

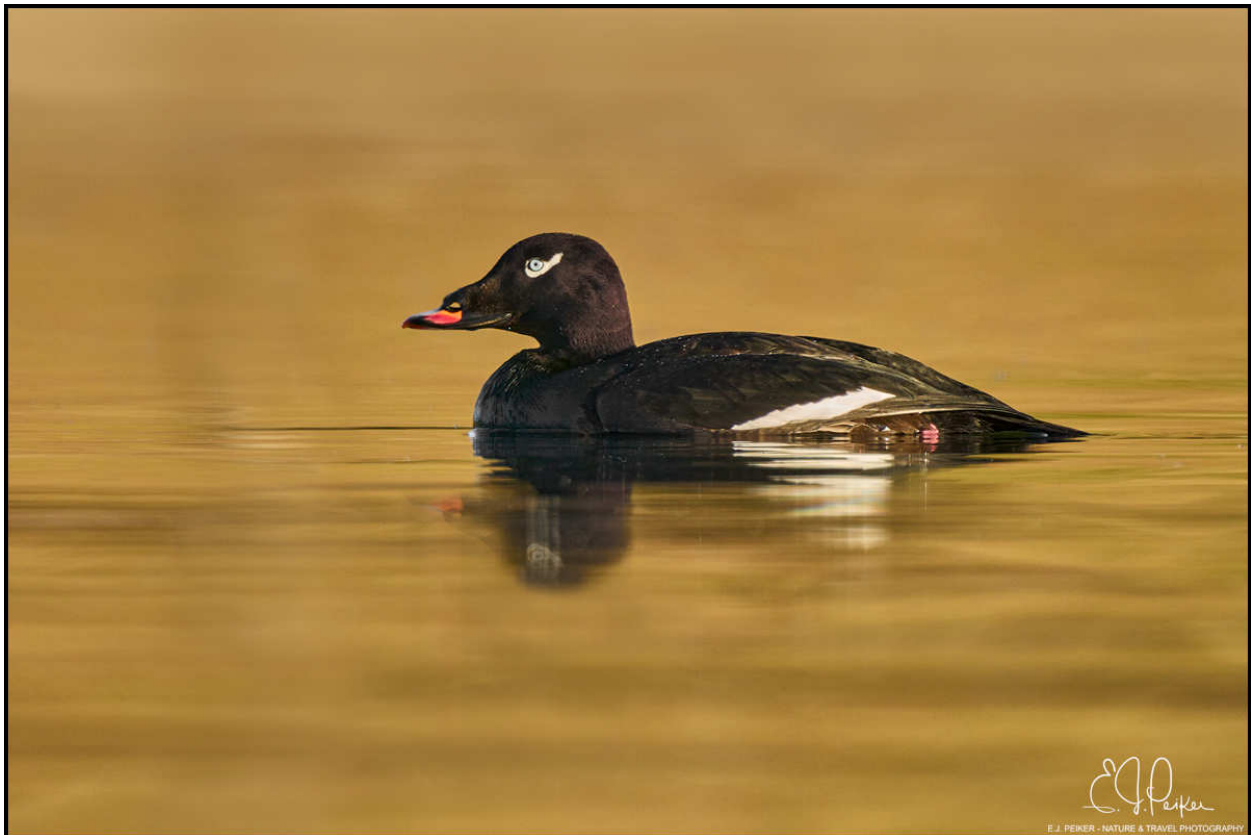


The Newsletter of E.J. Peiker - Nature and Travel Photography

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Welcome to the 22nd year of the photography newsletter from E.J. Peiker, Nature & Travel Photography and [www.EJPhoto.com](http://www.EJPhoto.com). In this publication, I share with fellow photographers my photographic experiences, photo equipment reviews, photography tips, processing tips, and industry news. All content is copyrighted by E.J. Peiker and may not be reproduced but it is permitted to forward this newsletter in its entirety only. If you would like to be added to the mailing list, unsubscribe, or access back issues, please visit: <http://www.ejphoto.com/newsletter.htm>



White-winged Scoter – Arizona (a1, 200-600mm + 1.4x)

## Newsletter Update

I announced in the last quarter that this newsletter would be streamlined into a format that includes the following segments:

In The Field – this is where I will be writing about photographing experiences in the last quarter.

Gear Talk – any new equipment that I have the opportunity to test, general gear talk, what I carry in the field and why, etc... Anything photo equipment related will appear in this section.

Digital Darkroom – this is where I will write about software, computer hardware, processing techniques and anything photography related that is done on a computer.

The Story Behind the Photo – by far the most popular section in the newsletter over the last few years will continue.

Some newsletters may not include one of these segments for various reasons.

An additional change that I am making is active management of the subscriber list. Due to changes in Mailchimp policies, I will now be automatically purging subscribers that have not opened the last five consecutive newsletters. Without doing this, the growth of the subscriber list would result in \$720 of Mailchimp charges per year for just 4 newsletters. This is clearly not an expense that someone that is retired from being a professional photographer can incur.

As always, the newsletter is available, even if you don't subscribe, on my website at the following URL: <https://www.ejphoto.com/newsletter.htm>

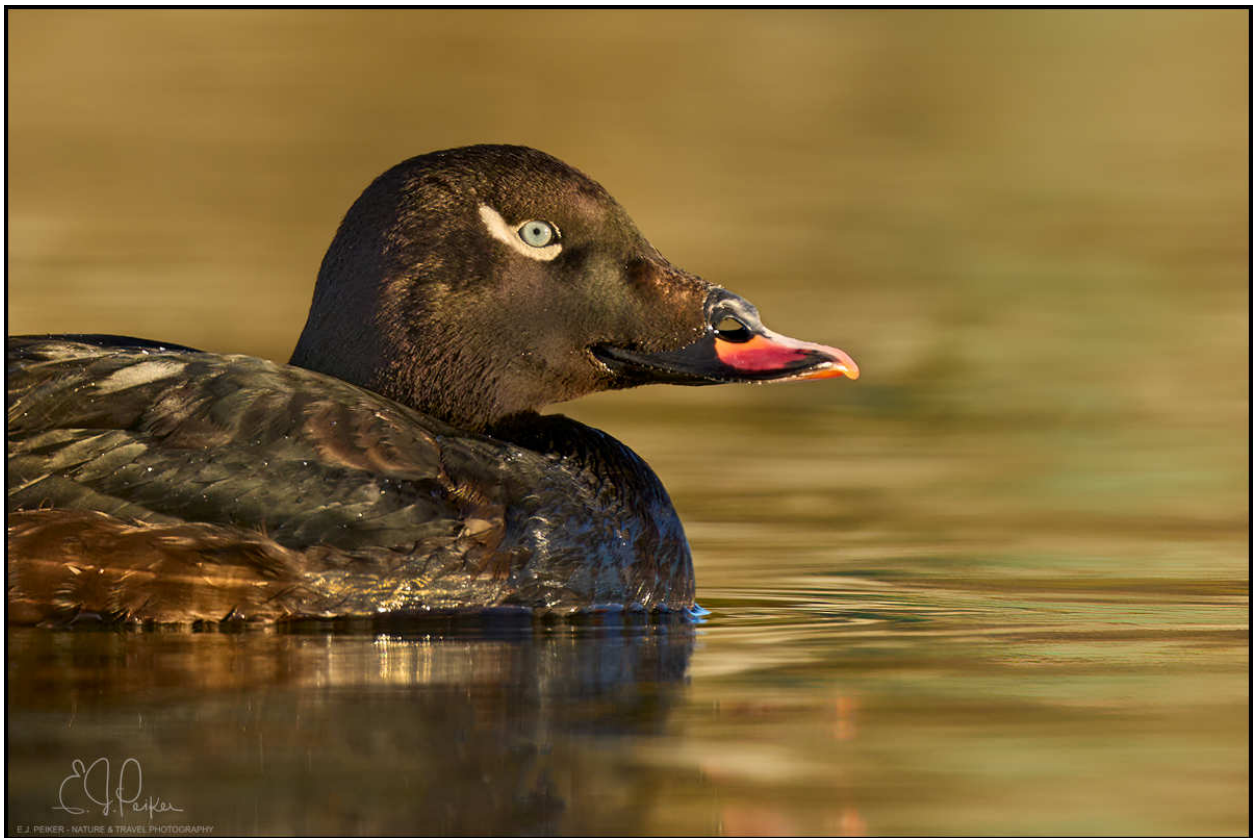


Superstition Mountains – Arizona (a7r5, 16-35mm)

## In the Field

My time photographing in the field in 2023 so far consists of about two hours one cold morning photographing the extremely rare, for my home area, White-winged Scoter and one late afternoon hunting for wildflower scenes in Arizona's Superstition Mountains. An accident at the beginning of January that left my significant other with a tibia/fibula fracture, knee cap fracture, sprained PCL, broken thumb, and a torn ligament in her thumb forced me into a 7x24 caretaker role. Fortunately she is healing well and I should be able to get out in the field more often going forward.

In my nearly 30 years of living in the Phoenix, Arizona metro, the White-winged Scoters that visited a municipal park for a few days were the first in my area that could be photographed. While they tended towards the center of the large park pond, a gaggle of a hundred or so photographers came out to get shots and I decided to be the lone photographer on the opposite side of the pond and, knowing the behavior of waterfowl well, exactly what I predicted happened – the pair drifted farther and farther away from the crowd giving me several minutes of nearly full frame shots at 840mm and some where I even had to zoom out a bit as can be seen in the head and shoulders shot below.



White-winged Scoter – Arizona (a1, 200-600mm + 1.4x)

Arizona had one of the wettest and coldest winters in its history and many were hopeful of a great wildflower bloom throughout the Sonoran Desert. Unfortunately a late February freeze and snowstorm that dropped snow all the way down to 1400 feet above sea level destroyed many of the seedlings of the more delicate flowers that can form a carpet over the desert right in the most critical time. There were a few areas that had a superbloom but a combination of high winds with either dead clear or cloudy/rainy conditions along with my caretaker duties prevented me from taking the longer drives to get to these locations.



Superstition Mountains – Arizona (a7r5, 16-35mm)

## Gear Talk

Due to the injuries I mentioned above, I have not taken many photos with the Sony a7R5 and Tamron 35-150 f/2-2.8 lens which I promised to have more information on in this newsletter so I don't have much that is new to report on that front, except this - I thought that I had discovered a significant shortcoming in Sony's implementation of Focus Bracketing (focus stacking). On every other camera system I have ever used that offers this function, it is possible to start the exposure sequence after a time delay to allow the camera to settle down on the tripod but on the a7r5 focus bracketing and the self timer are on the same selection button/sub-menu. It is possible to select one or the other but not both. I had just about given up when I found a YouTube video from one of my favorite photographers, Albert Dros, where he showed how to do this: ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HsRk4Qg8Csg&ab\\_channel=AlbertDros](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HsRk4Qg8Csg&ab_channel=AlbertDros)) There is a general bracketing set-up menu where you can select a self timer for Focus bracket - it is not in the actual focus bracketing settings page (which is dumb). See 7:25 in the video!

I have been thinking a lot (again) about how to minimize the size of my travel and hiking kit without compromising image quality. It is getting ever more difficult to carry a traditional kit consisting of a 16-35mm f/2.8, 24-70mm f/2.8 and 70-200mm f/2.8 lens plus a camera body on board airliners, especially outside of the USA. Also, as I head towards my mid 60's in age, my desire to carry large heavy gear continues to wane. I have recently spent some time analyzing different gear options which I will cover below.

My basic requirement is to minimize the weight and total size (volume) of my kit but maintaining exceptional image quality capability with no holes in the focal length range. This rules out superzoom

lenses such as a 24-300mm which can do everything in a single lens but are slow and universally have image quality below what I am comfortable with nor do they offer a wide enough angle of view on the low end of the focal length range. I am keeping the camera body constant in this analysis and am using the Sony a7r5 as the body. One could easily substitute any of the Sony full frame mirrorless camera options or come up with similar kits for other camera brands although the choices may be more limited as there is less third party support for most other brands. I am not delving into smaller sensors than full frame in this analysis. I have also included whether or not the lenses in each candidate group use the same or different filter sizes as this can play a role in how much gear you need to travel or hike with.

Traditional kit:

Sony a7r5 w/ L-plate, Sony 16-35 f/2.8GM, Sony 24-70 f/2.8GM II, Sony 70-200mm f/2.8GM II

Total weight – 8.2 lb

Total volume – 242 cubic inches

This is clearly an outstanding premium set-up that covers everything from 16mm to 200mm and can be extended to 280mm without too much additional weight or volume by including the Sony 1.4x teleconverter. It is, however, the largest and heaviest option with the camera and lenses alone weighing approximately what two laptops weigh. Add in your travel computer and other things that you need while on the flight and you will easily exceed some (mostly foreign) airline's 15lb carry on limit. The size of the kit is also relatively large requiring a backpack that will add significant weight. All lenses use the same filter size.

Candidate 1 – Two lens Sony/Tamron hybrid:

Sony a7r5 w/ L-plate, Sony 16-35mm f/2.8GM, Tamron 35-150mm f/2-2.8

Total weight – 6.6 lb

Total volume – 178.2 cubic inches

This is a two lens system that covers everything from 35mm to 150mm with exceptional image quality including excellent low light capability in the 35mm to 60mm range as the Tamron lens is an f/2 lens on the wide end. The focal length of this combination cannot be extended through the use of a teleconverter since there are no teleconverters on the market that are compatible with the 35-150mm lens. The weight is 1.6lb lighter and there is a dramatic reduction in the space this gear occupies making it easier to meet the most stringent airline requirements. Additionally, a smaller pack can carry this gear also making it more conducive to hiking long distances. Both lenses use the same filter size.

Candidate 2 – Three lenses all Tamron:

Sony a7r5 w/ L-plate, Tamron 17-28mm f/2.8, Tamron 28-75mm f/2.8II, Tamron 70-180mm f/2.8

Total weight – 6.4 lb

Total volume – 177.3 cubic inches

This three lens kit is the excellent Tamron equivalent of the Sony "holy trinity" lens set. It nearly equals Sony's f/2.8 set-up at a lower price and gives up very little, if anything, in image quality. The lenses are built with more composite materials and are smaller with fewer features. I have written about these lenses in previous newsletters and they have become my go to kit for travel since late 2018. It is a very lightweight combination despite consisting of three lenses and also they take up less volume but this can be a bit misleading in comparison to the Sony 16-35 f/2.8/Tamron 35-150mm f/2-2.8 combination. Since each lens requires a square slot in the camera backpack (assuming you are using dividers) the wasted space due to fitting a round object into a square space is greater with this combination and will likely take a bit more space than the two lens combination. Even though this combination consists of three lenses, there is a slight weight savings which may or may not be taken up by the additional divider required when packing. Overall this combination then becomes a wash for space and weight with Candidate 2 but this

combination will require more lens changes due to it being three lenses while shooting in the field. As with Candidate 2, there is no teleconverter option to extend the focal length but since this combination goes to 180mm, it may be a better choice over the two lens combo above. Additionally, you give up a slight amount of wide angle range being limited to 17mm rather than 16mm. While this doesn't seem much, I have been in a few situations where I wish I had had that extra 1mm. All three lenses use the same filter size

The next two candidates are newer options and while they provide even more size and weight savings than the options above, they introduce some compromises that may be too much for some traveling or hiking photographers...

Candidate 3 – Two lens Sony/Tamron hybrid #2

Sony a7r5 w/ L-plate, Sony 20-70mm f/4, Tamron 70-180mm f/2.8

Total weight – 5.4 lb

Total volume – 149 cubic inches

Some serious weight and volume savings can be had when combining the brand new Sony 20-70mm f/4 lens with the light but exceptional Tamron 70-180mm lens. The big compromise is a very significant loss of wide angle capability by going from 16/17mm on the wide end to 20mm. In field of view terms, this is very significant. The difference might be even more than one would think as the Sony 20-70mm isn't very good at 20mm and when shot wide open at f/4 goes almost black in the corners and doesn't brighten up to become a truly usable 20mm lens until you get out to f/8. The problems are not fixed by automatic lens adjustments as these can't brighten the corners enough and result in auto cropping the image leaving you with about a 22-70mm lens. Also, note that the Sony 20-70mm lens is an f/4 lens and I have generally tried to stick with f/2.8 lenses to allow low light photography and possibly even some aurora or interior shots. However, if you rarely shoot this wide and don't need f/2.8 on the wide end, this two lens combo is an incredibly light set-up that takes up very little space. These two lenses use different filter sizes.

Candidate 4 – Two lens Tamron kit

Sony a7r5 w/ L-plate, Tamron 20-40mm f/2.8, Tamron 35-150mm f/2-2.8

Total weight – 6.5 lb

Total volume – 155 cubic inches

Tamron has recently introduced a 20mm-40mm f/2.8 lens which seemingly would pair well with the 35-150mm f/2-2.8 lens to form a kit that goes from 20mm to 150mm in a fairly compact package capable of relatively low light photography. Unfortunately, the performance of the 20-40mm at 20mm is very similar to the Sony 20-70mm lens mentioned under Candidate 3. In other words, it is not really usable at 20mm unless significantly stopped down effectively making it a 22-150mm combination. But again, it is a fairly compact combo although not as light as Candidate 3.

There are many other combinations possible but not with aperture for all or at least the vast majority of the focal lengths of f/2.8. The question then becomes which one to choose? I am fortunate in that I can, to some extent, choose a combination that best matches my need for that day or that trip but if I could only choose one, I'd probably go with Candidate 2, the three lens Tamron option, due to its light weight, exceptional image quality and capability of going out to 180mm. Alternately, especially in windy and dusty environments where I'd like to minimize lens changes, Candidate 1 is a good option as cropping the a7r5 to a 200mm or 180mm field of view, still leaves me with plenty of pixels for most situations. The traditional kit just has become too heavy and large for most hiking or travel situations. It should be said that this entire analysis revolves around landscape and travel photography. Certainly if wildlife is involved, the whole game changes due to the need for much longer focal lengths.

## Digital Darkroom

About four years ago, just after Topaz Labs had released Version 1.0 of Sharpen AI, I illustrated how an image that suffered from the tripod sinking in wet sand during a longer exposure was rescued by Topaz Sharpen. At the time this was ground breaking as it included AI specific to detecting this sort of problem and it did an amazing job at rescuing the photo. You can find that article here:

<https://www.ejphoto.com/Quack%20PDF/Quack%20Summer%202019.pdf>

Topaz Sharpen AI is now on Version 4.1 and has been steadily improved including built in algorithms for birds so when I returned from California in December after shooting in the southern part of California's Coastal Mountain Range with Alan Murphy and Brian Small and got an in-flight shot of a Nuttall's Woodpecker where the focus system did not capture the bird but rather was locked onto a perch the bird was landing on, I was disappointed. I initially ignored this shot but then I remembered that Topaz had put in bird algorithms and decided to give it a try. I was literally blown away. First I ran the sharpener on the entire image, it found the bird and applied sharpening; the result was decidedly better but still left a bit to be desired in eye and head sharpness so I decided to run it again just on the head of the bird. The results are simply amazing. Here is the shot straight out of the camera and then again after this double application of Topaz Sharpen AI:





I have been a prolific culler over the years ruthlessly deleting out of focus pictures. I now wish I had some of those files back as I am sure there are dozens, if not hundreds, of shots that would have been great if they just were sharp.

### **The Story Behind the Photo**

The photo below is a pretty iconic view of the mountain called Buachaille Etive Mor in the Highlands of Scotland but when I took this photo, I had never seen this view even though it is now a very popular photo location sought out by landscape photographers far and wide. In the autumn of 2015, I had signed up for a photo tour with a well known photographer in the Glencoe area of Scotland. Ever since seeing images from there, I wanted to photograph this spectacular area. A couple of months before the trip was supposed to embark, I was informed that the trip was cancelled because there weren't enough participants to make the trip economically viable. I already had a plane ticket so after a couple of days of mulling around the idea, I decided to do the trip on my own. I contacted my good friend Alister Benn, a native of Scotland and someone that knows this area well for location ideas. His information was very valuable and I also did a ton of research on my own. I got there and the area was even more spectacular than I had imagined and I shot from an hour before sunrise in the early morning into darkness in the evening for a whole week.





One day while sitting in a café during a downpour I saw a beautiful photo on the wall which depicted a small waterfall with one of the iconic mountains in the area that I had seen several times while I was there in the back ground. I had a relatively good idea approximately where it would be based on the shape of the mountain but had no idea exactly where it might be but as the rain eased, and after studying my maps, I set-out to find it. Later in the afternoon as the rains cleared, I knew I was in the area and I knew I was alongside a river and the angle of the mountain was as I remembered from the photo on the wall of the café. I turned at the very next turn-out onto a small dirt road and immediately came upon a parking area just barely wide enough for three cars. I got out and could hear water falling but could not see it. I crossed the dirt road and walked up and over an embankment and there it was, no more than 200 feet away. I quickly grabbed my gear and started surveying the area for various shots. By now it was late afternoon and some clearing had started and I was hopeful that there would be some color in the clouds at sunset. After shooting for about an hour and finding my vantage point, standing in the waterfall's catch basin, the sun came out just as it was descending behind the mountain. A few minutes later it lit up the clouds. I was very excited as this was one of those rare times when a combination of research, paying attention to geography, using my senses, and a fortunate turn of atmospheric conditions all came in serendipitous fashion to create a photo even better than the one I saw hanging in the café. Since taking this, I have seen hundreds of shots of this location but I had not seen it before I went to Glencoe so it is still a special shot to me.

## Gear Garage Sale Continues

Many filters and camera support items are still available in my ongoing gear sale. All sales are within the USA to USA addresses only. Prices include ground shipping and I am not charging extra to cover PayPal fees – the price you see is what you pay, no hidden fees. Venmo and Zelle are now also accepted and the preferred method of payment. See the full and up to date listing here:

[https://ejphoto.com/gear\\_for\\_sale\\_page.htm](https://ejphoto.com/gear_for_sale_page.htm)

## Social Media

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/EJPeikerNaturePhotographer>

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Big Sur (a7R3, 50mm x 6 exposures)

*E.J. Peiker*

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