

TRIPODS

***Choose One and Use One
(It is not a walking stick!)
by Bill Black***

One of the most important pieces of equipment you own – or should own - is a tripod.

When choosing a tripod there are five things to take into consideration: stability, flexibility, ease of use, weight and cost.

When Noella Ballenger and I have led nature workshops we have seen all sorts of problems with people and their tripods - from not having one, to having an inadequate one, to the improper use of one, and all for a variety of reasons.

The first thing to consider when buying a new tripod is **stability**. This is the primary function of your tripod, and plays a big part in choosing one. The size lenses you own can help you in deciding what tripod to get, that is, either a light, medium or heavy type.

For lenses up to 200mm you can use a light tripod. Examples of this are the Bogen/Manfrotto 3001, the Gitzo 200 series and the smaller Slik and Cullman tripods to mention but a few.

Lenses up to 400mm need at least a medium tripod. Some examples of these include the Bogen/Manfrotto 3021 and 3221's, the Gitzo 300 series, the largest Sliks and Cullmanns. For lenses with a focal length greater than 400mm you need the big heavy tripods such as a Bogen 3036.



Fig. 1 – A tripod should be stable and easily adjustable for your height.

For a very concise overview of a variety of tripod styles, see *Outdoor Photographer*, March 2008, pp. 84, 85 (www.outdoorphotographer.com).

For those willing to pay for lighter weight and usually sturdier tripods there are many carbon fiber versions available. Good sources for quick reviews are www.bhphotovideo.com and www.adorama.com. These sources give support weights, heights and reviews as well as prices. Be prepared for sticker shock for the carbon fiber models.

Another factor to think about is **flexibility**. What type of photography you do will certainly help you decide what type of tripod to purchase. If you opt to get a lighter tripod for whatever reason, remember it probably won't be as stable as a heavier tripod. And if it's windy, a light tripod will be even less stable.

If you plan to do macro work such as wildflowers or anything close to the ground, you need one that enables the legs to lay out nearly flat, thereby allowing you to get your camera as low to the ground as possible. Tripods with support bars don't allow for this.



Fig. 2 – Tripod legs should be able to lay out nearly flat.

An additional factor to take into consideration is if you plan to photograph at or near eye level. For comfort you want one that reaches a height where you don't have to bend too low to look through your viewfinder.

Another thing to help you in buying one is ***ease of use***. This applies to both your tripod and the head you attach to it. For your tripod, you want it to be easy to adjust. The easier it is for you to raise and lower the legs and to rotate, the fewer shots you'll miss. The same applies to your tripod head. How easy it is to change from horizontal to vertical and move it around, the more shots you'll get when your subject is moving.

On this point you have primary choices of ball heads and geared action heads. Ball heads have more flexibility, but if you use a geared head enough you can move it around just as easily as a ball head. In addition to the heads of the tripod manufactures, there are

those of Arca-Swiss, Really Right Stuff (www.reallyrightstuff.com) and Kirk (www.kirkphoto.com), all expensive but of very high quality and durability.

Other possibilities are the grip action or trigger release ball heads such as the Bogen 3265 and the Slik AF-1100 and AF-2100 series. For many years I have used the Bogen and, although heavy, I have found it to be very durable and utilitarian by allowing position adjustment with one hand and camera focusing and focal length adjustment with the other.



Fig.3 – Trigger release ball head. (Bogen 3265 shown)

A fourth factor to take into account when choosing a tripod is how much it ***weighs***. If you plan to do a lot of walking to get your shots, you want one that doesn't weigh too much - unless you have a "camera caddy" at your disposal. This leads you toward the carbon fiber models – lighter in weight but more expensive than metal ones.

For a lot of people **cost** plays the biggest role in choosing a tripod. They think they can save money by getting a less expensive tripod. However, the question should be asked, "Why spend hundreds or even thousands for a camera and lens but scrimp on something that plays a key role in getting sharp images?"

In regards to using your tripod, one of the biggest problems I see is people raising the center post. DON'T. If at all possible, remove or cut it off. By doing this you have no chance of raising it. Raising it decreases the stability. Plus, removing it allows you to get closer to the ground for macro work.



Fig. 4 – Remove or shorten center post for more stability.

In addition to your tripod there are other items that can help make your tripod even more stable, especially if you have a very large lens. A stabilizer bar that connects from your camera body to the tripod helps eliminate camera shake. It cuts down on moving the camera around easily, but it definitely helps to keep it steady. And

do not forget the quick release plates. They save much aggravation as well as time.

If you have a tripod, I hope you keep these tips in mind while using it. And if you don't have a good tripod, use these five factors (stability, flexibility, ease of use, weight and cost) to help you choose which one to get.