



# How to photograph... Raptors

In the last of our 'getting started' series, bird photographer Mike Atkinson looks at how bird of prey centres can help you tackle more advanced shots

**H**UMANS have always had a fascination with raptors and so photos of these magnificent birds are universally popular.

Getting close enough to capture high quality images in the wild, though, can be extremely difficult and can risk disturbing the birds. Fortunately, there are now collections of captive birds of prey across the country, allowing close-ups to be taken even with basic compact cameras. (Avoid centres where all the birds are kept behind wire mesh, because this is useless for photography.)

For those with more advanced cameras, these centres offer the perfect opportunity to tackle the ultimate form of bird photography: flight shots. With flying displays held at fixed times throughout the year, it couldn't be easier to pick the right weather conditions and get a guaranteed opportunity. Some centres even run special sessions purely for photographers.

If you want to try flight shooting, look for a centre where you can get 'sun side' of the birds, preferably with a plain background.

■ Mike runs bird photography workshops and provides one-to-one tuition. For full details, visit his website at [mikeatkinson.net](http://mikeatkinson.net)

## ESSENTIAL GEAR

**DIGITAL SLR CAMERAS (DSLRs):** With compact and 'bridge' digital cameras now sporting 15-megapixel sensors and 20x zoom lenses giving huge magnification, it's easy to question why anyone would buy a big, heavy and expensive DSLR. The main reasons people upgrade, though, are camera features and image quality. On the features side, DSLRs have accurate viewfinders allowing you to see the exact image that will be captured. They also have more sophisticated autofocus systems, faster shutter response and higher

shooting speeds (frames per second). All of this adds up to a much higher ratio of successful shots. On the quality side, DSLR sensors capture greater tonal detail with lower digital noise levels. These give potential image quality way beyond the levels of compact/bridge cameras. To realise this potential, you need a decent lens. If possible, avoid zoom lenses and go for a fixed focal length lens of at least 300mm (preferably 400mm or 500mm). The ultimate bird lenses have wide apertures and built-in image stabilisation.

## SETTING UP THE SHOT

### Avoid the crowds

TRY to pick a time when the centre will be quiet and get a front seat for the displays. Entry to some centres is very inexpensive, so it doesn't cost much to go back again and again until you get the right results.

### Be prepared

FOR flying displays, get fully set up beforehand, with a charged battery, empty memory card and all camera/lens settings correct. Position yourself so you can pan smoothly with the birds, without stretching.

### Camera settings

FOR flight shots, use a fairly wide aperture (eg f/5.6) and a shutter speed of at least 1/1000th second. To achieve this, set an ISO sensitivity of up to 400: if you need more, return on a brighter day.

### Further settings

IF your camera allows, set it so that it focuses on whatever is in the centre of the frame and that it will adjust focus continuously as the subject moves. Also, set the highest continuous shooting speed.

Turn over for photo advice

# TROUBLESHOOTING

## Perch shots



MANY images taken at bird of prey centres just feel wrong. They are static, with too much of the artificial environment visible. Harsh side-lighting of a perched bird also makes the contrast too high, losing details in both the shadows and the highlights. The image above shows better composition and detail and was taken by moving closer and waiting for the bird to turn towards the light and strike a more interesting pose.

## Light direction



THE photo above is taken in what many people regard as perfect lighting, namely direct, slightly hazy sunlight. This light certainly brings out strong colours and avoids exposure difficulties. However, it can be a little flat and boring. Once you're comfortable shooting in front lighting, feel free to experiment with alternatives such as the backlighting shown below. Although a bit more challenging, it can add an element of atmosphere and interest to your images.



## Birds in flight



FOCUSING on a flying bird is a challenge for any camera. Autofocus (AF) systems typically lock on to high-contrast areas in the centre of the frame, so it's important to keep your camera pointed precisely on the flying bird – preferably on the bird's head. Your AF will particularly



struggle if there is detail in the background, because it will lock on to that instead of the bird, as in the shot above. You'll have a much better chance of focusing on the bird if the background is plain, eg a clear sky. As well as confusing your camera's AF, backgrounds also confuse auto exposure (AE), causing the bird to be overexposed. If available, use exposure compensation or manual exposure to set a lower exposure for birds flying in front of dark backgrounds (eg trees) or a higher exposure for bright backgrounds (eg skies). With practice, difficult situations, such as the eagle shot (top) can be handled.



Overcast days aren't ideal for any type of bird photography, but this is especially true of flight photography. In fact, bird photographers who specialise in flight shots just don't even bother trying on 'white sky days', because even well-posed shots like the Bald Eagle, above left, come out dull and unappealing. Sunlight and a blue sky are essential ingredients for flight shots. As we said before, choosing the right day to take your photos is important. If you plan on travelling a considerable distance to a raptor centre then make sure you check the weather forecast carefully, or you could end up with disappointing results and a long drive home on which to reflect on your misfortune... Keep trying – all that perseverance will pay off in the end.

# THE FINAL SHOT



Practising on captive birds means you'll be ready to make the most of opportunities in the field, such as this brief fly-past of a wild kestrel

Positioning the bird to the left of the frame gives it space to fly into

Rich blue sky complements the warm tones of the bird

Warm evening sunlight brings out the rich plumage tones of the female kestrel

The side lighting picks out detail in the bird's head, body and feet



Positioning flying birds slightly towards the top of the frame emphasises the fact that they are high above the ground and makes the shot look more natural

A composition made up of diagonal lines conveys a more dynamic feel than strong horizontals and verticals

Next month:  
Part one of our  
beginners' guide  
to digiscoping