Tripod Heads for Wildlife Photographers

In last month's edition of Behind the Lens, I discussed tripods for wildlife photographers. As hopefully everyone understands now, a tripod is not just a tripod – especially when it comes to photographing wildlife. With so many options, so many variations, if you are at that stage in the game where you are finally trying to figure out exactly what you need this guide was composed just for you.

This month, I want to discuss the other part of this whole tripod equation: tripod heads. You tripod is no good for you what so ever without a solidly built and well-designed head to attach your camera or lens to. Much like the issue with selecting tripods, there numerous options out there to choose from. Hopefully this discussion of tripod heads for wildlife photographers will help you make an informed choice when it comes time for you to plop down a big stack of cash on gear!

When it comes to tripod heads, there is no shortage of options. Fluid heads, ball heads, pan and tilt, gimbal heads, and so many more. All of these different types of heads have their applications. Each one was designed to do something really really well. But what exactly? And are any of these applications relative to wildlife photography?

I am going to review 3 ½ types of heads for this to help cut through the clutter for you. 3 and ½ you say? Well yes, sort of. One of the tripod head designs have two different versions out there and so if you read on you will understand what I am getting at here.

Fluid Heads

I am seeing these more and more in the field with burgeoning photographers. However, I often times wonder why, given the application that they are actually designed for in the first place.

A fluid head is a tripod head that literally has fluid inside of the head. This design is meant to dampen or eliminate any potential "jerkiness" introduced by the user when panning the camera. This is a wonderful design and is meant to hold an extraordinary amount of weight. The only problem is, in wildlife photography we are usually shooting with shutter speeds that are infinitesimally small fractions of a second. So when shooting with a shutter speed of say, 1/2000th of a second while panning with your subject, why in the world do you need a large bulky and super heavy tripod head designed to dampen your movements and create a slow fluid pan? You don't.

Furthermore, the use of these heads also requires the use of one hand on the handle of the head to move the camera around. Personally, I want both hands free for use with the camera and lens while the action is hot. This handle also means that you quite often need to stand slightly off to the side of the camera in order to properly operate the head.

To add to grocery list of issues with using this head for wildlife photography, we also have the matter of leveling the head itself. These fluid heads are designed to be used with some type of leveling base. This means that you must now also take the time to get the head leveled out to some degree.

Overall these heads are large, extremely heavy,

slow to use, and rather cumbersome. So why on Earth would anyone use these heads to begin with? Videography!

Fluid heads are not designed for photography. They are designed for motion picture. You need to be perfectly level, hold massive amounts of weight, and have slow, smooth, panning that fights against human error to help eliminate any and all jerkiness. THIS is what fluid heads are designed for and they do a fabulous job – for a price. Good fluid heads can cost upwards of $8,000. Is it worth it? If you are shooting wildlife video, it is worth absolutely every single penny. But for photography, hell no!
These tripod heads are designed for a particular job and that is that. Trying to use them for PHOTOGRAPHY only causes far more problems than it solves for you. In cinematography, they are the cat's meow. But not when shooting stills.

In today's world where our DSLR cameras are becoming equipped with HD and Ultra HD video capabilities, photography is beginning to straddle the line between still and motion pictures. With cameras such as the Canon 1DC (yes I meant to type C and not X), the Nikon D810, and a host of many others that are offering real solutions for cinematographers now, should we keep an eye on or actually consider using a fluid head despite the challenges that they create?

This depends. If you are first and foremost and photographer and not constantly concerned about capturing videos while in the field then the answer is no. There are better options out there for you. If on the other hand video is an important part of what you see yourself doing in the field, then a fluid head becomes a real option for you. But this is more than just simply saying, oh yes, let's make videos. There are very big limitations to what your DSLR can do and record. All of these things can be worked around with external recorders and other gadgets, but all of this comes again at additional costs. So if you do want to get into shooting

video, unless of course its just for yourself, you should probably do some research on the type of codecs you need to shoot, frames per second, and output size you will need to record in order to sell any of this stuff before you drop the money on a fluid head with this intention (I am switching over to dedicated video cameras for all video work for this reason).

SO here is my quick recap for those that don't want to or have time to read all the above info.

Fluid heads: Bad for wildlife photography. Great for wildlife videography.

Ball Heads

Ball heads are fantastic tools for nature photographers. Many wildlife photographers out there today learned how to shoot on a ball head and swear by them accordingly. Personally, I believe that Really Right Stuff really took the ball head to a whole new level with their BH-55 model. I have one of these. Most professional nature photographers have one of these as well today. I really cannot say enough good things about this ball head.

With that said though, I would argue that the ball head is the ideal tripod head for landscape and / or short lens photography. When it comes to long telephoto lenses, these tools and incredibly cumbersome to use and require far too much fiddling with and far too much of your time and concentration for wildlife photography where you must act and adjust things very quickly at times.

Personally, I don't see how people live without these tripod heads when it comes to things like landscapes. The ease of use for this application is unrivaled. Your camera is attached to a mount that is attached to a ball sitting inside of a socket. This means you have a seemingly infinite range of motion. With a knob to lock down your camera in whatever position you can come up with, a knob to control the friction on the ball so it doesn't flop around on you, and

another knob to allow for panning separately from the base of the tripod head, these are no nonsense tools. It's just that they are no nonsense tools for landscape photographers and other forms of "non" super telephoto photography.

Ball Heads: Great for landscape photography. Cumbersome and problematic for wildlife photography.

Gimbals

So here comes the 1.5 tripod heads that I wanted to talk about. Gimbal heads are all about finding balance. These types of tripod heads are designed to perfectly balance large and heavy camera rigs in such a way as to create a feeling of weightlessness while being used. When properly set up, you can position your camera and lens at just about any angle and it will remain there in balance.

Out of all the different types of tripod heads manufactured today, gimbal mounts are the one that are specifically designed for wildlife photography. Well, technically they are specifically designed for use with large telephoto lenses – so both wildlife and sport photography.

By and large, gimbal mounts are the go to

choice for the vast majority of serious wildlife photographers out there. Not all professionals use them. Tom Mangleson shoots with fluid heads. Doug Gardner uses ball heads. But for the most part, most of us are shooting with gimbals for the simple fact that they are by far the easiest to use, the most effective, and most agile support systems on the market for use with long lenses.

I'm a big fan of Occam's razor when it comes to my style of photography. That is to say, quite often, the simplest methods are the best. So when we take a look at tripod heads and fort the application of wildlife photography, gimbal style heads are just that – the simplest to use and operate. They are the one and only type of tripod head specifically designed for long lenses. I have a fluid head, several ball heads, an old pan and tilt head (not discussed here for a reason) and two different types of gimbal heads. Each one of these tripod heads have their use for me. Each one is employed where needed. So I can honestly speak about these tripod heads from extensive experience using each type. So with that said, trust me when I say that gimbal mounts are the way to go when it comes to long lenses and wildlife.

Now one of the arguments that does surface from time to time in regards to using these types of tripod heads is in regards to balancing them. However, they are no more difficult to obtain level horizons with than any other type of tripod head. By simply loosening the knob on your tripod color (you attach your long lens to the tripod head and not the camera itself) you can the rotate the camera and lens however you need to as you swing your camera around in a seemingly infinite number of different angles without any problem.

Gimbal mounts are agile. They are quick to use. You can follow the most erratic action imaginable (think birds in flight) and regardless of how fast you must move, regardless of what angle you have your lens in, you can then simply let go. With a ballhead, you lens would flop over, smacking your tripod.

Now when it comes to gimbal mounts there are two basic types. There is what we call a full gimbal and a side mounted gimbal. With a full gimbal, our clamp that holds on to the lens rests horizontally beneath the lens. This design allows for the full weight of the camera and lens to be comfortably and safely cradled from below.

The other gimbal mount is designed to attach at a 90 degree angle, or off to the side of the lens. This design does not offer the same load bearing capacity as that of the full gimbal but it does allow for a better range of motion and perfect balance of your lens and camera no matter what angle you place it. On the full gimbal, you must lock the arm in place or otherwise it will slowly sing back to a neutral position.

Now I have technically used a 600mm and D4 camera together on boat the side mount and full gimbal without any problems. However, the side mount is not recommended for anything heavier than a 500mm lens and many people prefer not to use these side mounts regardless of weight simply because the full gimbal fell safer to use because you sit the lens into the clamp vs

awkwardly clamping it down off to the side with gravity fighting the entire set up.

There are a variety of companies that make these gimbal mounts now a days, but personally I have only used two different companies thus far and so can only speak for their products. These two companies are Wimberley (which is the original company to design this style of tripod head) and Really Right Stuff. Of these two companies I personally prefer the Wimberley products for my gimbal mounts. They are streamlined, as light as possible, solid, and works flawlessly. Really Right Stuff has chosen to make their gimbal mounts highly modular so that they can be customized and pieces of them can be used for a variety of other applications. For me, this makes them too large, too heavy, too bulky, and with too many parts I have to worry about.

Regarding Wimberley's product line, they technically make three designs but I am only going to speak about the full Wimberley II and the sidekick here. The Wimberley II is basically what I have been speaking about thus far except when it comes to the side mount version of this tripod head. The side mount that I like of Wimberley's line is called the side kick. This thing actually connects to your ball head and turns it into a gimbal mount. Simply drop the mount on the ball head off to the side, slip the side kick into the clamp, lock it down, and viola – gimbal mount.

This ability to combine the side kick with the ball head allows for a light and efficient set up. You can very quickly switch back and forth between a ball head for landscape and a gimbal head for wildlife. Sure you can always remove the full gimbal and change it out for a ball head, but now you have two very large and heavy tripod heads that you must carry around with you. Whereas the side kick is designed to be light enough and small enough to carrying around with the rest of your camera gear and slipped into place when needed.

Sometimes the amount of gear and the weight of your gear is a real issue – think bush planes, long distance hikes, etc. When it is simply not feasible to add an additional 4lbs of gear to your bag, but you need both the ball head and the gimbal, this is a job for the side kick!
So here is by short and sweet version.
Gimbal Mount: Excellent for wildlife. Borderline useless for most landscape photography unless that done with telephoto lenses.
Let's face it. When it comes to wildlife photography there really isn't that many choices after all. Make life easier on yourself and get a gimbal style tripod head. You will not regret it!