

Capturing flight

Winners and finalists of Bird Photographer of the Year share their tips for success with **Hollie Latham Hucker**

This year over 23,000 images were submitted to the Bird Photographer of the Year competition by photographers all around the world in the hope of winning the grand title and £3,500 in prize money.

The winning image – ‘When Worlds Collide’ by Canadian photographer Patricia Homonylo – is one that you won’t forget in a hurry. It depicts over 4,000 dead birds from window collisions in Toronto, carefully positioned in a series of rings, symbolising the poignancy of the circle of life.

‘Each year more than one billion birds die in North America alone due to collisions with windows,’ says Homonylo. ‘I am a conservation photojournalist and have been working with the Fatal Light Awareness Program (FLAP), where we save window-collision survivors in Toronto. Sadly, most of the birds we find are already dead. They are collected and at the end of the year we create this impactful display to honour the lives lost and to increase public awareness.’

This image, which was also the Conservation category winner, really sums up the core values at the heart of this competition and what it seeks to do. It raises awareness of human impact on the environment and the devastation it can cause to wild birds. This year the competition donated £5,000 to partner charity Birds on the Brink, which provides vital funding to grass-roots bird conservation projects around the world. (See more details at www.birdsonthebrink.co.uk).

Other categories in the adult competition included Best Portrait, Birds in the Environment, Bird Behaviour, Birds in Flight, Black and White, Urban Birds, Conservation and Comedy Bird. There was also a Portfolio and Video award too.

The Young Bird Photographer of the Year title was awarded to 14-year-old Spanish photographer Andrés Luis Domínguez Blanco for his creative angle on a nuthatch scrambling down an oak tree.

Here we pick our favourites from each of the main categories and speak to the photographers for their tips on capturing award-winning images. All awarded images will be published in a hardback coffee-table book by Princeton University Press (£30), which is now available to buy online, see website below.

If you’re interested in entering, the 2025 contest is now open for entries. Visit www.birdpoty.com for more information and to view all the winning images from this year’s competition.



When Worlds Collide by Patricia Seaton Homonylo, Canada Conservation (Single Image), Gold Award Winner and Bird Photographer of the Year 2024

Instagram: @patriciahomonylophoto

Each year during spring and fall migration, more than 1.3 billion birds die in North America as a result of window collisions. A network of dedicated volunteers head out each morning to pick up the pieces. For over 30 years FLAP (Fatal Light Awareness Program) volunteers have patrolled cities worldwide in search of birds that have collided with windows. While their efforts have saved an impressive number of bird collision survivors, the majority do not survive the impact. But the fallen birds are never left behind. Their bodies are collected, and their

lives honoured in the annual ‘Bird Layout’. The Layout brings volunteers together to arrange the dead birds in an emotive and provocative display. While The Layout honours the fallen birds and brings closure for the volunteers, it is also a critical event that raises public awareness and highlights a global issue. I have volunteered with FLAP for four years and attend The Layout annually. From hawks to hummingbirds, this 2022 display includes more than 4,000 birds.

PATRICIA'S TOP TIPS

1 I don’t ‘chase’ any wildlife for my photography. I will choose a location and let things unfold in front of me. I prefer nature to reveal itself which takes patience and creates amazing results. I believe my respect and love of wildlife creates my best images.

2 It’s the story that matters most. Go beyond the portrait. Never underestimate the power of a single image to tell a complex story. What do you want to say in your work? Let that guide you.

3 Know your camera inside and out, forward and backwards, so you can operate by feel and in the dark. While I may sit in one spot for hours, wildlife only gives you a split second to react. There is no single magic setting. Research and observe your subject so you can determine whether your shutter speed needs to be 1/2000sec or 1/160sec.

Migratory birds, various. Toronto, Ontario, Canada.
Sony A7R IV with Sony 16–35mm f/2.8 lens at 16mm; 1/160sec at f/4, ISO 500

Playful Fledgling by Jack Zhi, United States

Bird Behaviour, Silver Award Winner

Instagram @jack.zhi.photo

This peregrine falcon fledgling had been flying for over a week and his skills had improved by the day. While he still took food from his parents, he had started to practise his hunting skills. He was not good enough to catch live birds in the air yet, so he took baby steps by chasing a fluttering butterfly. He was certainly much faster than the butterfly and also nimble enough to keep up with it. Look at the concentration! He was successful on occasion, caught the butterfly, played with it for a second, then released it. I have been photographing peregrines for years, and this was the first time I have seen fledglings play with butterflies.

JACK'S TOP TIPS

1 Find shots that not only have an initial wow factor, but also have an interesting story. Like in this image, why would a juvenile falcon face off with a butterfly: for food, for fun, or hunting practice?



Peregrine Falcon, *Falco peregrinus*. Southern California, United States. Sony A9 II, 600mm; 1/4000sec at f/5.6, ISO 640

2 Capture the emotion of the animals, the undivided concentration of the falcon for example, with the talons up at the chest, ready to strike.

3 Fix your exposure based on the subject when background changes quickly, from skies to cliffs to ocean, for example.



Swanception by Samuel Stone, UK

Best Portrait, Silver Award Winner

Instagram @samualcstone_photo

I conceived the idea for this image some time ago, but each time I attempted to turn it into reality one of the elements was not right. It felt like I was in a creative rut and I had not taken an image I was really happy with for a while. On this particular morning, I decided to

Mute Swan, *Cygnus olor*. London, United Kingdom. Nikon Z6 with Sigma 150-600mm f/5-6.3 lens at 155mm; 1/500sec at f/6.3, ISO 1600

return to this idea out of desperation. I spotted my local mute swans in their usual spot, preening in the morning light. Fortunately, it was also a crisp morning, and the mist was slowly descending, creating a soft morning glow. After so many attempts, everything finally came together when a swan swam into the perfect spot. Finally, I created the image I had pictured in my mind.

SAMUAL'S TOP TIPS

1 Get to know your subject and learn their patterns of behaviour. This will help you predict their movements and get into the right positions. Larger birds often take off and land into the wind. I've found this useful knowledge for getting in-flight shots.

2 Photograph birds common in your local area. They're accessible and offer opportunities to practise technique and learn new compositions. Choose the story you want to tell and keep trying for that image; having a clear vision will help you to execute it.

3 Many bird species are highly intelligent; never underestimate their capacity to surprise you with interesting behaviour, as you might capture an image of something unique (be ready).

Dawn's Whispers by Hermis Haridas, India

Birds in Flight, Gold Award Winner

Instagram: @hermis.haridas

A Eurasian hoopoe took flight with its wings spread in a smooth motion across the canvas of the early-morning sky illuminated by the sunrise's bright hues. I saw that this bird would occasionally grab its prey in the air and other times on the ground. Additionally, I noticed that each time it caught prey, it flew in the same direction to a nearby tree. That was when I had the idea to photograph the bird against a background divided into dark and light, representing the contrasting sides of existence. The following morning, I returned to the same spot well before sunrise, eager to witness nature's spectacle unfold once again. Anticipation heightened as the first rays of light bathed the landscape, and, true to my expectations, the hoopoe appeared in the distance, gliding gracefully towards the perch that was familiar from the previous day. With my camera poised and settings adjusted, I commenced capturing the unfolding scene. Among the flurry of clicks, I chanced upon a frame that resonated deeply with me – a moment frozen in time, brimming with unique charm. It was as if nature had bestowed upon me a gift, a singular composition that encapsulates the essence of the hoopoe's beauty and grace. Indeed, many have remarked that this frame is a marvel that cannot be replicated – a testament to the serendipitous wonders that await those who seek them amid the natural world.

HERMIS'S TOP TIPS

1 Use a fast shutter speed (1/1600sec or faster) to freeze motion, and set an Auto or High ISO for low light. An aperture around f/5.6 to f/8 helps keep the bird sharp. A long lens (400mm+) and tripod are essential for stability and reach.

2 Use continuous autofocus (AI Servo/AF-C) to track birds in action. Frame your shot with the rule of thirds for a balanced composition, leaving space on the direction of movement.

3 Early mornings and late afternoons provide soft, golden light and the birds will be more active. A camera that has a very good low-light performance will be very helpful in such situations.



Eurasian Hoopoe, *Upupa epops*. Al Qudra Lakes, Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Nikon Z8 with Nikon 400mm f/2.8 lens. 400mm; 1/3200sec at f/6.3, ISO 320

Immersion by Kat Zhou, United States
Birds in the Environment, Gold Award Winner

Instagram: @katsnaps.art

Here we see a trio of northern gannets diving into the ocean on a sunny day in Shetland. The species is Scotland's largest seabird, and they are remarkably adept in the water, with the ability to dive to depths as far as 22 metres. I took this photo while scuba diving from a boat near Noss, which is home to the UK's seventh largest colony of northern gannets. In the past the population has been estimated at around 25,000 birds, though their numbers were unfortunately severely reduced by the avian flu outbreak. It is unclear when, or if, their population will be able to recover. Dead herring from a local herring fishery were used to attract the birds to the boat.



Northern Gannet, *Morus bassanus*. Shetland, United Kingdom
Nikon D850 with Nikon 8-15mm Fisheye lens. 15mm; 1/250sec at f/14, ISO 100

KAT'S TOP TIPS

1 Experiment with different angles of light throughout the day. Shooting flying birds in backlit conditions can be especially beautiful, as the backlight creates a glow in their wings!

2 Most birds in flight require a shutter speed of around 1/2000sec or above for tack-sharp wings (but fast birds, like hummingbirds, generally require 1/4000sec or above!). However, you can also create an artistic blur in the wings by shooting at a lower shutter speed.

3 Many birds, especially males, are especially bright and colourful in their breeding plumage, which can be a great time for photography. For example, California brown pelicans are generally in their brightest breeding plumage during mid-January!

Grey Heron, *Ardea cinerea*. Okavango Delta, Botswana.
Canon EOS R6 II with Canon 400mm f/2.8 II lens. 400mm; 1/200sec at f/11, ISO 2500



Eclipse by William Steel, South Africa
Black and White, Silver Award Winner

Instagram: @williamsteelphotography

Here we see a grey heron as it looks for a roosting place in the top of a dead tree, illuminated by a full moon. Knowing that it was a penumbral lunar eclipse, my guests

and I went in search of a distinctive subject to place in front of it. As the heron jostled for position alongside some larger marabou storks, we managed to capture the moment just before the heron flew away. Using a high f-stop, heavily underexposing, and keeping a slow shutter speed of only 1/200sec, I was able to capture some of the moon's detail, while suppressing most of the noise.

WILLIAM'S TOP TIPS

1 Don't ignore the 'common' species. They are often overlooked, but these are the subjects that give you the best chance of capturing creative imagery.

2 Try to use light in unique ways. Backlighting, rim lighting, low-key lighting, and high-key lighting are all styles that we see more with large wildlife but can be very effective with bird photography too!

3 We have all seen thousands of 'bird on a stick' images. These likely won't win awards or garner much excitement from a viewer. Surprise people with images they may never have seen before.

Helmetshrikes Preparing to Sleep by Gary Collier, UK
Comedy Bird Photo, Bronze Award Winner

We were on a safari, and returning to camp in Sabi Sands, South Africa, on a dark March evening. We stopped, having picked up some unusual sounds, although unsure what they were. Then we heard chattering and fluttering high above us. When illuminated with the

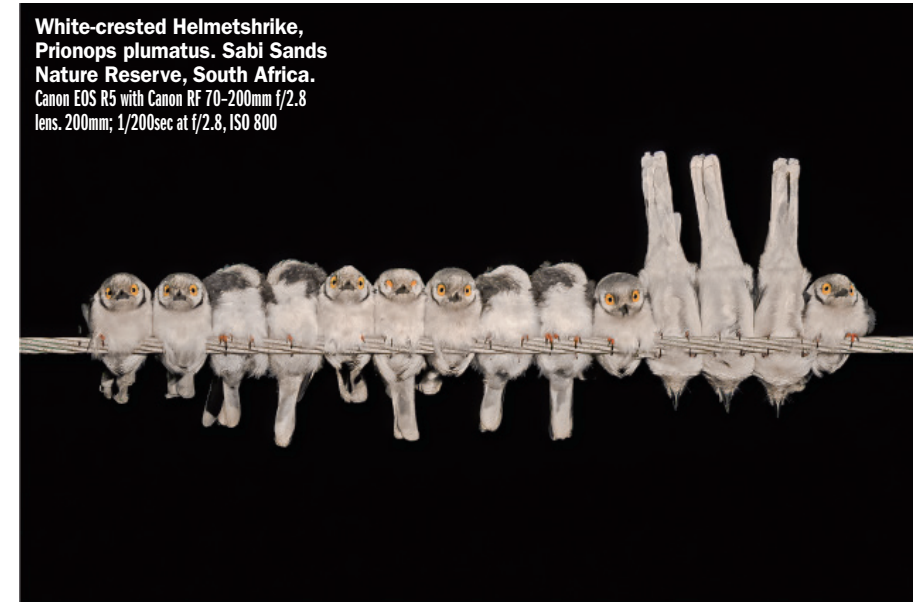
lamp on the vehicle, we saw these helmetshrikes huddling together against a night that was starting to turn colder. Another wonderful experience in Africa!

GARY'S TOP TIPS

1 Notice and adjust to the changing conditions. We moved from normal daylight to full darkness quickly. This image was only possible by quickly changing to a fast f/2.8 lens in response to those conditions, before the opportunity even appeared.

2 Manually set the shutter speed and aperture for your planned subject and set to Auto ISO. Then all the individual shot exposure control can be done using exposure compensation. On my Canon R5 this is easily set up on the back dial and quickly controlled using my right thumb.

3 Know the relationship between your camera controls and image output. Blown highlights and shadows without detail can ruin an image. Practise so it becomes second nature.



White-crested Helmetshrike, *Prionops plumatus*. Sabi Sands Nature Reserve, South Africa.
Canon EOS R5 with Canon RF 70-200mm f/2.8 lens. 200mm; 1/200sec at f/2.8, ISO 800

Crows Watching TV by Tomáš Grim, Czech Republic
Urban Birds, Bronze Award Winner

Instagram: @tomas_grim_photography

Berlin Television Tower, the tallest structure in Germany, provides a great background for urban photography. But in January it turned out to be a challenge: I was freezing, it was dark from sunrise to sunset, and pictures were poor. Disappointed, I stumbled upon a mixed hooded crow and jackdaw roost, conveniently positioned against the desired tower. Taking acceptably sharp shots at 1/25sec, without a tripod and shivering, was not easy. The dark scene coupled with mostly cold tones perfectly captured my feelings. However, the sprinkle of warmer colours gave a hope of better times in the spring.



Hooded Crow, *Corvus cornix*. Berlin, Germany
Nikon D500 with Nikon 200-500mm f/5.6 lens at 400mm; 1/25sec at f/6.3, ISO 5000

TOMAS'S TOP TIPS

1 Don't focus on (and thus become unconsciously constrained by) the work of other photographers – just follow your heart.

2 I almost never plan in advance what and how to photograph something – I follow the 'here and now' approach, taking advantage of unique aspects of immediate situations that I am happy to stumble upon.

3 As a friend pointed out to me, virtually all my images that got attention in photo competitions are those of LBJs (insignificant grey and brown birds) and not any colourful and spectacular ones. Any bird can be a 'star' – if you don't see it, take a different angle, change the composition, distance and play with exposition parameters.