

Tripods - a primer for wildlife photographers

For some, you probably have long since dialed yourself in to a solid support system for your camera gear. For others however this is not the case. Tripods I find, tend to be the number one gear related issue I see on workshops.

The story is always the same. The legs are not easily adjusted, the height is WAY to small, there is a gigantic center column that keeps the tripod from going lower than 3 feet, the whole set up is too light to handle a telephoto lens, the head is flopping over constantly. I'm sure you get the picture.

In the course of doing workshops, I have seen tripod heads pop open like a piñata, complete with a million different parts springing out all over the place. I have watched as people try to put rented 500mm lenses on Walmart tripods that I would be skeptical of mounting my iPhone to. I've seen tripods come up out of the water completely missing legs. I've even seen legs snap in half. Let's put it this way, if it can happen, I have seen it happen.

For beginner photographers, tripods and tripod heads are often times little more than an afterthought. All the emphasis is on getting a camera and a lens. Quite often it is not until other photographers around them start telling them that they need a tripod do they then buy one. And more often than not there is something to a predictable evolution to their tripods.

Most beginners start out with the cheapest, lightest, most plasticky thing they can get their hands on. Usually it's something from Walmart. With tripod in hand, they feel as though they are officially photographers now – they wield a full kit of equipment.

Once they start using the tripod though, they find it a hindrance and too cumbersome. They find it doesn't move right. It doesn't hold their gear steady. When photographing with one of these uber cheap tripods, more often than not, you spend the majority of your time fighting with the damn tripod instead of photographing.

The result? The denial phase. "I don't need some stupid tripod." "Tripods inhibit my creativity." "Tripods just slow me down!" Sound familiar?

Eventually though, the fact that the rest of the world is using a tripod becomes inescapable. The photographer can no longer deny that there must be SOMETHING to the whole tripod thing given that everyone – and especially the pros – are all using a tripod.

So at the behest of friends and peers, or workshop instructors, and at the bewilderment of spouses who are privy to the bank statements, our novice photographer goes all out and drops \$200 - \$400 on a tripod. This is real money. This is a car payment. This must be a good tripod.

For some, it will be. For those with small cameras, little lenses, and even less muscle – this might be just about right. But for wildlife photography, for handling large telephoto lenses it simply does not measure up. So the whole cycle repeats itself.

Most photographers I know have gone through a number of tripods before they finally bit the bullet and dropped big bucks on a top quality support system. I know I did.

So with this said, let's get down to business here.

First and foremost there are two parts to the “tripod equation.” The first is the actual tripod itself. The second, is the head that you will actually attach your camera / lens to.

When it comes to tripods, not all are created equally and for wildlife photography this is what you want to look for:

Carbon Fiber

- This stuff is extremely light and extremely durable. This will more often than not be the major difference in price between inexpensive tripods and high end support systems. Despite the difference in price, this is really the way that you want to go because of the weight. If you are carrying a big lens or you have a smaller stature, then weight will make or break your ability to shoot and react quickly.
- If you cannot carry your equipment around all morning and afternoon, then you will not be shooting long. Photography will be drudgery. It will be a pain – literally. If you are exhausted physically, how do you expect to be in the game mentally?

Center Columns.

- Do not purchase a tripod with a center column. You will regret this – especially if you are a wildlife photographer or want to photograph wildlife. Your tripod should come up to your chin or neck without the use of a center column. If you need a center column to bring the camera up to your height, you need a different tripod!
- The biggest issue with center columns is the fact that they will not allow you to get low. In all the years that I have been photographing, I can think of countless times where I need to get lower – its actually something of a constant. However, never once can I think of any situation ever where I needed to get my tripod a few inches higher.
- You want your tripod to be able to go all the way down to the ground with legs spread open. This is crucial and needs to be taken into consideration with every tripod purchase.

Leg sections.

- Basically you have to option here. You can purchase a tripod with 3 or 4 sections to each leg. Now this is a tough one because technically speaking, the 4 section design will allow you to get lower to the ground without spreading the legs wide open. The tradeoff here however, is that each section becomes another point in which you introduce movement and instability to a tripod.
- Some wildlife photographers swear by the 4 section designs. Me, I stick with the three section and spread my legs when needed. It's something of a personal decision here. But I can assure you that 3 section designs are far more common than 4 sections.

Carrying capacity.

- No we are not talking about ecology here. We are talking about the actual amount of weight that your tripod can hold. This can be very misleading as there are variables and physics involved in this that are not taken into account when rating tripods.
- Say you have a 200-400mm lens and a D4s camera. The combined weight of these pieces of equipment is right at about 10.5 lbs. OK great. So

as long as I get a tripod that can hold 15lbs then that should be enough, right? Wrong.

- For starters you still have a head to consider here. Now we haven't spoken about a head but let's say you are using a ball head with a sidekick style gimbal mount attached. The combined weight of this will bring you to about 3.5 lbs. So with $10.5 + 3.5$ we are at 14lbs. Whew, 1 lbs to spare you would think. But if you did think this, you would be wrong again.
- At 14lbs of weight we are looking with ideal conditions on level terrain and no wind. Wait, what? Wind? Level ground? That's right. These numbers are for when weight is evenly distributed across all three legs and when there are no other elements affecting your tripod such as the vibration caused in your tripod legs in wind for instance. Remember, when photographing with a telephoto lens, all movement, all vibrations are exaggerated in the picture because the image is magnified. So, everything else is magnified as well.
- The rule of thumb is that you want to add at least 20lbs to whatever the maximum amount of weight you will be putting on your support system. This means that you would instead need a support system that will hold at least 35lbs instead of 15lbs. But then you have to ask yourself, what if I want to put a bigger lens on there one day? What if I need to use flash with a flash bracket and cord? This is going to up the weight.
- For me, 50lbs is the number I shoot for with all gear. My tripods need to be able to hold at least 50lbs. My tripod heads need to be able to hold at least 50 lbs. This will insure that I never have supports that are giving out under the weight of whatever rig I want to set up on it.
- I am not alone in this and most other wildlife photographers shoot for this same goal.

So based upon these criteria, we have eliminated the vast majority of tripods on the market. The issue of the center column and the weight carrying capacity though is what really limits what is available for wildlife photographers. In fact, this actually brings us down to just two companies

that I would consider purchasing from and they are: Really Right Stuff and Gitzo.

One company that has been making quite a name for itself is Induro. However, given that they continue to want to place a center column on their tripods, I exclude them from this list.

Now with Really Right Stuff the models I would suggest are the TVC-3 and TVC-4 series tripods. The TVC-3 has three section legs and the 4 series has 4 section legs. There are three different versions of each one depending upon how tall you need the tripod to be overall.

Really Right Stuff tripods in these two series are going to run you between \$895 - \$1480. These guys are expensive but they make great equipment, have excellent customer service, and all parts are made right here in the US.

For Gitzo, I would recommend just about anything in their Systematic lineup (it's the only one that does not come with a center column). These are going to run you between \$750 - \$1800 depending on size and weight demands (they go up to hold 100lbs).

Yes, these prices are similar to buying a lens. This is big bucks. But then again, what about photography today is inexpensive? Tripods are a significant part of the gear equation. The better the tripod, the more versatile it will be, the more maneuverable it will be, the easier to use it will be, the better it will hold your gear, and the sharper your photographs will be.