

Getting Your Gear Around

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One of the many challenges we face as photographers with super telephotos is toting our heavy gear around, whether in the field or on an airplane en route to our destination. There are plenty of products and potential solutions out there, but often it helps to know what has worked for others before making your own decisions.

BACKPACKS FOR THE FIELD

As I've collected gear over the years I've also collected bags. My first was a Lowepro Mini Trekker; all of the equipment I used for the first few years fit into it. The backpack-style bag works well for me - I find it a relatively comfortable method for carrying. Upon acquiring a 500 f4 I graduated to a Lowepro Photo Trekker, which I still use for my telephoto gear. As my photographic interests became more diverse and my equipment list grew, I started to use the Mini Trekker again, which is now packed with most of my macro and landscape gear.



The Lowepro Photo Trekker

*Canon 500 f4 IS, Canon 400 f5.6, 1.4x / 2.0x TCs
Canon EOS 1D Mark II, two batteries, Canon 580EX
Flash brackets and other incidentals in front pocket*



The Lowepro Mini Trekker

*Canon 70-200 f2.8, Tokina 28-70, Canon 550EX
Canon EOS 1D Mark II, extension tubes
Flash brackets, close up lens, filters, and
other incidentals in front pocket*

The Lowepro quality is quite good and the dividers are customizable for a variety of configurations. There are pockets in the front of the bags, as well as on the inside of the front flap to load up with flat items. After many years of stuffing heavy equipment inside the Photo Trekker, the zipper has stopped working in one direction – it doesn't connect. It has to be zipped from the other side, and of course I worry it's only a matter of time before it stops working in the other direction as well. But the bag has been so useful to me I would replace it with another Photo Trekker without hesitation.

There have been situations where I needed to transport just my 500 f4, camera, and accessories. My solution: the Kinesis L511 long lens case with optional backpack straps and belt. My camera is mounted to the 500 f4 (hood reversed) with the 1.4x in the case and my accessories are in the front pouch and mesh holders on the side of the bag. I carry a tripod in my hands and can be ready to shoot in a relatively short amount of time. I have hiked miles with this setup – the fact is this type of gear is heavy. But the Kinesis case has made it much easier to lighten the load as much as possible and the supportive,

padded harness and belt help make it as comfortable as possible.



The Kinesis L511 Long Lens Case is perfect for the Canon 500 f4 IS with 1.4x and pro body attached.

Add backpack straps and a belt for a convenient way to carry your gear in the field.

Accessories can be stored in the SLR pouch and mesh side pockets, and you can add modular items to the harness or belt.

[Click here to see the gear that can be packed into the Kinesis L511 Long Lens Case.](#)

BELTPACKS

Sometimes you can get away with carrying your setup over your shoulder and just need something small to hold a few accessories: extra batteries, teleconverters, etc. There are a broad range of beltpacks on the market. I use a small Tamrac bag that can be found at some retail camera stores, but if you are in the market for one yourself, consider what items you need to carry and find a pack most suited to your needs.

MODULAR SYSTEMS

Kinesis and Think Tank Photo offer modular belt systems for photographic gear. Start with a padded belt and harness, both with numerous rings to attach modular components to, then select the bags you need for your specific gear to build a custom system. Each time you head out into the field you can set it up to carry just the items you need, and you can choose where you attach things to distribute the weight in a manner that works for you.



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The Kinesis modular system made a long day of hiking at White Sands National Monument with gear a bit easier.

Modular systems can be ideal for the landscape photographer. Separate pouches for a wide-angle zoom, mid-range zoom, tilt-shift lens, and flash still leave room for another pouch to carry an additional lens or photographic accessory. Kinesis offers a filter pouch that conveniently attaches around the tripod neck. Add a stabilizing, light harness and you can hike for days in comfort and still have room to carry a backpack filled with non-photographic essentials.

AIR TRAVEL WITH YOUR GEAR

With constantly changing TSA and airline regulations, it is in your best interest to communicate directly with the airline you'll be traveling on to be sure you know what checked and carry on baggage will be allowed all the way through to your destination. It is important to know when booking your tickets what aircraft(s) you will be boarding. Sometimes a trip via larger aircraft has a small hop from the last airport to your final destination on a regional jet, which will have different allowances for carry ons.

Part of packing is considering how you will need to carry your gear once you've arrived. If you choose a carry on bag made specifically for air travel with photo gear, such as the Think Tank Photo Airport Security or Airport International, it can be packed for travel and you can also work out of it from your car or blind at your destination. Otherwise you will need bags for your gear while in transit and also need to pack bags to carry your equipment once you arrive at your destination.

CARRY ON LUGGAGE

Generally, a traveler is allowed one carry on bag that fits within the size and weight guidelines and one "personal item," which can be a laptop bag. Boarding as early as possible may improve your chances of having adequate room to stow your belongings in the overhead bin and under the seat in front of you. If flying coach, try to get a seat towards the back of the plane, as most airlines board the rear passengers first, resulting in a higher likelihood there will be room for your carry on in the overhead bins. While the leg room of the first row or an exit row may sound appealing, you may want to forgo the luxury if you don't get both your overhead bin space and storage under the seat in front of you – assuming you need them both. Consider using frequent flyer miles to upgrade your coach ticket to business, as often there may be less enforcement of regulations.

Everyone is different, but personally I try to keep as little gear in my checked bags as possible. I have a regulation carry on bag that was about \$20 at an office supply store that I load up with my equipment, padded with shirts and other clothing. This 20"h x 14"w x 8"d bag easily fits into the overhead of 737's and other larger aircraft. It does not fit into the overhead bins of regional jets, but it will fit under the seat in front of me (sacrificing all of my foot room and a little of the passenger's next to me). However, because it doesn't fit the regional jet carry on size requirements, it is up to the flight crew if I will be allowed to carry it on. Sometimes they allow it, other times I am forced to gate check.



Left: My \$20 hard-sided rolling carry on bag. Right: Think Tank Photo's Airport International bag.

[Click here for a comparison of these two bags packed with the same telephoto gear.](#)

[Click here to see the larger Think Tank Photo Airport Security bag packed with a 600 f4 and other equipment.](#)

GATE CHECKING

Gate check: two words that can strike terror into the heart a photographer traveling with equipment. But it can happen, and you need to be as prepared for this contingency as possible. Plan for it! Be sure you are comfortable with how well padded your gear is, and with the bag you are carrying your equipment in. I carry a sheet of neon labels with "FRAGILE" printed on them and if I have to gate check will label the bag. I also make sure I am to receive my bag when getting off the plane and that it will not be sent into the carousels with the regular checked bags. Usually gate checked items have special tags applied

– I put this on in a highly conspicuous area of the bag to reduce the chances of it being mistaken for checked luggage.

CHECKED BAGGAGE

Generally, there is a limit to the number of checked bags you can have and how much each can weigh. Anyone who has stressed the night before a trip, packing, weighing, and redistributing items amongst various checked bags probably knows that the return trip is even more difficult because you are probably exhausted at the end of your trip and don't have a scale to weigh anything. Arriving at the airport to return home to find you have the same amount of items but somehow they weigh more now – sometimes it's just easier to pay the extra fee for overweight bags than to unpack and redistribute items in front of all the other travelers behind you. A few other options include shipping some of your items back via the postal service or another common carrier, or if you are allowed more checked bags than you flew to your destination with, include an empty duffel or other soft bag which can be used as another checked bag for your return flight.

While almost all of my gear is in a rolling carry on, my tripod is packed into a checked bag with the Wimberley Head II removed. I have my Lowepro bags inside the checked bags, filled with personal items, and once I've arrived at the hotel, I transfer my equipment into its standard configuration in the Lowepros for the duration of the trip.

INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL

Each airline, country, and aircraft size has its own considerations. If you need to carry your gear for international travel, be sure to communicate with the airline(s) about what aircraft(s) you will be boarding and what the regulations are. If you are part of a photo trip, contact the operator, as he/she should be intimately familiar with the specifics of regulations to your mutual destination. You can also avail yourself of the NatureScapes.Net forums as a resource, to ask the membership (thousands of photographers worldwide) about their experiences traveling to specific destinations. Often it can be to your benefit to obtain feedback from real-world experiences, as traveling in practice can vary from published guidelines.

Editor's note: Kinesis and Think Tank Photo products are available in the [NatureScapes.Net store](#).



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