

Action Photography Tips

(example: birds in flight - BIF)

(By Jim Lamb, Inspired by Mike Stensvold, Melissa Groo & Steve Perry)

The setup (Including Back Button AutoFocus [BBAF] & hand-held):

- Action makes a tripod difficult, unless a gimbal is used. For distant subjects (e.g. birds), you might need a 400 to 600mm capability. An f/2.8 or f/4 lens is desirable, f/8 the limit.
- Set autofocus to Continuous (CF/AF-C), rather than Single (SF/AF-S). This allows focusing to adjust while the dedicated AF button (BBAF) (, or shutter release,) is pressed.
- Set focus to Manual override. Using CF+MF allows you to manually prefocus a ballpark distance so autofocusing takes less time. If not, autofocus on an object at a distance similar to what you expect for your action.
- If your telephoto has a Focus Limit, set it for the desired range only (∞ -5m).
- Use the Auto-Focus Lock (AF-L or AF-ON) button to hold focus instead of setting focus with the shutter button (BBAF).
- Set autofocusing to Release Priority. This allows the shutter to fire on demand regardless of autofocus lock, or flash recharge.
- Switch AF from the Shutter Release half-press to the AF-ON or other button (BBAF).
- Set the focus target(s) to Dynamic center point (DSLRs), or area/group/zone boxes (DSLMS). This allows faster focusing and avoids distracting nearby objects.
- Set CF Lock to On. This feature keeps the focus priority on the same object, even when other objects momentarily appear in front of your subject (timing controlled).
- Set the Image Stabilizer/Vibration Compensation (IS/VC/VR) to Off. This allows faster shutter release and possibly sharper images. (Shutter speeds are fast enough $> 1/500^{\text{th}}$.)
- Set the AF Illuminator to Off and Low Light Assist to Off. This allows faster focusing.
- Set Exposure Control to Manual. This allows faster exposures and avoids improper exposures due to backgrounds or dark/light subjects, etc. (Meter pavement, grass, jeans.)
- Set the Shutter Speed to a high number, such as $1/1000^{\text{th}}$ +, to stop action. Birds should be $1/2,000^{\text{th}}$ to $1/3,200^{\text{th}}$ (far to close), with speedsters at $1/4,000^{\text{th}}$ +. (Silent Shutter to Off.)
- Set a higher ISO setting, such as 400 to 800. Higher in dim light. Try Manual with Auto ISO with limits (set Max & Auto Min if you have it). If cropping is planned, reduce ISO.
- Set a wide aperture to isolate your subject, but try to avoid the last couple of wide open apertures for best quality (DSLRs). Closer subjects may need stopping down to $\approx f/8$.
- Set the Sequential Shooting mode to On. Lower speeds allow better focusing.
- Set the File Format to JPEG Fine or 12 bit raw (if ISO > 800 &/or for buffer limits), to allow faster frame rates, if needed.

When ready:

- Get a stance or position that allows balance throughout your motions. Feet pointed where you expect shutter releases.
- Set focus on an object near your capture expected distance.
- Track the subject and hold the AF-ON button (BBAF) (, or shutter release [SR] half-way).
- When steady tracking the subject, press the release and capture a sequence of shots.
- Follow through your motion as you lift off the release and AF-ON button (BBAF) (or SR).
- Chimp (with zoom) for sharpness/blur. Look up and around.