

# Raptor Shooting- Observations and Thoughts

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We had a great field trip shoot organized by Philip Wong. We had great weather conditions, good light and a very knowledgeable host James Cowie, with his wife. I had cobbled together advice from different RHCC members who had been there before yet found that I was not that well prepared. This note is an attempt to provide more information to groups who visit after us.

The setup for different birds is similar in that they fly between a perch further away to one closer to where we normally shoot from. Depending on the size and type of flight pattern of the bird, the starting perch can range from 30ft for owls to 300 ft for the Golden Eagle. We were shooting from about 10-20 ft behind the landing perch.

James has most birds sit for portraits before flying them back and forth between the perches, five to seven times per bird. He is a photographer himself so provides good advice on light direction, where to shoot from and what to expect from the bird flight. Our visit had the following:

1. Great Horned Owl (Oliver)
2. Screeching Owl (Gordon & Cecil)
3. Harris Hawk (Doughty)
4. Gyrfalcon (Sparks)
5. Bald Eagle (Sam)
6. Snowy Owl (Mr. Snowflakes)
7. Eurasian Eagle Owl (Frodo)
8. Golden Eagle
9. Harlan's Hawk (Donovan)

Shooting opportunities:

1. Bird on perch for still photographs – 10-15 ft distance
2. Bird starting its flight from perch – approx. 30 ft to 300 ft away. This has good dynamics of bird preparing for takeoff and doing so slowly – wing patterns for getting to normal flight momentum
  - a. 100-400mm zoom is helpful
  - b. 1/2000<sup>th</sup> sec to 1/4000<sup>th</sup> sec at F5.6 to stop motion blur and have sufficient depth of field
3. Bird in full flight: Smooth flight, fast for some birds, close to the ground for most – is a challenge for keeping focus and for keeping bird filling the frame, especially as it flies towards where you are. You have to continuously reduce zoom while maintaining focus.
4. Landing on perch: birds have spread their wings and put the brakes on, are slower than full flight. The challenge here is good focus and a drastically reduced zoom to capture the full wingspan of the landing bird at 10-20 ft, especially the larger ones like the

eagles. Birds will always slow down against the wind direction, so take position upwind from the bird landing spot.

Thoughts, to self, for next opportunity to shoot there:

1. Tripods are relatively useless and monopods almost so – consider not taking them
2. 70-300mm lens is probably the best range, as long as your camera can focus as well as keep focus on a moving subject. Different cameras have specific support for such situations so read up / practice them beforehand. 100-400mm is a good bet although one may be squeezed to get a full view of an eagle landing on a perch less than 20 ft away. 70-200mm works well in most situations but 500mm or 600mm is probably too long to capture landings from 10-20ft
3. Single point focus is better than one with too many points as birds are small and fast, making it easier to lose focus
4. As we capture at high speed, need a high-speed SD card to write images. It is easy to capture 2000-4000 images during the shoot so capacity to store is essential as is battery life
5. Best shooting opportunities:
  - a. Still life
  - b. Starting the flight from further perch, includes bird in motion
  - c. Landing with full wing spread – slow movement, relatively close range under 20 ft
  - d. Eagle coming over pond with one wing touching the water. Iconic shot and probably the only mid-flight one worth focussing on compared to other birds who fly close to the ground / grass thereby not making it so iconic
  - e. I'd focus on the takeoff stage with high-speed shooting and then another burst of the landing, giving the camera time to store between bursts
  - f. For the eagle skimming the pond, focus on mid-flight burst and another for landing or shoot these on different bird flight trips. I tried to do both mid-flight and landing in one and messed both up - one was keeping focus on mid-flight (started capture in early flight and not when it had come over the water) and did not zoom out to get full bird for landing (wings were outside frame for most shots)