

Getting the Most From Your “Better Beamer” Flash X-tender™
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For years wildlife photographers have been using the “Better Beamer” Flash X-tender™ in order to increase the output of their external flash units when shooting with telephoto lenses, and for good reason - it’s lightweight, convenient and effective. The “Better Beamer” Flash X-tender™ is a compact device consisting of two plastic side arms and a flexible fresnel lens that, when assembled, attaches to the front of your external flash with a Velcro strap. The Flash X-tender™ comes in 5 sizes and fits most popular external flash units. (For model and sizing info see the Flash X-tender™ products page in the NatureScapes.Net store.)



What does it do?

Since the Better Beamer Flash X-tender™ narrows the beam of light emitted from your flash to cover an angle of view approximately equal to that of a 300mm lens, it increases the range of your flash by a little more than two stops. But increasing output is only one of the advantages of using the Better Beamer Flash X-tender™. This increase in range also shortens the time it takes your flash to refresh between each shot and reduces battery consumption.

Assembly



To install the Flash X-tender™ follow these instructions (courtesy of the manufacturer, Visual Echoes Inc.):

- A. Unwind the Velcro strap wrapped around the flash brackets.
- B. Position one bracket on each side of the flash head. Note that the bracket ears help maintain the alignment of the X-tender to the flash head.
- C. Wrap the Velcro strap around the flash head to secure the brackets in place.
- D. An additional piece of Velcro has been attached to the Velcro strap. You will need to adhere this to the top or bottom of your flash head to keep the strap securely in place.
- E. Attach the lens to the Velcro strips on the front of the brackets. Your Flash X-tender™ is now ready to use. ALWAYS remove or cover the lens when not in use.
- F. With TTL flash no additional compensation needs to be added due to the use of the Flash X-tender™. Use the same settings that you would normally set on your flash. The Flash X-tender™ provides increased distance from your flash to the subject with both fill and full flash lighting.

Manufacturer's note: This unit [the Flash X-tender™] is designed for use with lenses of 300mm or longer. If used with a shorter lens, please pre-flash the subject to ensure coverage by the flash. Use of an auxiliary arm is recommended.

Other Considerations

Contrary to the instructions above, I find it easier to attach the lens to the two arms beforehand as it makes it easier to hold the arms onto each side of the flash using one hand, while attaching the strap with the other hand. Additionally, as suggested in B above, I line up the tabs of each arm with the front face of my flash unit, but I then slide them forward about ¼" which, in my experience, results in slightly increased effective distance.

While the "Better Beamer" Flash X-tender™ is recommended only for use with effective focal length of 300mm or more, it can be used with much wider lenses as long as the area needing illumination (your subject) is smaller than full frame and your flash is properly aimed. As suggested in the instructions, a pre-flash or test shot is a good idea to ensure you are achieving the desired results.

Once installed, it is recommended that you set your flash zoom setting to 50mm in order to obtain even coverage from the Flash X-tender™. Experimenting with different zoom settings will give you mixed results. Setting a wider zoom results in a narrower beam of light emitted by the Flash X-tender™. In a pinch I sometimes widen the zoom setting to obtain a little more range, but am careful to properly aim the unit.

As recommended by the manufacturer, I use an auxiliary flash arm, or flash bracket, when using an external flash with the "Better Beamer" Flash X-tender™. Once mounted, I carefully align the front of the fresnel lens with the front of my lens hood so that the beam of light from my flash does not shoot over or under my subject. I use the Wimberley flash bracket system which facilitates aiming the unit by rotating the bracket up or down. (store link to flash brackets) This is an important step as some of today's flash units tend to sag downward once the Better Beamer Flash X-tender™ is installed.



Use of flash can bring out details, even on a dark bird. Manipulating your flash settings and camera's exposure settings can allow you to darken a light background as well.

Advanced use

Estimating Effective Range using TTL:

It is easy to estimate the effective range of your “Better Beamer” Flash X-tender™ if your flash has a distance scale.

In TTL your flash unit will display an effective near distance and an effective far distance.

The near distance indicates the minimum distance your subject needs to be in order for the flash to be able to properly expose it using its minimum power capability. But, since the “Better Beamer” Flash X-tender™ adds at least two stops of output, then this number is only about half of what the actual minimum distance would need to be in order to still obtain a proper exposure at your flashes minimum power capability.

Confused? Here is an example:

If your flash indicates a minimum distance of 10 feet then you would double that number when using the “Better Beamer” Flash X-tender™. So, anything closer than 20 feet would be too close for the flash to properly expose it and the image would be over-exposed. In this case it would be wise to remove the “Better Beamer” Flash X-tender™ in order to prevent this over-exposure.

If you have ever over-exposed a shot using the “Better Beamer” Flash X-tender™ this may be why!

The far distance that is displayed on your flash unit indicates the maximum distance that your subject can be in order to achieve a proper exposure. Again, when the “Better Beamer” is installed, this number can be approximately doubled to obtain the maximum distance and still achieve the proper exposure at the given setting.

For example, if your flash indicates a maximum distance of 40 feet then with the “Better Beamer” Flash X-tender™ installed, you can expect to achieve the proper exposure up to about 80 feet. Anything further than that and the amount of flash reduces exponentially.

Estimating Effective range using Manual Flash:

When shooting in manual mode your flash will only give you one distance – this indicates the distance that your subject needs to be in order to achieve a full flash exposure for a middle-toned subject. As with TTL, this number can be approximately doubled when using the “Better Beamer” Flash X-tender™ resulting in the proper exposure for a middle-toned subject at full flash. If shooting fill flash this number can then be doubled again, for instance, if you are looking to achieve a -2 stop fill effect. Add 50% to the doubled result and you will achieve approximately a -1 fill effect.

Confused again? Here is an example of the last scenario.

If the subject is 60 feet and the beamer yields 2 stops of increase in flash range, then half of 60 or 30 feet would be a full flash exposure. Half of it again would be a -2 stop fill flash exposure or a 15 foot indication on the flash head range scale.

If I wanted minus 2 stops I would set my flash so that it indicated 15 feet or $15 \times 2 = 30$ (full flash) $\times 2 = 60$ feet (minus 2 stops).

If you photograph smaller subjects with focal lengths of 300mm or more and are looking to increase the output of your external flash, the lightweight, convenient, and effective "Better Beamer" Flash X-tender™ has been used successfully for years by other nature photographers – give it a try!



Greg Downing's zest for nature photography stems from a deep love for birds. For years he has been specializing in avian photography and has developed a style for clean, dynamic and powerful compositions of birds in their natural environment. He makes a living teaching the craft worldwide through his popular workshops and tours through www.gdphotography.com. As he travels the world taking pictures, he enjoys meeting others, teaching, and sharing his enthusiasm and expertise while making new lifelong friends in the process. Greg is also the publisher of NatureScapes.Net and enjoys sharing his knowledge in the online forums.

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