

Telephoto Lenses – Photography at a Distance

There is one item of kit that is seldom included and often missed in the average photographer's arsenal - the telephoto lens. Excluded because of their cost and missed for the range of opportunities there are passed up when you don't have a long lens. Fortunately telephoto lenses can be readily rented so photographers planning ahead for specialised shoots can make sure they have one on hand. Telephoto lenses, although indispensable for certain applications, also require slightly amended techniques in use. These 10 tips for telephoto lens use may help bridge the gap.

Subject isolation:

Telephoto lenses do a great job of isolating and adding emphasis to distant subjects, while not requiring too close a crop. Spatial relationships are also maintained between elements in the composition. This can be achieved with shorter lenses, but not as well.

Telephoto effect:

Telephoto effect is the unique perspective flattening characteristic of telephoto lenses. Basically, when we look at a pole 25 feet away and a tree 1000 feet back from that, our eyes tell us that the pole is close and the tree far away. When the scene is photographed with a telephoto lens the tree is obviously magnified, but more importantly the spatial relationship between the pole and the tree is distorted or flattened and they look a lot closer to each other. Although strictly speaking a lens aberration or fault, it is often used to great effect by photographers to create striking visual effects.

Using tripods:

Telephoto lenses magnify everything including unwanted things such as camera movement. Hunters or metallic silhouette shots will tell you that a dead steady sight picture over open sights appears to be struck in granite, not moving a millimetre. The same picture through a scope appears to be dancing all over the target. Telephoto lenses can magnify camera movement so much that even your breathing can cause blurring with slow shutter speeds. Telephoto lenses also tend to be fairly bulky which exacerbates the problem. So when using very powerful telephoto lenses the use of a tripod is essential. If a tripod is a little too bulky then a monopod can be used. It is also a good idea to pack a bean bag to support the lens when lying down or shooting over a rest or the roof of a car.

Framing:

Particularly when photographing wildlife with telephoto lenses, subject framing comes into its own. Telephoto lenses allow one to use creative framing across a great range of distances that are not possible with conventional lenses.

Image stabilization and tripods:

Inbuilt VR features on telephoto lenses do a great job of vibration reduction when shooting freehand, but can cause havoc when used in a captive environment such as a tripod mount. The slightest referencing movement on a tripod can cause the VR mechanism to run and actually create blurred shots. When using a tripod turn the IS/VR function off if you can.

Shutter releases and tripods:

The whole point of using a tripod will be lost if you induce slight movement when depressing the shutter release. For this reason it is wise to use a shutter release cable or remote control release when using a tripod. This eliminates all possibility of movement.

Action panning:

This technique requires a fair bit of practice as the magnification factor of telephoto lenses makes holding a subject in motion difficult. The results warrant the effort though, as panning action shots are one of a telephoto lenses greatest draw cards. Manipulating settings to induce some motion blur can add greatly to the artistic effect of this feature.

Depth of field:

One of the defining characteristics of super-telephoto and telephoto lenses is Bokeh or a pronounced shallow depth of field. This feature of long lenses is useful in isolating the subject material from distracting backgrounds. Intensely crisp subject detail can be maintained with all other items in the shot, even a foot or so behind the subject, softly out of focus. This depth of field effect is particularly useful with telephoto lenses as they give a more pronounced Bokeh effect for any given f stop setting than conventional lenses do.

Astrophotography:

No photographer with access to a telephoto lens will ever pass up the chance to shoot a striking moonlight scene. Although not in the same class as true telescope based astrophotography, using telephoto lenses to shoot night skies produces some striking results. Just keep these points in mind. Always use a tripod and shutter remote, choose an area with as little ambient light as possible to prevent light flares and choose shutter speeds with care. The moon can move a surprising distance over an extended exposure causing blurring even with a tripod.

Macro photography:

Although unwieldy, telephoto lenses work well for some types of ultra close-up photograph. Extension tubes used with telephoto lenses shorten the focal distance considerably and with the increased magnification some truly astounding macro results can be achieved.

If you are prepared to accept the few limitations and idiosyncrasies of telephoto lenses they can become an indispensable part of your photographic kit and open up many previously unattainable possibilities.