BIRD PHOTOGRAPHY QUICK REFERENCE FIELD GUIDE

#1: SHUTTER SPEED (PERCHED)

Whenever I see a blurry photo chances are it's because the shutter speed is too low. For perched birds, I recommend 1 over the focal length. So if you're at 400mm, then at least 1/400th sec is a good choice.

#2: SHUTTER SPEED (IN FLIGHT)

For birds in flight (BIF) it's hard to give an exact number because all birds are different. A big bird flying slowly (Pelican) I'll usually go with 1/1600 - 1/2000th). For an Eagle or Osprey diving to catch a fish, I'll be at least at 1/3200th.

#3: AUTO FOCUS MODE

Check your auto focus mode. For most moving subjects you'll want to be in a continuous auto focus mode (AF-C or Servo) so that the camera continually tries to focus while you're shooting.

#4: AUTO FOCUS AREA

The Auto Focus area is where the camera will look for a subject. Generally for birds I'll be on a center "zone" or a "wide" area of focus, and try to keep the subject as close to center as possible - but because you gave it a larger AF "area" you'll have some room for error, that you wouldn't have if it were a single point like you'd use in landscapes.

SOURCE: MATTK.COM/WILDLIFE

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#5: AUTO ISO

Consider turning on Auto ISO so that, as the light changes, you don't have to change ISO settings. Read up on this for your camera, but it's a great tool to have on a semi-cloudy day with the sun going in and out of the clouds or rapidly changing light.

#6: SUN AT YOUR BACK

Whenever possible, keep the sun behind you when photographing birds. That means the light will be on the birds approaching you. If not, and you're shooting in the direction of the sun, the bird will most likely be really dark and void of detail.
PS: This is VERY difficult to fix on the computer later (if not impossible).

#7: WIND AT YOUR BACK

Birds tend to fly, land, and take off against the wind. So if you're photographing birds, you'll want to try to have the wind against your back which means the birds should fly towards you.
A good rule of thumb... you "usually" want an East wind in the morning (see the sun rule above), and more of a West wind in the late afternoon.

#8: ADUST SETTINGS BEFORE YOU LEAVE

Adjust your settings before you leave the house. I was recently out photographing Eagles and the first eagle appeared before anyone thought. One person in the group was ready, and the rest of the group missed an amazing shot, because they hadn't dialed in the right settings yet.

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#9: KEEP SHOOTING!

When bird in flight action is happening around you (especially if they're feeding) try to keep shooting after you think the magic moment has happened. Often, other birds will swoop in and small squabbles or battles will occur. I've put my camera down too many times and missed some incredible moments.

#10: GET LOW

It's not always possible, but photographing on the bird's eye level can be a very powerful image. That doesn't mean you have to be low. I've put my camera on the ground before and extended the LCD screen so I could frame up photos and they often are some of my favorites.

#11: LOOK FOR BACKGROUND SEPARATION

Always be on the look out for background separation. Often your f-stops are limited by the lens and gear you have. So shooting at f/1.8 (which helps with blurry backgrounds) with a 400mm lens isn't possible. But if you can put some distance between the bird and its background, you'll be able to get those beautiful buttery smooth backgrounds.

#12: FRAMING

This one may get me in trouble with the cropping police but...
I simply suggset just trying to keep the bird in the center of the frame. Trying to nail the composition of a bird in flight is tough. Practice smooth panning, tuck your arms in close, relax and just try to keep the bird centered. Your auto focus zone (if you choose center) will work great and you can always crop creatively later on the computer.

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