

Winter Crow Roost: Photography Guide



Each winter, crows gather in cities across the United States. These Crows may number in the tens of thousands as they assemble in pre-roost staging areas and then converge in flight into the overnight, communal roost, typically just after sunset. This amazing avian spectacle provides an opportunity for stunning images by photographers at all levels.

Getting the best images will often depend on lighting and location options in the local setting. It is possible to take terrific images of large groupings of staging and roosting birds as well as birds in flight. Camera gear will be important, but great images can be captured at all skill and equipment levels. This brief guide will help you make the most of local possibilities.

Advanced Planning

- **Preparation:** No matter what level of gear you are using, planning and preparing in advance will help you capture much better images.
- **Scouting:** If possible, make a scouting trip at least one-to-two days in advance to become familiar with the local area and location options for best images.
- **Weather Check:** Check overall weather conditions, especially levels and types of cloud cover; wind speed and direction; and temperature levels, including wind chill.
- **Arrival:** Plan to be in the area about 60 minutes before sunset time.
- **The Golden Hour:** The golden hour (60 minutes before sunset) under clear-sky conditions provides optimal lighting for outstanding staging and flight images.
- **The Blue Hour:** The blue hour (60 minutes after sunset) under clear-sky conditions provides much more challenging lighting conditions as well as different options for flight, staging, and roosting images. The blue hour refers to the time when the sky transitions from a gentle light blue to a much darker blue before darkness settles in for the night. In nearby cityscapes, ambient lighting picks up.

- **Sun Location:** Determine in advance or with an app where the sun will set relative to shooting locations. Staging locations and flight images light up when the sun is at your back. Later lighting conditions, when you are shooting directly at the colorful dusk sky at and after sunset, may provide dramatic colors and images. You may also see perched birds and those in flight.

Composition: Consider Your Options

- **Test Images:** Look for a range of possibilities in advance, and take many test images.
- **Composition Locations:** Composition preferences differ, but consider the birds on the ground as well as those perched and in flight. Backgrounds could include sky and clouds, a flowing river, buildings, roadways, bridges, utility poles, or lighting poles. You might also choose solid ground for the foreground.
- **Timing:** Make sure you have plenty of time at the location, and take test shots to decide the composition of your photo.

- **Birds in Flight:** With birds in flight, it is usually best to leave room for them to fly farther into the frame.
- **Flocks:**
 - * Large flocks provide an opportunity to capture striking silhouettes, preferably against a colorful sunset or clear-sky background with no trees or cluttered-background elements. However, for some images you may want to include local landmarks that are familiar to viewers.
 - * With flocks it is best to focus on the most dominant birds and those in the same plane of focus.
 - * Try panning while birds are in flight, and lock focus on a small, moving group.
- **Perched Birds:** With perched birds it is usually best to leave some room both above and below the perched bird in order to include other elements in the image.
- **Horizon:** Keep images level to the horizon as much as possible.
- **Composition Elements:** Adjust and capture a range of composition elements, and then make final choices later during the processing of the image.



Compact Cameras and Smartphones

Both compact cameras and smartphones work well because you are capturing a larger action scene and not trying to get close-up images.

- **Overall Scene:** Look to capture the overall scene, including background; foreground; and, most importantly, the birds either on the ground, perched, or in flight.
- **Background Lighting:** The background lighting will be very important, and silhouette scenes may work very well.
- **Natural Lighting:** Go with natural lighting. Do not use the flash. You are shooting at a distance, and the flash only illuminates a few feet, which can ruin the look of your photo.

DSLR and Mirrorless Cameras

DSLR and Mirrorless cameras have interchangeable lenses. These cameras provide better control and have larger sensors than smartphones, providing much better image quality.

- **Lens:** Consider a standard zoom lens with a wide or standard focal-length range, anywhere between 14 and 70 millimeters. You should consider an extended, telephoto, zoom lens for close-ups of birds farther away to bring your subject closer.
- **Tripod/Timer:** As light fades, use a tripod and timer or remote for long-exposure images.
- **Exposure:**

Shoot in aperture-priority mode up until about 30 minutes after sunset on clear nights. No flash needed.

- * Set aperture at F5.6.
- * Increase ISO as needed as light fades. You may typically go as high as 6400, or, in some cases, higher.
- * Adjust exposure compensation as needed. Exposure compensation will fine-tune the amount of light in your photograph.
- * Use continuous or burst-drive shooting mode.
- * Choose AI Servo (Canon) and AF-C (Nikon, Sony and most other brands), which are modes for flight action.

About 30 minutes after sunset, on a clear night, autofocus capability will usually drop off significantly. This is a great time to shift to long-exposure photography. Shoot in aperture-priority mode. Again, no flash needed.

- * Set aperture to 8.0.
- * Set ISO to 100.
- * Use single-shot mode, not burst.
- * Adjust exposure compensation as needed.
- * Select timer for at least two seconds, or use remote timer.
- **Resolution:** To capture as much information and detail as possible, set your camera to the highest resolution (JPEG), or take uncompressed images (TIFF or RAW).

Conclusion

- **Keep shooting!** Play around with different exposures, and focus on various subjects. The light changes continuously.
- **Edit your images.** You can crop, add contrast, tweak colors, layer, and do so much more by processing your images using photo-processing software.

Published by Craig Gibson

Craig Gibson is a bird photographer and writer with a passion for avian ecology and conservation issues. He has photographed birds from Alaska to Antarctica. His current focus is on everything related to the Winter Crow Roost in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Craig's crow photos and articles have appeared in the Essex Art Center exhibition; *Bird Observer*; Mass Audubon publications; the *Eagle Tribune* newspaper; Cornell Lab's Bird Academy new, online course "The Hidden Life of the American Crow"; a new addition to the *Peterson's Guide* series that focuses on bird behavior; *Muse Magazine*, a quarterly publication for students about science, nature and history; and *Massachusetts Wildlife Magazine*. He is one of the founders of The Crow Patrol.

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