

## 5 Camera Settings Every Bird Photographer Should Know

If you want to capture amazing bird photos, you absolutely need to master your camera settings. Because camera settings determine whether your bird photos look blurry or sharp, well-exposed or lacking details. In other words, your camera settings can be the difference between a great photo and a mediocre photo. Which is why this article is dedicated to giving you the five camera settings that every bird photographer should know. That way, you'll never struggle to choose the correct camera settings again.

Let's get started.

### 1. Use Aperture Priority or Manual mode to set your exposure

First things first:

If you want to create beautiful bird photos, you have to make sure they're well-exposed. This means that you need the right aperture and right shutter speed to create a bright, detailed photo.

How do you ensure that you capture a well-exposed bird photo?

You use Aperture Priority or Manual mode.



Both of these modes are available via the Mode Dial on most cameras. Aperture Priority is the easier mode to use: It allows you to choose an aperture, while your camera selects a shutter speed based on its evaluation of the ambient light.

Manual mode forces you to choose both an aperture and a shutter speed. However, the camera viewfinder displays a bar that shows whether your choices will result in underexposure, overexposure, or an exposure that's just right. If you use Manual mode, then you must carefully observe this bar to determine the best aperture and shutter speed for each photo.



If you're a beginner, or if you're shooting fast-paced scenes, Aperture Priority is generally the best choice. You can dial in a wide aperture (usually between  $f/5.6$  and  $f/7.1$ ), then allow your camera to choose a shutter speed. If the shutter speed is too low (more on that later!), then you can raise the ISO to compensate.

Manual mode is a bit trickier to use and takes some getting used to. Once you feel confident in your exposure skills, Manual mode might be the way to go. Manual mode is also a good choice if the background is changing rapidly, but the light on the bird remains the same (such as when you're photographing a bird in flight). In such a situation, Manual mode will prevent the camera meter from changing your shutter speed in response to the changing background.

Here's the bottom line: To get a perfect exposure, you need to take control of your camera settings. And that starts by choosing a camera mode.

Both Aperture Priority and Manual will work. Start with Aperture Priority and, if you like, you can always work up to using Manual.

## **2. Use back-button focus to capture tack-sharp photos**

Back-button focus is one of my favourite camera features because it's just so amazingly useful.

Here's why: Back-button autofocus allows you to control your camera's focus via a button on the camera's back (sometimes labelled AF-ON). Rather than pressing the shutter button halfway to focus, then the rest of the way to capture a shot, back-button focus allows you to separate these two functions.

The shutter button is used for taking pictures. And the AF-ON button is used for focusing. This is invaluable if you want to focus and recompose, then track a moving subject, then focus and recompose again. (You'll want to make sure you've set your autofocus mode to AI-Servo, also known as AF-C.) You see, if you press and hold the AF-ON button, it activates the continuous autofocus, which will track a moving subject.

But once you let go of the AF-ON button, the autofocus locks in place. Now the autofocus acts like one-shot AF, which locks focus and stays focused. So, if you come upon a bird that's moving, you can track it via back-button focus. But as soon as the bird stops moving, you can let go of the AF-ON button, and test out different compositions, knowing that the focus won't change.

The ibis in the photo below was moving along the water's edge, but then stopped so I could grab this photo. I focused on the eye, but then reframed (a perfect situation for back-button focus!).



Cool, right?

Plus, if you accidentally let go of the shutter button, you don't have to deal with refocusing. Back-button focus stays locked in place. That's the power of back-button focus!

To set up back-button autofocus does take a bit of fiddling with camera settings, which is beyond the scope of this article. So, take a look in your camera's manual (or do a bit of Googling!). It's worth it, I promise.

### **3. Use continuous shooting to nail the action shots**

Bird photography often gives you the opportunity to capture amazing action shots. Photos of birds flying through the air, birds diving into the water, birds capturing fish. But here's the thing: It's easy to miss the action if you're not prepared.

After all, birds move fast. That's why continuous shooting comes in handy.

Pretty much all cameras have a continuous shooting mode, these days. Continuous shooting allows you to fire off a burst of photos, generally between 5 frames per second and 15 frames per second. So, whenever you go out to do bird photography, switch your shooting mode to



continuous shooting. And then, when the action heats up, start shooting burst rather than single shots.

That's what I did for this little blue heron shot. When the bird began to hunt, I started shooting in bursts, so I could be sure to get sharp shots with the beak near the water!



Will you get a lot of throwaway images? Sure. But you'll also have a much better chance of getting the perfect image. So, it's undoubtedly worth it! You do want to be careful, however, because your camera's buffer can fill up quickly. When that happens, you won't be able to shoot bursts until the camera has processed some of the images. Just be mindful of your camera's buffer. And you'll get some shots of a lifetime.

#### 4. Choose a shutter speed of at least 1/500s (and probably faster)

If you want to capture sharp bird photos, then you have to use a fast shutter speed. Because the shutter speed is what determines whether you freeze the scene, or whether it turns into one unpleasant blur.

Now, there is no one ideal shutter speed. If the bird in your scene is stationary, you'll need a much slower shutter speed than if the bird in your scene is flapping its wings wildly. But I can give you some recommendations that should ensure you get sharp bird photos, consistently.

First, if you're shooting a motionless bird (for instance, a bird that's sleeping or standing still), I recommend using a shutter speed of at least 1/500th of a second. This is to compensate for the length of your lens because longer lenses result in more potential for camera shake.



Second, if you're shooting a bird that's moving at a slow to medium speed, around 1/1000th of a second is a good choice. This will freeze the movement, but won't force you to crank up the ISO to compensate for underexposure.

Third, if you're shooting a fast-moving bird, you should choose a shutter speed of at least 1/2000th. If the bird is flying at high speeds, then 1/2500th, 1/3200th, or even 1/4000th is a good choice. Birds move fast, and you don't want to end up with a blurry shot because your shutter speed was a hair too slow.

## 5. Use the lowest ISO you can afford for noise-free photos

In bird photography, shutter speed and ISO tend to balance one another out. If you choose a slower shutter speed, you don't need a high ISO; if you choose a high ISO, you don't need a slow shutter speed. Now, ISO comes with a big downside: The higher the ISO, the more noise you'll get in your photos. And noise is pretty much always bad.

On the other hand, a high ISO increases the brightness of your photos, which allows you to use a lightning-fast shutter speed without worry.



So, what do you do? How do you choose your ISO? I recommend you start by determining an acceptable shutter speed. Use the guidelines in the previous tip if you're struggling. Then push your ISO up until you've reached your determined shutter speed – but don't go any higher than you have to.

Because here's the thing: It's better to get a noisy image than a blurry image. But the holy grail of photography is achieving sharp photos without noise. So, keep your ISO to a minimum. And you'll get the best possible shot.

## Conclusion



Choosing the best settings for bird photography may seem difficult, but it doesn't have to be. Just remember the five camera settings that I've shared. And you'll be capturing amazing photos in no time!