

* 7 Tips for Raptor Photography *

(For non-captive, wild birds)

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1) Burst mode's best.

When birds blink, their second eyelid (called a *nictitating membrane*) opens and closes, which can result in strange looking images. Since an in-focus eye is one wildlife-photography “must,” burst mode ups your chances of capturing keepers. It also helps collect quick action such as birds fighting over carrion, landing, and taking off.

2) Wary is the word.

Nobody had to teach raptors about stranger danger—these birds are born nervous! Quick movement catches their eyes the most. In and out lens movement may even give them pause. Act like a statue, staying still as much as possible. Nervous birds will look at you; if one does, FREEZE! If not careful your actions will scatter your subjects—for the rest of the day. Allow raptors to relax after you shoot your landing shots. A raptor on one foot signifies a relaxed bird. A bird stretching its wings might make you think he's relaxed, but not necessarily! If he has sat still for a while the opposite is probably true—he's probably preparing for take-off.

3) Keep concealed.

There's a reason we use the phrase “eagle eye”: raptors will see you before you see them (*see tip #2*). Your best bet's to work from a blind. Often a vehicle works well as a blind, especially if you bring your biggest lens and sit extra still for a while after shutting off the engine. Since I'm talking about photographing non-captive birds, plan on staying far away from these subjects.

4) Stay silent.

Raptors can hear well. Vertically offset ears located just behind the eyes help hone in on sound location. Some species get extra ear-range from facial disk feather arrangement. Your voice and your shutter—especially non-stop actuation—could cause the birds to leave for the day. If you must talk, keep your voice down. And use short bursts when shooting.

5) Lookout for landings.

Focus on where a bird is headed *before* she arrives. Like airplanes, most birds (*including raptors*) take off and land into the wind. Considering when the light's best for photography, an a.m. east wind and a west wind in the afternoon, means you're in luck!

6) Prepare for lift-off.

You get some of your best action shots as birds leave. That means you've got prepare for take-off. Good news! Raptors also prepare for take-off and will give you plenty of signs that they're about to depart. A bird looking *into* the breeze and/or crouching is a bird about to take-off. So, too, is a bird that defecates.

7) Practice patience.

Patience pays in wildlife photography, especially when shooting raptors. Don't fire away at a perched bird just sitting there. You're creating lots of boring images and running the risk of scaring your subject away with the sound of your shutter. Wait for natural behavior, the kind of show a relaxed bird puts on: stretching, preening, calling, eating. Wait for her to *do* something before taking your shot.



Wildlife photographer, Jeff Parker, leads the naturally curious on photo tours throughout North, South, and Central America. Join him & Explore in Focus™!

Questions about bird photography? Give Jeff a call or send him an email. He'll be happy to help you out!

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