

TECH TIPS

An intermittent column about things you can do to improve your photography.

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This month's topic: Assorted tips and tricks for the field photographer.

We all know that photographers tend to like gimmicks and gadgets. Browse through any photo store or catalogue and you will see hundreds of accessory items for every possible photographic purpose. It is easy to accumulate many pounds of this stuff and therein lies the problem: If you are like me and enjoy nature photography on hiking trails, you just can't carry all that stuff. What do you really need and what is the best way to manage it?

Let's start with filters. I use the rectangular ones that slide into a holder mounted on the lens. A \$10 CD carrying case works great to hold them. I got a *Caseit* brand nylon CD carrying case that was intended to hold 24 CDs in its dozen pages. (There is a separate, soft-lined pocket with a plastic, flip-up lid on each side of each page.) It zips around three sides, is about 6.5" square by 1" thick and holds all of my filters neatly and safely. It is also light and takes little space in my backpack.

Sometimes you need more light when doing macro work. The on-camera mount may not let you get the flash where you want it. Bring an off-camera flash cord so you can retain your automatic camera's TTL capabilities while moving the flash into the desired position. If you don't want flash bring a small reflector. An old CD makes a great one. The nearly mirror-like finish can put a lot of light right where you need it. Just prop it up with rocks or twigs. Carry it in the CD case with the filters. Another cheap way to get a reflector is to cover a piece of cardboard with aluminum foil. Crumple the foil and then smooth it before fastening it to the cardboard if you want a softer reflection.

A more versatile option is to get a Chameleon. This is a small reflector kit that weighs a couple of ounces and is only 9" in diameter by 1" thick when packaged. . It has a thin metal hoop that pops open to provide a 21" light diffuser for harsh light conditions. It also has a fabric sleeve that slips over the diffuser. The sleeve is silver on one side and gold on the other so you can use it as a reflector and vary the color of the light. If you don't carry filters slip the CD into the package for more versatility. One other useful thing to carry in your reflector package is a small gray card. Place it next to your subject in the same light and spot meter on it for the proper exposure.

Camera support is a must in the field. I carry a small Bogen tripod (Model 3001) on most hikes but sometimes I need alternatives. The Ultrapod II is a lightweight, plastic, fold-up, tabletop tripod. It can be placed on any reasonably flat surface or can be strapped to a small tree with its nylon and Velcro strap. At 7" long it also fits easily into my pack. A remote shutter release cable is always advisable with tripods but if you don't have one use the camera's timer function. Set it for 7-10 seconds to allow any movement to stop.

We shouldn't leave the topic of support without mentioning monopods. I don't use one for nature work but have a Bogen 3006 (their lightest and smallest) for street use and public places like museums that don't allow tripods. When combined with a tilt/flip head a monopod is surprisingly versatile. Here are a couple of hints for better results with a monopod: 1) Make a tripod by standing with your legs shoulder-width apart and the monopod an equal distance in front of your body. Lean forward slightly, placing the camera over the center of this triangle. 2) Stand next to a building or pillar with the foot of the monopod a few inches away from the base. Lean on the support and press the camera up against it with your hand between the camera and the surface for padding. 3) Sit on a bench with the pod between your legs. Lean forward and put your elbows on your knees. Adjust pod height for your eye level in this position.

Next we come to the topic of lens protection. If the front glass of your lens is scratched it is ruined. Aside from being careful there are three ways to add protection to your lens. The first is by always keeping the lens cap on except when you are shooting. The second is by placing a filter on it. Many people use a UV filter for this purpose. The key thing to remember is that you shouldn't put a cheap piece of glass on a good lens. Always use filters that are equal in optical quality to that of the lens. The third form of protection is a lens hood. If yours didn't come with one, buy it. They not only shade the lens from sun flare, they help keep raindrops off it and form a barrier to damage.

I always use my lens hoods when working out of my car but admit to leaving them behind when I hit the trail. They are too big to fit in my backpack. I use steps one and two above for lens protection but must still deal with sun flare. I handle this by bringing another item which has great trail value: a broad-brim hat. It keeps the sun and rain off my head and I can use it to shade the lens when necessary. I can also lay it on the ground upside down and use it as a temporary 'bin' for lens caps, filters, and other small items.

If you have a modern camera you use batteries. If you have a flash head or light meter you use more batteries. You don't want to be miles from your car with dead batteries and no replacements. I line AA batteries up in groups of four and hold them together with a strip of scotch tape. I seal two of these 'packets' in a snack-size zip-lock bag and fold it over. All batteries are kept clean and dry and the sets can't contact one another. If one leaks it is contained and doesn't damage anything else. The bag fits in one of the small pockets in my backpack.

Speaking of plastic bags, bring some gallon-size zip-lock freezer bags when you will be taking your camera and lenses from a cold environment to a warm one. Put the camera and lenses in these bags before entering a heated room from winter weather or when leaving air conditioning to go into the heat. (Temperature changes of 30 degrees or more, especially if the warm environment is more humid than the cold one.) This will allow your equipment to warm to ambient temperature without accumulating condensation. These bags offer good protection in dusty environments too. Also, keep a fresh yard waste plastic bag folded in the bottom of your pack in case of rain. It can cover a camera on a tripod, protect your pack or, with some arm and head holes, become a raincoat.

Another important thing in the field is film management. First, remove the boxes. They take up too much space. Second, have a system to segregate exposed and unexposed film -- right jacket or pants pocket to left, for example. Wear a jacket or vest with big pockets or cargo pants that have an extra pocket on each thigh. For in-car storage I have a small Playmate cooler. I have gallon-size zip-lock freezer bags marked with ISO designations: 50, 100, 200, 400 and EXPOSED. All film canisters are in these bags and the bags are in the cooler where they are clean, dry and protected from extremes of temperature. I feed my pockets from this supply before a hike and return the film to it afterward. If I push a roll I immediately mark it (with a Sharpie permanent marker) on the cassette and the canister with +1 or +2 so I won't forget later.

Finally, if you are just learning about exposure or doing a lot of experimentation you will be taking many shot variations. It is annoying to get your pictures, find some good ones and be unable to remember what you did to make them. Try using a micro cassette recorder for field notes. I start each roll with the date, camera, lens, film type and location. Then I dictate something like this: "Frame 1 is Devil's Tower seen from the trail head, f16 @ 60 with polarizer. Frames 2 and 3 are bracketed at plus and minus 2/3 stop. Frame 4 is f16 @ 100 with an 81B filter." Then, when I like one shot better than another, I know what I did.

Oh, one more thing: always carry a small flashlight to find things in your bag at dusk and dawn, and to find your way back to the car after dark.

Happy shooting!

Abstract: This column discusses some simple, inexpensive and practical ways to handle basic photo needs in the field. It covers filter storage, flash and reflector ideas for macro work, camera support equipment and techniques, lens protection, battery storage, preventing condensation when moving equipment from cold to hot environments, film management and field notes.