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.
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 5 am 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.”

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

He often plans his images in advance and has a lot of dreams shots. “It was lying in a poppy field 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 I 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

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.

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.

3. THINK ABOUT COMPOSITION

Include as much of the background as possible – lighting them perfectly from the front.

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.

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

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 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.

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.

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 Worldwide. 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.

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.

Waterbirds

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