

QUACK

Newsletter of E.J. Peiker, Nature Photographer and www.EJPhoto.com
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Welcome to the quarterly newsletter from E.J. Peiker Nature Photography and www.EJPhoto.com. In this quarterly email publication, I will keep subscribers posted on upcoming workshops including the DuckShop Series as well as sharing some photos and experiences with you. I will also give you brief impressions on any new equipment that I get the opportunity to use and any other general information in the world of digital nature photography. Please feel free to forward this along to other photographers and interested parties but please do so only by forwarding this newsletter in its entirety. Please note that all content is copyrighted by E.J. Peiker. If you would like to be added or deleted to the mailing list or if you would like copies of past issues, just send me an email message at ejpeiker@cox.net. Back issues are available online at <http://www.ejphoto.com/newsletter.htm>



Pyramid Mountain, Alberta (EOS 1Ds, 24-70mm)

Equipment in the Field

Almost everyday somebody sends me an email or asks online about what equipment I use in the field for various situations. Since I recently switched from Canon to Nikon but am still very much up to date on Canon equipment I can give recommendations on both.

Let's look at landscape photography first! Here is what I would use as my primary equipment in both systems. It is important to know that I generally hike a lot on my landscape shoots so weight is an important consideration:

Tool	Canon	Nikon
Camera Body	EOS 1Ds Mark III or EOS 5D Mark II	D3x or D700
Ultra Wide Angle	16-35 f/2.8 II	17-35 f/2.8
Wide Angle to Normal	24-70 f/2.8	24-70 f/2.8
Telephoto	70-200 f/4	70-300 f/4.5-5.6
Tripod	Gitzo 1430 or 1297	Gitzo 1430 or 1297
Tripod Head	RRS BH-55 or BH-40	RRS B-55 or BH-40
Flash	580EX II	SB900 w/ D3x, none with D700

As you can see, for landscape photography I prefer a full frame sensor camera. This allows me to get a high pixel count and resolution. Frame rate and high ISO capability are generally not a major consideration in landscape photography. If there will be a strenuous hike I will choose the D700 (or 5D Mark II if I were shooting with Canon gear) due to weight. I do hope Nikon comes out with a higher resolution version of the D700 to compete with the 5D mark II. If the hiking is moderate, say 5 miles or less per outing, I prefer the D3x which is simply the best DSLR ever made to date.



Elephant Seal, Falkland Islands (D300, 18-200mm)

I am often asked why I don't choose the optically superior 14-24 Nikkor lens over the older 17-35mm Nikkor lens? As much as I would love to shoot with that lens, it's simply not practical for a hiking landscape photographer due to its weight and lack of filter capability since it has a large bulging front element. Another question I get is why I opt for the consumer grade 70-300 Nikkor lens rather than the 70-200 f/2.8. Most assume it's due to the weight. While weight is a serious consideration and the 70-300 weighs a lot less, it is not the primary reason. The 70-200 simply does not produce sharp photos on full frame sensor cameras. This lens was designed in the days when Nikon publicly stated that full frame sensors were not needed and it shows. As soon as you get outside the 1.5x crop (DX) area of a full frame, the image quality becomes absolutely atrocious. Many fanboys will claim that I have a bad copy of the lens. It isn't so, I have tested 3 such lenses and several websites have corroborated my findings. On the Canon side, a common question with my choices is why I would use the 16-35 II over the lighter 17-40. I simply find the 16-35 far superior for corner sharpness on a full frame sensor and it has much less linear distortion. On the long end, the 70-200 f/4 is much lighter and slightly sharper than the heavier 70-200 f/2.8. I do wish Nikon offered an equivalent of the Canon 70-200 f/4L IS lens.



King Penguin, Falkland Islands (D300, 200-400mm)

On the tripod and head front, if I plan on doing a lot of hiking, I will take the Gitzo 1430 even though I find it's torsional rigidity to be just barely acceptable. The somewhat heavier 1297 Basalt tripod is the superior choice for stability in most situations. Whether I use the lighter BH-40 or heavier BH-55 all depends on how much hiking will be involved. If I am out with the D700 I typically do not take an external flash for a landscape hike and rely on it's built in flash if a bit of light is needed to light a foreground.

Additional tools for a landscape shoot include polarizers for every lens. My polarizers of choice are the Singh-ray LB neutral Polarizers for their extra light transmission. I also take a variable Neutral Density filter such as the Singh-Ray Vari-N-Duo which combines a polarizer with a variable neutral density filter

Now let's move to Wildlife including Birds. This requires much heavier equipment. Here's what I usually take on a shoot like this (or what I would take with Canon):

Tool	Canon	Nikon
Camera Body	EOS 1 DMark II n or EOS 1D Mark III	D300 w/ MB-D10 or D3x in DX mode
Short Telephoto	70-200 f/2.8	70-200 f/2.8
Medium telephoto	300 f/2.8 and/or 400 f/5.6	200-400 f/4
Super Telephoto	500 f/4	500 f/4
Teleconverters	1.4x II and 2x 2	TC 14E II, TC 17 E II
Tripod	Gitzo 3531	Gitzo 3531
Tripod Head	Wimberley Head II or Mongoose M3.4	Wimberley head II or
Flash	580EX II	SB900

When the situation calls for the big guns, I prefer a cropped sensor camera such as those listed above. Even though the D3x is a full frame sensor camera, it can be put in a high speed crop mode that gives you 7 frames per second at 10.5 megapixels making it a formidable wildlife camera as well as a superior landscape tool. The D300 at over 12 megapixels is a perfect combination of performance at 8 frames per second (with MB-D10 and EL-N4a battery) while giving you enough pixels to do some cropping if needed. On the Canon side, a 1D Mark III that focuses well is superior to a 1 D Mark II n due to better image files and a slight increase in resolution however finding one that focuses flawlessly in all situations continues to be a challenge (although Canon recently announced the availability of yet another fix that is supposed to resolve the issues).

The lens choices for me are pretty obvious. Many people ask why I choose the 500 f/4 lenses over the 600 f/4 lenses. There are two reasons: 1) The 500's weigh about 3 pounds less than the 600's and are better balanced; 2) The smaller front element size and length make the 500 much easier to travel with. In the middle range, while the 300 f/2.8's generally represent the very best optical quality from the manufacturers, the Nikkor 200-400's versatility while maintaining excellent image quality even with a 1.4x teleconverter makes this the ideal choice and one of the primary reasons why I switched back to Nikon. You may ask why not the Canon 100-400. Despite what many claim presumably due to their emotional attachment to something they spent as much as \$1600 for, the lens is just not sharp enough above 300mm. On the Teleconverter front, I use manufacturer's extenders for the best possible optical outcome. Both

manufacturers' 1.4x converters are excellent. On the longer converters, the Canon 2x II is good but the Nikon 2x is awful so I have opted for the 1.7x and even it needs to be stopped down at least two stops before it is acceptable for sharpness.

For camera support, I love the Gitzo 3530/3531 tripod. While it's a bit long in length when fully collapsed, it still packs fine in my usual luggage and feels a little more stable than the 4 leg section 3540/3541 model to me. Also, it is faster to set-up due to one less set of leg locks per leg. Nothing beats a Wimberley head for ease of use with a big lens. The downside is the weight so in weight sensitive travel, I use the Mongoose M3.4 which only weighs about 2lb but is not as convenient to use. Other equipment includes powerful flash units and a Flash Extender.

I have outlined what equipment I currently prefer and some of the reasoning behind it. This is of course subject to change as the field of digital photography advances. You can always see what I am currently shooting with on EJPhoto.com and clicking on the Equipment link (<http://www.ejphoto.com/Equipment.htm>)



Morning Glory Pool, Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming (EOS 1Ds, 24-70mm)

PMA

In early March I attended the photo Marketing association's annual trade show. Most of the manufacturer's of note were present and many specialty equipment suppliers were also on hand. Here are some short blurbs about the things that caught my attention:

Panasonic introduced what is probably the coolest new camera introduced at this show - the Panasonic GH1. This is an update of the Micro Four Thirds G1 ultra-compact DSLR with added 1080P/720P video. This was the first time I handled a G1 class camera - it is only slightly larger than the high end digicams and significantly smaller than the compact

DSLRs. Overall I am very impressed with this little camera. They also introduced a 14-140 (28-280 equivalent) lens to go with it. It is totally silent so that the movie modes won't pick up any noise from any drive motors.

Canon showed their new 17 and 24mm new Tilt shift lenses. I got a chance to play with them on a 5D Mark II body. These are very impressive lenses and feature a complete redesign and clearly very high quality L-level construction. The 17mm is a beast and the 24mm is totally different than the old lens it replaces. These lenses feel extremely well built and the MTF curves on the 17mm are about the best ever created at this focal length.

Nikon had a huge fancy booth but Nikon didn't introduce anything of note for most serious nature photographers during this show after the plethora of products Nikon announced last year. There is a new DX crop 35mm f/1.8 lens.



Brown Bear, Katmai, Alaska (EOS 1D Mark IIIn, 500mm)

Sony had some interesting things on display. There is a mystery mock-up that looks very much like a high grade 500 f/4. Hopefully this signifies Sony's entry into the long

lens arena with an updated design. Sony shooters really only had the old mechanical drive Minolta 600mm lens as an option. One of the coolest things I saw at PMA is a feature in a new digicam from Sony - the DSC-H1X. It has a panorama feature that is unique. You basically start on the left of your scene, push down the shutter button and then pan to the right while holding down the shutter button. The camera automatically takes the frames needed to produce a panorama automatically. After you are done panning and let up on the shutter release button, the camera processes the panorama image in camera and writes it out as a file. This is very cool technology that I hope finds its way into a DSLR near you. I actually tried it myself and it works very well.

Sigma introduced several new lenses. The one of most interest to my audience is a new 24-70 f/2.8 to compete with the likes of the Canon and Nikon offerings. It looks like a great lens but we will have to wait for actual tests to see how it stacks up. I played with the Sigma 200-500 f/2.8 - what a beast. The AF is way too slow for wildlife work and seemed to have a lot of trouble locking on – this could have been a function of the EOS 30D it was attached to. The lens is WAY too big and heavy to be practical in the field and seems like more of a technology gimmick than a product that would actually be useful.



White-rumped Sandpiper, Falkland Islands (D300, 200-400mm)

Leica had the medium format S2 DSLR on hand but with only two lenses and it was all behind glass. It was very disappointing that 6 months after initial announcement, we still don't have a hands on model at this show. The whole thing seemed extremely understated with no fanfare and nobody talking about it. I hope this doesn't mean anything bad.

Custom Brackets makes a new Wimberley Head competitor. At first glance it looks dauntingly complex but it has some significant advantages including the ability to break it

down from a full Gimbal mount to a Wimberley Sidekick like head, separate tension and lock knobs for each axis, and bearing based rotation mechanisms rather than friction based. It has so many knobs though that I think it will have trouble gaining a big following even if functionally it is superior and much smoother than the Wimberley product. Marketing for this also seems lacking.

Plasticase is a Canadian indestructible case manufacturers which makes a very appealing alternate to Pelican cases has some nice hard cases on display from their Nanuk line - I liked what I saw with better clasps and a better interior divider system.

Acratech's tripod head line has grown to many products and overall I was impressed with what I found. I especially like their levelling head which is a much smaller and lighter solution for smaller lenses (say 300mm and below). Some innovative heads were on display as well.

Lite Panels is a manufacturer of LED panels for subject illumination. They have a small one that would be a boon to the macro photographer. The panel is about twice the size of a typical flash head and is AA battery operated, puts out virtually no heat and is dimmable. Pair up a couple of these with a 50mm or 100mm macro lens and you have a killer macro set-up. They also have large panels for studio lighting that looked awesome but very expensive.

Zeiss had their line of Canon and Nikon mount lenses available. I was fortunate to be one of the very first lucky individuals in the USA to handle the new 21mm f/2.8 Zeiss lens for Nikon - the first ones arrived in the US the day before I got to play with them and they weren't even in press hands yet. These lenses exude quality in your hand, in the smoothness of the focus rings and in the overall craftsmanship. I have never touched a lens that felt as good in your hands. For Nikon they have a full line from 17mm to 100mm macro. For Canon there are just 2 lenses right now. But the 21mm and 35mm f/2 would be the ones I would want fro Nikon. The price tag is pretty high for these lenses and we will see what the tests say once they are done but if they are anything like past offerings, these might be the very finest wide angles available for Canon and Nikon shooters.

Novoflex displayed a modular 4 legged tripod, er quadpod called QuadroPod. It is super stable and an interesting concept. It takes a bit of practice to figure out how to best set it up so that it doesn't rock like a chair with one leg too short but once you figure out how best to use it but it offers unprecedented stability. A number of attachments are available for it that makes it highly modular and versatile. Friend Andy Biggs will try one out as a Safari vehicle mount this summer in Botswana.

Eizo Monitors was present with their ultra high end line of monitors and I spent some time talking to the folks there about Eizo technology. Their 30" is gorgeous (which is the only one I gravitated towards since I use a 30" Apple now). The evenness of illumination and color gamut is unmatched. A beautiful beast with a beastly price - but it was fun to do some image editing on one.

Photosol, the manufacturers of the SensorSwab cleaning system now has portable sensor swab singles that are great for travel in a fully sealed, pre-wetted package. They are OK for air travel unlike the bottles of Eclipse and E2 solution.

Overall I had a good time and got to play with and examine a lot of equipment. However, I failed in my quest to find a camera strap that I think suits the landscape/hiking photographer.

Upcoming Photo Activities and Appearances

In January I will be traveling to the Falkland Islands to photograph Penguins – EJPhoto will be closed from 1/15 to 1/27

On February 27 – March 1 I will be conducting the SoCal DuckShop

March 2 – March 4 I will be at the annual Photo Marketing Association Convention in Las Vegas

On April 4, 2009 I will be giving a presentation on Wildlife Photography at the Rio Salado Habitat in Phoenix, AZ

On May 9, 2009 I will be giving my annual Introduction to Bird Photography talk at the Boyce Thompson Arboretum State Park in Superior, AZ

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