

I Just Got a Super Telephoto...Now What? **Text copyright Heather Forcier, all rights reserved**

It may have been years in the making, but now you finally have that 500mm, 600mm, or perhaps a super telephoto zoom lens. You may be asking, "What do I do next?" You wouldn't be alone – this is a very common question for new super telephoto owners.

Proper Support

An often overlooked or underestimated but critical component in a telephoto setup is the support. This is usually a tripod but can also take other forms, such as a beanbag or ground pod. There are a very rare few who can effectively hand-hold these mammoth lenses.

The glass in your new, coveted lens can perform its best when stable, without unwanted vibrations. A sturdy tripod, rated for the weight of your setup, is crucial. This is not an item to skimp on. Consider that a lesser camera and lens on a good tripod could possibly be capable of sharper captures than a great setup on inadequate support. What is the point of having a super telephoto without letting it operate at its best?

How do you find the right tripod? Read the specifications, know what the maximum load is with your setup and factor in everything you may have mounted - it all adds up! Consider your specific needs. You may want something light if you have to hike with it, or maybe you need something that collapses small if you travel by airlines with weight or baggage size restrictions. Be sure the height of your tripod not only fits you, but also your potential shooting situations, such as on uneven terrain, or when trying to raise it up high to photograph a nest, or when lowering for ground-level shooting. Also, it's helpful to find out what other nature photographers use – getting feedback from people with similar setups combined with practical experience can be invaluable.

Tripod Heads

There are numerous tripod heads on the market, but the weight, size, and use of a super telephoto require some special consideration. You will want the setup to be well balanced and not at risk for flopping over on the head. Gimbal-style heads are among the most popular. The right one will allow you to balance heavy gear and track a bird in flight fluidly – almost effortlessly – increasing the odds you'll get the shot you want. Possibly the single-most popular gimbal head for nature photographers is the Wimberley Head. The same manufacturer also offers a side-mount "Sidekick" which mounts to a ballhead and provides the functions of a gimbal head. While not appropriate for the weight of a 600 f4, many have used a 500 f4, and smaller, on it successfully. The main advantages here are that the Sidekick costs less than the full gimbal head and you will always have your ballhead with you. For the nature photographer who mixes wildlife and landscape photography, this can make the ballhead immediately available and reduce the items you need to carry into the field with you.

Lens Plate or Replacement Foot

Due to their weight, super telephotos are mounted to the tripod head instead of the camera. (Imagine the stress on the lens mount of the camera if it had to hold up that weight!) The lens should come with a rotating collar and lens foot. A lens plate can be mounted to the foot which would allow it to fit into the tripod head clamp. Another option is a replacement foot, which can lower the profile of your lens, reduce the overall weight just a bit and may allow you to mount the lens to the tripod head.

Both options may be available with "stop screws" – small screws that stick out of the bottom of the plate. These may seem strange or even annoying at first because they require the lens be mounted into the clamp from the side, but photographers use them for a very good reason. If the clamp hasn't been tightened all the way and the setup slides fore or aft, the stop screws should catch and keep everything from sliding to the ground. It does happen, and anything you can do to protect your equipment is something to consider seriously.

Leveling Your Setup

A leveling base, such as the Gitzo G1321, replaces a Gitzo tripod flat plate and allows you to quickly level your gear, as opposed to adjusting each tripod leg individually each time you set it down someplace new. As a bonus, there is a quick release lever on the G1321 base that helps you remove the head easily when needed. Anyone who has struggled to remove a stuck head from a flat plate can certainly appreciate this feature, especially in the field when seconds count. The downside is that a leveling base will increase the weight of the rig.

While many long lenses have a "detent" – a noticeable resting spot that should align the lens in a horizontal or vertical shooting position, many photographers have found it easier to rely on a second bubble level, such as one mounted in the hotshoe, instead. (If using a flash cord, you can glue a level to the top of the hotshoe mount with five-minute epoxy.)

Leveling both the base and the hotshoe level will keep your horizons level - especially useful for water scenes and multi-exposure panoramics. Additionally, having a level setup allows you to pan with moving subjects more easily, as there is no misalignment requiring adjustment during your movement.

Technique

Proper long lens technique can help stabilize the setup and help improve your chances of capturing sharper images. It's critical to understand and practice technique. Essentially, your right hand steadies the camera with your finger ready to gently press (not mash) the shutter at the right moment, your face is rested against the camera, your brow against the viewfinder, stabilizing the camera from behind. Finally, the left hand rests on top of the lens as far forward as can be comfortably reached, with slight pressure pulling downwards to dampen vibrations. Research on the NatureScapes.Net forums or the internet should reveal numerous detailed articles on the topic, some of which may include illustrations.



Carrying Your Gear

There are many options for carrying your gear. Again, consider your needs. Do you want to carry your super telephoto for hikes? Are you looking for a travel bag for your accumulation of gear that will protect it as much as possible during flights? Do you simply need a backpack for the telephoto and an assortment of frequently used items? You may need several bags for different uses.

Note that a fairly common way to carry a telephoto setup in the field is over the shoulder. It can be awkward and heavy, but you are ready to shoot at a second's notice. There are different types of padding that can either go on the top of the tripod legs or on your shoulder. My advice: Get into the habit of checking the setup every time before throwing it over your shoulder to ensure it's secure.

Flash

Typically, one of the benefits of outdoor photography is the often ample light source – sun. However, many situations can benefit from supplemental flash, or even flash as a “main” source of light. It is beneficial to raise the flash off the same plane as the lens due to shadows and red or “steel” eye in your subjects. To get the flash off-camera, you'll need a flash cord to connect the flash to the hotshoe and brackets to hold up the flash. Proper flash angle is needed.

Use of another accessory, a flash extender, can extend the range of your flash for smaller subjects by focusing the light in a narrower beam. This can also reduce the amount of power the flash uses and speed up the recycle time.

Incidentals

There are other items you may wish to consider for your lens. For the fraction of the cost of the telephoto, you can get a neoprene cover to slip over it. This can protect your investment from minor nicks and dings, helping to preserve the resale value. Perhaps you don't like the stock lens cover and wish to replace it with another option. If you may be doing any shooting in the rain, your lens may be sealed but you can further protect it by using a rain cover.

These are some of the basic considerations for a new super telephoto owner. Congratulations on your purchase - have fun in the field!

Editor's note: The [NatureScapes.Net store](#) was created to provide one-stop shopping for nature photographers, stocked with a variety of items - from Gitzo tripods and Sekonic Lightmeters to OP/TECH Hood Hats, photography blinds and more. We only add the items we use and have come to rely upon ourselves as very active photographers. The accessories discussed in this article, and more, are available through the online store.



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