



Seeing is Believing

by Andy Long

Learn some shooting tips so you too can capture some great wildlife action photos.

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The quick little gull just found its meal ticket as it steals food from an egret.

and split second timing catch action that's too fast for the eyes to comprehend.

Some of my recent action images have shown me that animals are amazing. The first example happened in Florida when I focused on a great egret that was in the water hunting for a meal. Wanting to get an image of the egret and whatever it caught in its mouth, I waited for the strike of its head into the water before I fired off a burst of shots. What resulted was a shot of a gull stealing a crab out of the egret's mouth. The timing could not have been any better. The position of the gull's head as it made its quick steal was the most unique aspect. As it hit the crab, the gull bent its head underneath it to grab and transfer the meal from one diner to the other. If I hadn't captured the photo, I would have found the incident difficult to believe. But the shot of the gull snatching the crab and the next of it flying away were solid proof.

The saying "a picture is worth a thousand words" is one to which almost any action photographer can relate. When you're going through a batch of images after a shoot, you spot features that make you shake your head in amazement. In real time, the events happened so fast you never knew exactly what happened.

Multi-frame cameras

Many other settings can hold surprises. The most recent happened during my eagle workshop in the Aleutian Islands off southwest Alaska. As the group concentrated on getting shots of the eagles hitting the water to catch fish, we were impressed with several aspects of the action. The first was the speed with which those very large birds moved as they approached their prey in the water. One second they were nowhere near their target, and in the next second, their talons were extended to grip their upcoming meal. The accuracy with which they hit the target time after time was uncanny. Also, seeing one eagle steal a meal from the talons of another is just as impressive. Anyone who has watched eagles in action knows they are among the biggest thieves and scavengers in the animal kingdom. However, why they would expend the energy necessary to chase down a bird in flight to either grab a fish from its talons or harass the eagle enough to force it to drop its prize is a bit of a head-scratcher.



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An eagle has zeroed in on his prey.

Another fascinating aspect about eagles is how far below the surface of the water they dip their legs in order to catch a fish. Even though the eagles generally snag a fish from the surface, there are times when they retrieve fish from four inches deep or more. A photographically frozen image of an eagle with its legs fully immersed in the water as it seizes a fish is an experience, even though the live action is impossible to see with your eyes because it all happens too fast. In addition, when there are quite a few eagles in the area, it's not uncommon to see two going for the same fish, their wings hitting one another in flight, although both birds maintain their flight patterns as if nothing happened. With those competitions in mind, I've wondered when I've seen large flocks of birds taking flight at once--such during the morning sunrise setting at Bosque del Apache and the snow goose departure. Why don't they ever fly into one another? My shots show no such collisions, and it still makes no sense. The eagles, though, have no problem with this contradiction.

Another still another behavior I noticed through my images is the way in which eagles use their tails as a rudder and counter balance on the water to help them to complete their attack and get away. Several images of the resulting tail streaks in the water teach me more than just observing with my eye ever could. Never once did I observe--or see in a photo--the huge

wings of the eagles tipping the water. As the birds approach their target, they soar in and away before they resume flapping their wings.



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An eagle will submerge its legs in the water to catch its prey.



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An eagle will drag its tail in the water in order to maintain its balance.

Just as in any predator/prey setting, the predator doesn't always win. Quite a few times your images will reveal an eagle flying away with empty talons. However, even a miss can result in a usable image, depending on what you want others to see. You'll come away from a gathering of eagles with a wide variety of photos--from an eagle's approach to a strike, its hit on the water, a tail drag, a bird with legs immersed, an eagle flying away with a fish in its talons, and eagles flying away empty-taloned. No matter what the shot, most people will be quite impressed with your results.

SHOOTING TIPS

Animal behavior is one area that wildlife photographers should not take for granted. Studying and watching the target wildlife, gaining an understanding of what an animal is doing, can be good keys to capturing a special image at the peak of action. Today's cameras—shooting eight to ten frames per second—will also help you catch great shots.

Numerous camera settings can help guarantee success. The first is a shutter speed of at least 1/1000th of a second. (I try to get higher than this, but this is normally sufficient to freeze the action.) If overcast skies are present, bump up the camera's ISO to a setting that provides this shutter speed. (Don't worry about using an ISO of around 800, as modern cameras handle this and even higher ISO's quite well.)

Because the action is fast and furious, using the center focusing square serves two purposes: One, by getting the eagle in focus in the center of the frame,



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There are no wingtip marks on the water as the eagle flies off with its prey.

you should be able to keep it in the frame. Two--and this is good to know for a variety of shooting settings--is that it is the most sensitive and accurate of all focusing squares. Several cameras have a custom function that allows for an expanded focus square selection. Using this helps if and-when the subject strays from the single

square.

For f-stop, I recommend to go one-half stop from wide open when shooting wildlife--particularly wildlife in action. Sometimes this extra half stop gives that little extra depth-of-field to carry through a sharp focus on the subject.

The last main setting is to use Servo or Continuous focus as opposed to Single Shot.

When you're just starting out shooting birds in flight, waiting for your subject to get into the position you want is a good idea. The farther away the bird is in the field-of-view, the easier the shot. (Over time, you'll be able to get a focus on a bird that's closer to you.)

No matter what you shoot, don't be shocked at some of the positions and actions you catch in your shots. Surprises are to be expected.

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