

# Focus On NATURE

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## *Birds in Flight Techniques*

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*Trip Report:  
Bosque del Apache*



## *A Feather Quest* ©R. Munguia

When I got my first camera back in the mid 80's, I could swear it came with a label that said "For Bird Shooting Only". For many years, I tried shooting birds and enjoyed doing so, but the camera wasn't fast enough to track on my moving subjects, making shooting action shots almost impossible. Auto Focus technology was a toddler, a really slow one. Over the years, this has changed and nowadays, we have technologically advanced autofocus systems that allow you to track your subjects for sharper shots. Due to the limitations of my



*The Whooping Crane, one of the most endangered species in the U.S., with less than 340 individuals. 80 of them live in FL.*  
©Reinier Munguia

first camera, I opted for shooting nature in general, with a special interest in reptiles and eventually, birds. Today's technology allows me to capture these wonderful creatures with great sharpness and details, raising my interest on my feathered friends. With close to 10,000 species around the world, and 900 of them in the U.S. alone, birds make the top on my subject list. Being able to get close to some of these species is among my most memorable experiences. As a photographer, I enjoy looking at their eyes and catch a glimpse of the world around them. But getting close to many of these birds requires a special skill, that not many are willing to learn: patience. Taking the time to understand my subject allows for closer inspections and over time, my subject understands my non-threatening behavior. This mutual understanding ensures beautiful close shots of otherwise skittish and hard to capture subjects.

While many of my subjects are found even around the house, I spend a lot of time traveling in search of less common birds or specific behaviors. For instance, if you want to shoot amazing hummingbirds, there's no better



*Female Northern Cardinal feeding young. Lakeland, FL.*  
©Bonnie Shedd

place on Earth than the rainforest of Costa Rica. If in search of nesting egrets and herons, you don't need to travel far. Many locations around Florida are within comfortable driving distance. Occasionally, I'll go far from home in search of new species. Last year my search for birds took me to Puerto Rico, looking for endemics, and a late December trip to New Mexico, in search of the snow geese and sandhill cranes that migrate there.

But my love for birds goes beyond photography, and to stay tuned, my wife and I are foster parents of 24 birds that range from tiny parrolets to lorikeets to a large military macaw, all of them with their own personality and emotions. In addition, I bring bird presentations to schools and birding festivals as a way to give back to nature by means of educating. If you're ever in search of new subjects to add to your photo collection, start a feather quest. -rnc.



*Whistling Duck with ducklings.*  
Titusville FL. ©R.Munguia

# Birds in Flight Techniques

Text & Photos ©R.Munguia

The number one rule for bird photography is one that applies to almost any type of photography: learn your subject. Knowing your subject well will definitely improve your chances of getting a few keepers. For example, large birds such as wood storks, white pelicans and cranes, usually circle before landing, when the landing area is reduced for their massive bodies. Knowing this, you can prepare for a good panning sequence that allows enough time for the autofocus system to lock on your subject. Start tracking your subject early in the flight path and predict the direction of flight for the remaining glide. If using a camera with selectable focusing sensors, make sure you use the center sensors, as they're far more accurate and faster than the sensors positioned on the thirds.

Wait until the real action occurs and shoot as quick as possible a series of frames; don't forget to anticipate. By shooting a sequence of 3-6 shots within a couple of seconds, you'll have more chances to capture most of the action. Shots in which the birds are in an angle against the camera or braking speed before landing, make astounding action shots. Keep an eye on their wing beat rhythm. The downstroke is usually faster than the upstroke, meaning that images can be obtained with less motion blur during the upstroke. When shooting several birds in a flying formation, try not to overlap birds, as they become distracting and confusing.

Be careful when selecting your backgrounds. A flying bird cutting across a building doesn't look as good as one over a clear sky or diffused vegetation. Use the fastest speed you can afford to avoid any camera or motion blur. Try your luck at shooting verticals instead of horizontals, especially

with birds coming towards you at steep angles. They make striking images. Practice, practice, practice, it's the only way you can improve in this challenging photography. Knowing your gear well will definitely help you get the best of shots at the right time.

The difficulty of capturing birds in flight often depends on the species. Knowing this, you should start with slow flying birds, until you get good results. Try shooting Wood Storks while gliding or Pelicans soaring at eye level during windy days. Speedy birds such as diving ducks can be extremely challenging for even the most advance autofocus systems. Occasionally it is better to prefocus at a certain distance and wait for your subject to flight into focus. Estimating where your subject will land can increase your chances of getting sharp images at the right time. By prefocusing the lens on the landing area, the autofocus system will achieve focus faster as the lens won't need to go from one extreme of the focusing range to the other.

I have found that using a 400mm lens or better yet, a 100-400mm zoom,



*Skimmer over Shell Key, FL*  
©Reinier Munguia

will be the best lens to use for flight shots. The added advantage of the zoom lens is the ability to crop in the spot. Most of the time the lens is handheld, so shutter speed is my priority. Setting the speed too slow, your subject's wings will appear blurred. For this reason, even if you use a 400mm lens, the shutter speed should be of at least 1/1000sec. to ensure sharp images. The rule of the shutter speed being the reciprocal of the focal length does not apply if you're panning your camera following a fast moving subject. So, keep that speed high, for better results.

Whenever possible and if supported by the camera, use high-speed flash sync. This will further increase the quality of your images by stopping the action while filling-in the shadows. Practice makes perfect, so the more you shoot the more you learn. Gulls flying overhead make a perfect subject for your training exercises. So go to the beach and have somebody tease the birds with bread, while you shoot.



*Learn to predict your subject moves, and be ready to shoot at the right time. Great Blue Heron -Venice, FL.*  
©R.Munguia

# Trip Report: Bosque del Apache, NM.

Text & Photos ©R. Munguia

Any bird photographer's dream is to be able to wake up early one morning and find thousands of birds sitting in front of the lens, only to be awakened by the sudden noise of a blast-off. Reality sets in, and the dream becomes true, as nearly 25,000 geese fly in front of you in a mass stampede, filling the sky in a matter of seconds.

Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico is one of few places in the world where migration can be experienced in such magnitude. This refuge provides several species with wintering grounds, rich in food and resting areas. The farming area on the north side of the refuge provides much of the food for the 25,000 geese and close to 20,000 sandhill cranes that arrive every year to winter. But many other subjects are available, including over 26,000 ducks of various species, like Northern Shovelers, Northern Pintails, Green-winged Teals, Mallards, and American Wigeons. Also, in the refuge it's common to find Mule Deer, Ring-necked Pheasant, Golden and Bald eagles, Harrier Hawks, Red Tails, and various egrets and herons.



Snow geese fly-by. Bosque del Apache, N.M.  
©R.Munguia



Hundreds of snow geese sit waiting anxiously for the right cue for blast-off. In a matter of seconds the winter sky turns into a magic pattern of flying birds. I used a flash to bring some details from the otherwise backlit geese. ©R.Munguia

While driving through the refuge, you might encounter a number of situations that will make you jump out of the car with camera in hands. Coyotes set the mood in many occasions, by charging on the feeding flocks of geese and sandhill cranes, creating havoc and confusion. The noise produced by the thousands of birds is amazing. Early in the morning, you can hear the sound produced by the wings of the sandhill cranes as they fly over your head. As sacred as a religious procession, all birds take-off in the morning, heading to the feeding grounds and in the same manner, they come back to roost at night in the same pond. So perfectly timed they are, that the personnel at the refuge can give you an idea of what time the blast-off will happen.

All these wonderful things happen during the golden hours of

light, early in the morning and late in the afternoon. This makes it hard for the photographer to decide between shooting the birds or the spectacular sunrise or sunset happening in the background. While a blast-off only lasting few seconds before all the birds are airborne, at least the sunrise gives you a little extra time for



A lot of things happen during the day, so keeping the eyes open may yield an interesting catch.  
©Reinier Munguia

preparation.

If you're lucky, you might even get the *catch of the day* shot. This Great Blue Heron was so decided to eat this fish that allowed me to approach within 10 feet.

## *Bird in Focus*

### *American White Pelican*



#### *Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*

The American White Pelicans are one of the most interesting birds to capture in flight. Contrary to the Brown Pelicans, these birds don't dive to procure their fish, instead they swim in large flocks herding the shoals to shallow waters and then in unison, they dip their bills to scoop the fish. Most AWP spend their spring and summer season in the fresh water lakes of the northern, central, and western states. They breed in massive colonies in North Dakota at the Chase Lake NWR. During fall, they begin their journey south, spreading in different directions. Florida seems to be one of their favorite wintering grounds, and hundreds of them can be seen flying over lakes in Central Florida. Large groups of AWP can be found in Merritt Island NWR, Ding Darling NWR, and Pelican Beach in Sarasota. If you really want to see them up close, try Lake Morton and Lake Hollingsworth in Lakeland. Last year, more than 850 made Lake Hollingsworth their wintering lake. At these locations, you can get really close to them, enough to get some tight close ups of these magnificent giants without using an extremely long lens. An overcast morning light or a late afternoon sunset, will be perfect to photograph the AWP. Better yet, wait for their arrival or departure to their roosting lakes and you'll be rewarded with amazing landing shots as they soar over you before landing. Good luck!



*Hundreds of snow geese taking-off in a frenzy after a coyote spoiled their feeding fun.*  
©R.Munguia

During blast-offs, the noise produced by the birds only competes with hundreds of cameras shooting non-stop throughout the whole event. Then, as if nothing had happened, everything goes back to normal and you start hearing comments from the fellow photographers previewing their images on their LCDs, almost like sport photographers after a tackle. My words can't describe this place good enough, so consider a winter vacation to New Mexico, stay in Socorro and visit the "Woods of the Apache"-Bosque del Apache NWR.



*Thousands of birds cover the sky within seconds of the morning Blast-offs*  
©Reinier Munguia



*I used a slow shutter speed to emphasize the peak of the action during a blast-off*  
©R.Munguia