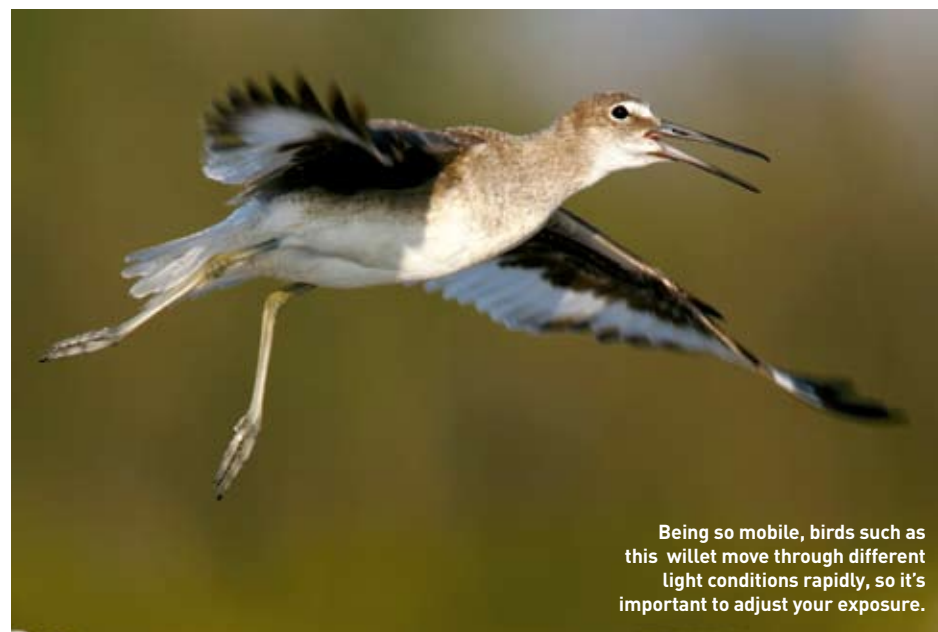
Manuel Presti's top bird-in-flight photography tips



Birds, such as this snow goose, tend to land into the wind, so bear this in mind when photographing them front-on.

1 Think about the wind and sun

The best conditions for flight photography are when the wind is blowing from roughly the same direction as the sun is shining. An easterly wind early in the morning or a westerly wind late in the afternoon will ensure that most birds take off and land facing into the sun – lighting them perfectly from the front.



Being so mobile, birds such as this willet move through different light conditions rapidly, so it's important to adjust your exposure.

2 Set the exposure manually

Take a few test shots of birds in the sky and then set your exposure manually. When birds are flying, they move across light and dark patches of sky and, unless they are really filling the frame, make it difficult for the auto-exposure to cope. Don't forget to adjust your exposure as the light changes.

YOUR STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE...

Mark Carwardine shows you how to apply the theory to get the perfect picture.

1 FOLLOW THE BIRD



- » **Pick up the bird** (here an osprey) in your viewfinder as early as possible – don't wait until you are ready to take the shot. This allows your autofocus to lock on and gives you a moment to think about composition before shooting.
- » **Practise finding** a flying bird through your lens – it's an essential skill and the quicker you can do it, the better.
- » **Make sure the autofocus** is set to 'continuous' (and keep pressing the shutter button halfway) to ensure that it maintains sharp focus on the bird as it moves towards or away from the camera.

2 SHOOT FIRST, ASK QUESTIONS LATER



- » **Start shooting** if you think a good picture is about to unfold. If you stop to think, even for a second, you could miss the shot. Don't worry if you do miss – just keep trying.
- » **Improve your chances** by trying to anticipate the action. By reading wind conditions and behaviour, for example, it is often possible to predict when a bird is likely to take flight and where it is likely to fly.
- » **Keep shooting.** The more images you take, the more chance you have of getting a good one.

3 THINK ABOUT COMPOSITION



- » **Put the bird** on the left side of the frame if it is flying from left to right (and vice versa). This gives it room to fly into the picture and makes a more comfortable composition.
- » **Ignore the rule of thirds** (see March) and put the bird close to the centre of the frame if it is flying straight towards you.
- » **Take care** when photographing small flocks of flying birds. Try to avoid shots where one bird blocks another (wait until it is clear) and avoid cutting off parts of birds at the edges of the frame.

4 WORK AT GETTING CLOSE



- » **Seek out places** where birds are used to people, so you can get close without disturbing them. Try everywhere from rubbish tips and coastal resorts, with their friendly gulls, to seabird colonies.
- » **Find nature reserves** with hides overlooking feeding or breeding grounds, where you can remain unseen for as long as you like.
- » **Move slowly** and stay low ('low' might mean on your stomach, not merely on your knees) to approach subjects without scaring them.
- » **Move into position** as you draw near, so that your flight shots are against a clean, uncluttered background.



ESSENTIAL KIT... 1.4X TELECONVERTER

If you can't afford a sufficiently long lens for bird photography, try using a 1.4x teleconverter. This is an optical device placed between the camera body and the lens in order to increase the lens's focal length by 40 per cent. It will transform a 300mm lens, for example, into a 420mm lens. Though you lose one stop of light (a 300mm f4 lens becomes an f5.6 lens) and may lose some quality, it is an inexpensive way of getting more shooting power.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

- » **1.4x magnification** – don't be tempted to buy a 2x teleconverter unless you are using it with an extremely high-quality lens, as the quality may suffer and you will lose two stops of light instead of one.
- » **Manufacturer** – use a teleconverter made by the same manufacturer as your lens for the best results.

CHEAPER ALTERNATIVES:

- » **Think more creatively** – specialise in bird flocks or easily approachable species such as gulls and terns, which do not require particularly long lenses.

DOS & DON'TS

- » **DO use a sturdy tripod** whenever possible, otherwise camera shake is likely to be your biggest enemy.
- » **DO use a fast shutter speed** to freeze the wing movement of birds – at least 1/250 for large birds flapping slowly and much faster for birds with quicker wingbeats.
- » **DO pray for blue skies** – white skies make dreary backgrounds.
- » **DON'T be tempted to scare birds** into flying – just wait patiently for them to fly.

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TAMRON SP AF 200-500mm F5-6.3 Di LD
A versatile mid to long range telephoto lens providing clear images with vivid colour rendition. This lens is ideal for wildlife photography.

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MASTERCLASS CHALLENGE UK...



There are plenty of opportunities for photographing birds in flight in Britain. **Rob Jordan** tells you how to make the most of them – and sets you a challenge.

Seabird colonies

Though September is late in the season, many seabird colonies will still be active. Terns, in particular, will hover above you, offering photo opportunities. Decide if you want a sharp or blurred image, get low and shoot up against a bright, clear sky. Select a fast shutter speed for pin-sharp detail, perhaps even using flash, or illustrate motion by going slow.



Flocks

Flocks of birds are best photographed against plain backgrounds, otherwise they just blend into the clutter. Early or late in the day, watch for the directions the birds fly in as they move from lakes and ponds to feed or roost. Approach them carefully, use a tripod, be patient and don't be tempted to scare the flocks into the air.



Urban birds

Get close to birds in parks, ports and seaside resorts – places where birds are used to humans, often repeatedly performing the same behaviour. Don't just fill the frame with the subject, but leave space in the image for the bird to fly and be in its element. Handholding the camera in low evening light may bring out something other than the obvious.



Waterbirds

Plan your intended images, but take advantage of lucky occurrences and lighting effects around you. Don't always use automatic settings, so you can react quickly when something does happen. Try lying down near water level where a slow shutter speed and panning with a flying bird's movement can create great reflections and an impressionistic effect.



MASTERCLASS READER PHOTO OF THE MONTH

Now practise your new photography skills on your local British wildlife. Use all of our experts' hints and tips to take pictures of any British seabirds, flocks, urban species or waterbirds. Upload them on our website and the winner will be published in *BBC Wildlife* and on our website.

HOW TO ENTER

Log on to www.bbcwildlifemagazine.com and click on Photo Masterclass, then follow the instructions to upload your images. Closing date: Weds 30 August.

RULES 1) The competition is open only to amateur photographers. 2) Up to two entries only per category. 3) Entry of a picture constitutes a grant to BBC Worldwide to publish it in all media. 4) Entries will be judged by *BBC Wildlife*. 5) The winning image will be published in the October issue. 6) No correspondence will be entered into and winners will not be notified. 7) Entries will not be accepted by post or email.



'UNDERWATER' WINNER: JUDITH OAKLEY

This masterclass was tough, but many of you seemed to find your natural element and produced great shots. Judith's image reveals a jewel of a shore urchin among the kelp. Visit our website to see the runners-up.