

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

Award-winning wildlife photographer and Canon pro, Ben Hall, shares top tips with our Apprentice for taking great shots of birds of prey



CANON PRO

NAME:
BEN HALL
CAMERA:
CANON EOS-1D X

PROFESSIONAL wildlife photographer Ben, 39, got into photography as a 14-year-old. He turned professional in 2003, and in 2017 won a British Wildlife Photography Award and was named Bird Photographer of the Year with his shot of a condor. He currently runs photography workshops throughout the UK, centring on British wildlife such as moorain hares, red deer and more. For more information visit www.benhallphotography.com

APPRENTICE

NAME:
PAUL SHARMAN
CAMERA:
CANON EOS 7D Mk II

PAUL, 52, from Burgess Hill, West Sussex, has been shooting since his teenage years. He got his first DSLR, a Canon 350D (Rebel XT), in 2007, then bought a Canon 40D while living in the US. He specialised in fishing photography, getting published in American magazines, and today he is editor-in-chief of several websites. Paul wants to hone his nature photos. His work can be seen at www.paulsharmanoutdoors.com

FACT FILE

WE SHOT at the fantastic International Centre for Birds of Prey, a charity in Newent, Gloucestershire, established in 1967, and packed full of beautiful birds of prey. Visit www.icbp.org for details.

TECHNIQUE ASSESSMENT

Having looked at his settings, Ben advised Paul to make a few adjustments on his 7D Mk II



WHITE BALANCE

PAUL noticed that his images, shooting side by side, weren't quite as rich as Ben's. The wildlife pro took a quick look at Paul's screen and immediately suggested a pro tweak. "Try changing your white balance to Cloudy," says Ben. "This works well with colourful birds and backgrounds. The Cloudy setting warms things up and makes the colours pop." The image above was taken using Auto White Balance, while Hot Shot #1 has been shot using Cloudy.



IS MODES

WHEN PAUL asked which image stabilization mode to set his Canon 100-400mm lens to, the answer was "it depends." Mode 1 provides stabilization in all directions, making it suitable for general movement such as in bird portraits. Mode 2 only stabilizes in the direction of camera movement, which makes it ideal for panning shots. However, at speeds over 1/1000 sec, IS can be turned off as the shutter speed is fast enough to eliminate movement.

PAUL'S COMMENT

When we first walked in to the centre, several birds were sitting out on perches and both Ben and I were drawn to this handsome red kite. I had positioned myself at eye level to the bird, zooming in with my 100-400mm lens, but Ben also made me aware of checking the background, keeping it neutral and therefore highlighting our subject. An aperture of $f/5.6$ has kept the whole bird nice and sharp.



Lens	Canon EF 100-400mm f/5.6L IS II USM
Exposure	1/2500 sec, f/5.6, ISO 800

TOP GEAR #1

All-season shooting

AS AN outdoor professional, Ben uses the flagship Canon EOS-1D X for its pro features. The fact it's weather-sealed is obviously key when working out in the elements, as is having a rugged body that can withstand knocks and scrapes. The 1D X meets the durability requirements, along with the necessary performance needs in terms of its superior 14fps burst speed (16fps in Live View) and incredible autofocus tracking performance.



PRO TIP

PORTRAIT POSING



WHEN taking headshots of birds, you can apply many of the same rules you adhere to when taking regular portraits – such as choosing an angle that's flattering to your subject. This majestic sea eagle has a stellar 'banana beak', which is one of its most striking features. When shot head-on, though, this characteristic is completely lost. Direct eye contact can be very striking, but always be aware of your angles to capture the best features.

HOT SHOT #1

BEN HALL'S TEN TIPS FOR BETTER BIRDING SHOTS

- 1 Know your location**
Get to know the area and spend time revisiting it under various lighting conditions and seasons. You will begin to build up knowledge about not only the subjects that can be found there, but also how the light changes and what opportunities are possible.
- 2 Research your subject**
A simple Google search will bring up lots of information such as habitat, breeding behaviour and feeding habits. This is valuable information and will help to save hours when out in the field.
- 3 Back-button focus**
By focusing with your thumb, you can leave the camera set to predictive focus mode at all times. When you need to lock the focus, simply press and release the back button and your focus is locked, enabling you to recompose. If your subject is moving, simply hold down the back button to track.
- 4 Crop factor**
Bodies with a smaller sensor, like Paul's 7D Mk II, can give you more reach. In this case you multiply the focal length by the 1.6x crop factor, meaning that his 100-400mm lens becomes a 160-640mm.
- 5 Wear suitable clothing**
Having warm and dry clothing is ideal when shooting in cold conditions. The more comfortable you are, the longer you'll be prepared to keep going and the more chances you have of capturing something special.
- 6 Symmetry**
While some birds are best shot in profile, when shooting birds head-on symmetry becomes important. Compose your shots with this in mind.
- 7 Metering**
When shooting headshots you can use evaluative metering most of the time, except for situations where the subject is backlit, when you can meter off a specific part of the bird instead.
- 8 Manual ISO**
Auto ISO can be useful, but it's best to control your ISO manually. You'll need to boost it for higher shutter speeds, as you'll get more chances at 1/4000 sec than 1/1000 sec for quick subjects.
- 9 Beanbag**
When shooting at ground level I opt for a beanbag for support. It's quick to set up and offers a solid support and an excellent freedom of movement.
- 10 Start slow**
There's a lot to consider when shooting birds. Don't be overwhelmed and go at your own pace.



TOP GEAR #2

Telephoto prime

BIRDS are fairly small and often far away. The reach of the Canon EF 500mm f/4L IS USM enables Ben to keep his distance from his shy subjects, while still getting those frame-filling shots – and the focal length, combined with a wide aperture, produces incredibly shallow depth of field. Its fast and reliable autofocus make this the premier prime lens for bird photography of all kinds.



PRO TIP



STARTING SETTINGS

THE CHANGEABLE weather can make shooting headshots tricky. "I tend to adjust the ISO according to what the weather is doing," says Ben. "Try starting with a shutter speed of around 1/250 sec at ISO400 – you don't have to worry about noise at ISO400. I use aperture value to control depth of field, and I also use Manual quite a lot. On a day like today, start at f/5.6 and experiment from there."

SHOOT WITH A PRO

Lens	Canon EF 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6L IS II USM
Exposure	1/1000 sec, f/5.6, ISO400

PAUL'S COMMENT



Portrait photography can apply to birds, too, so we tried a few shots of some of the falcons lined up in front of their cages. Being an editor myself, I like to shoot some editorial shots sometimes, leaving gaps for text at the top. What Ben also taught me was to compose so the background behind was in shadow and therefore darker, and then to use a little negative exposure compensation (1/3 or 2/3 stop) to darken the background further. As the birds themselves were well-lit, this helps them stand out a bit better.

HOT SHOT #2





TOP GEAR #3

Telephoto zooms

WHERE the 500mm offers superior reach, these zooms offer versatility. The EF 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6L IS USM and EF 70-200mm f/2.8L IS USM provide great coverage for birds in flight, enabling you to close the distance when needed, and boast vital stabilization for handholding at distance. The wider aperture of the 70-200mm equates to a faster shutter speed and lower ISO.

PRO TIP

FINE-TUNE YOUR FOCUS

WHEN shooting moving subjects, make sure to change your autofocus mode to AI Servo AF. This exploits your Canon camera's world-class Dual Pixel Autofocus tracking to keep track of fast-flying birds of prey.



PAUL'S COMMENT



There were three red kites being flown at once, so it was best to pick a target and stick with it. I had already set my AF point zone focusing at Ben's suggestion, which really helped when tracking the subject in flight, and we were also using 'Case 2' autofocus, which kept them sharp as they flew in front of trees and other obstructions that could have distracted the focusing.

Lens	Canon EF 300-400mm F4.5L IS II USM
Camera	EOS R5



PRO TIP

SHOOTING THROUGH



THE STAFF at the Centre for Birds of Prey flew a number of raptors for us, but there were some beautiful birds that remained in their enclosures. This might seem awkward but, using lenses with longer focal lengths, it's possible to blur the metal fencing away and capture some lovely images. If your AF insists on focusing on the cage, focus manually.



BIRD WATCHING

Three of Ben's best shots of birds in the wild



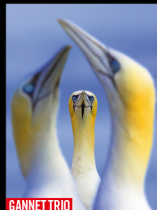
ANDEAN CONDOR IN FLIGHT

THIS image is about the relationship between the bird and its habitat. Images such as these tell a story and can help to draw a viewer into the subject's world.



RED-FOOTED BOOBY

I SHOT this back-lit red-footed booby bird while leading a workshop in the Galapagos Islands, proving that shots of birds in flight can be powerful.



GANNET TRIO

HERE'S a perfect example of using a natural frame – in this case it came in the form of two displaying gannets. I took this image on Bass Rock where I saw the potential for a creative image.



PAUL'S COMMENT



As well as photographing birds already in flight, it was also interesting to try to capture the moment they lock off. A fast shutter speed of 1/800 sec froze the motion, but the key was to anticipate and start shooting just before it happened to take into account the slight lag time both in human reaction and also the camera's first shot. We used the silent continuous shutter mode so as not to distract the birds or the other guests.



PRO TIP PANNING

PANNING successfully is all about matching the speed of your subject and moving in a fluid motion. Try to pan as smoothly as possible, keeping your arms locked and rotating your upper body. To capture a sense of motion, set the camera to shutter priority and experiment with shutter speeds between 1/30 and 1/60 second. The aim is to get the bird (especially its head) sharp, while the background becomes a blur.



Lens	Canon EF 100-400mm f4.5-5.6L IS II USM
Exposure	1/800 sec, f5.6, ISO400

TOP GEAR #5

Pack smart

BEN needs his kit backpack to be as rugged and weatherproof as his equipment. He uses the LowePro Whistler BP 450 AW, the largest of the Whistler line, which opens from the back. This means that you can lay it face-down to retrieve your gear and not get wet when you put it back on.



EXPERT INSIGHT BEST CASE SCENARIO

A NUMBER of Canon's full-frame bodies enable you to tailor your autofocus a step further, using the AF Configuration Tool. This offers preset 'Cases' to match different shooting situations. "Bring down the sensitivity to Case 2," suggests Ben, which means the camera continues to focus-track even when the subject momentarily leaves the AF points.



PRO TIP

PRE-FOCUSING

PHOTOGRAPHING birds is challenging because of the unpredictable nature of their movement. If you're shooting at a bird or wildlife centre, however, you have the luxury of perches and feeding pedestals where you know the birds will be landing. Take advantage of this by pre-focusing on these landing platforms.



SHOT OF THE DAY!



Lens	Canon EF 300-400mm V4 L IS USM
Exposure	1/2500 sec, f/5.6, ISO 400

PAUL'S COMMENT



“The flying displays were great, with lots of different birds from owls and eagles to vultures, kites and falcons. Ben had me work on my panning and tracking techniques to try to keep up with these fast-moving targets – not always easy. This particular falcon flew right overhead and so I just kept tracking it and shooting when I thought I had it in my sights. I was pleased to see it came out sharply and illustrates their mastery of the skies.”



BEN'S VERDICT



“After getting comfortable following the birds, Paul shifted his focus points off-centre in order to create space ahead of the subject for a more balanced composition. He also took control of his camera, which often over- or under-exposed when shooting in the sky, and dialled in his exposure manually under the changeable conditions. Paul proved to be a real student of the game and he took all of my advice on board, culminating in a strong Shot of the Day.”



BE OUR NEXT APPRENTICE

Do you need some help to take your Canon photography to the next level? Let us know what you'd like help with and we could pair you up with a top pro for the day! Email photoplus@futurenet.com with 'PhotoPlus Apprentice' as the subject, and include your phone number and address.