

Macro Lens Discussion

By: Mark Hamilton
Ohio Valley Camera Club of WV

Not long ago, I owned a camera bag of lenses & stuff and sold it all to Mike during a plan to simplify down to one or two versatile lenses. I was surprised to find that one of the lenses that I immediately missed is the macro and this is most surprising because it is the lens that I used the least. What I've come to realize is that a Macro lens is something that every serious photographer should have in the bag even if you don't intend to photograph the tip of the nose of a fly. Just like an ex-smoker reaching for the pack, I still see shots each week (if not every few days) that makes me think "go get the macro".

So, I've been again looking on the 'net.

So, what is a Macro lens? The usual definition is a fixed non-zoom lens that can photograph the subject close-up and usually life size. It is typically a fast lens (usually F2.8) and usually is a medium telephoto. Note that this isn't a scientific definition, so don't mail back corrections, but you get the idea. You get to photograph things up close and they turn out really big. Don't think for a minute that that zoom lens that you own is an actual macro lens just because it says "Macro", there is a world of difference. For a zoom, the word macro usually just means that you can focus it closer than normal but it just doesn't have the same magnification not to mention that the quality of glass is not the same as a macro lens.

There's other ways to do this that is cheaper and I think Jeff gave a good program on some of them. Pocket digicams can even be set to the little flower setting and you can get decent close up shots. I've even turned around a 50mm lens and mounted it in front of another lens to get good magnification. A dedicated macro lens will beat all these alternatives because of the sole fact that it is a very very versatile lens for other things than true macro photography.

Shoot portraits? You'll not find a better lens because of the sharpness, the lovely background blur and the focal length that often lies right in the legendary 100mm range that a lot of folks like. Shoot still life? These lenses are one of the best and you can manipulate the depth of field to give extraordinary sharpness just where you want and then blur the rest without the need for fakey photoshop. Close-ups of fall leaves, insects, abstracts? This is your go-to lens, bar none.

What do I look for in a macro lens? One thing that I don't pay any attention to is the BRAND NAME. If you are one who likes to sell your stuff after awhile, you might be better off by sticking with Nikon or Canon brand for the macro because it is a fact of life that a lot of photographers associate these names with all the good photographs made

on the face of the earth and you might get more of your money back. But if you hang onto your stuff and actually use it, you can do just fine with another manufacturer (and, as you'll find out, maybe even do better). The Macro that I sold was a Tamron 90mm and this lens is one of those that is known worldwide for its portraiture work. The background that it produces is the softest, most lovely blur that you could want. Besides being a great lens, Tamron runs rebates periodically so that right now, you can get the lens for about \$350 after you wait months to get the \$90 rebate back. You'll probably be in the weeds shooting spiders and nobody will see the name on the lens anyway.

With F2.8 being pretty universal for aperture, the biggest deciding factor should be the focal length of the lens. Macro lenses will come in 50mm, 60mm, 90mm, 100mm, 105mm, 150mm, and 180mm (plus a few assorted other sizes). What this means, more than anything, for close-up photography (and still life photography) is that the longer focal length lenses will give you a longer working space between your subject and the front of the glass when you are working at the most extreme close up (i.e. most extreme magnification). The working distance for a 50mm may be something like 2 or 3 inches whereas the working distance for the 180mm would be something like maybe 9 or 10 inches. That's a lot of difference when shooting insects. One other item is that a lens hood will reduce the working distance considerably and you may not be able to use one. The Tamron has glass that is set back in the barrel and does not need a lens hood, which has helped me quite a few times.

So, if you shoot insects then you'll need more distance. Shoot floral, then you can do with less. Just remember that you may block the light if you are too close. This info should make the decision easy, but it doesn't. As you might suspect, the price goes up dramatically as you go from 50mm to 180mm. But the limitation that will affect you the longest will be the versatility of the lens when you are not using it in macro photography. Remember, these lenses have exceptionally high quality glass for the money even if you get a Sigma so it would behoove you to pick a focal length that is most useful to you for general photography. Most folks choose the 100mm range as being a good compromise. My Tamron was 90mm and was a perfect fit.

Here's some examples, all shot with the Tamron 90mm. I should include the fact that I never shoot real macro photography like the eyes of insects or small innards of watches. My interests lie more in close-up work with insects and still life, things that I can do without getting into the expense of lighting setups.

[A photo of Telisa shot in Mike's garage with his studio lights.](#) The interesting thing is that I shot this with illumination of the modeling lights and his flashes did not go off. The lens was wide open at F2.8. With macro lenses, you can routinely shoot wide open and get good results.

[Moms yellow rose shot at F5.6 to F8.](#) I'm a constant believer in Program mode and auto focus, but with a macro lens you will get your best result if you get in the habit of switching to aperture priority and manual focus then use the focus and the F-stop to

control the focus point and depth of field.

[Photo of a moth, shot at F4.5](#). This is one of my favorites and it shows how you can control the depth of field. Look at the netting and you can see how the focus gradually sharpens then blends back to a blur. I lose the sharpness of the back of his wings but the eyes and legs is what gets you. This was a "go get the macro lens" moment and was a grab shot on the back porch.

[The last tomato](#). This photo shows how a good macro lens will make a nice soft background, which I call Bokeh (but which someone may point out really isn't).

[The primrose photo](#) shows how the macro works good for still life. I picked this flower out of our garden and set it up in morning light with a white board as the background. Set at F5.6, it gave good sharpness of the flower while letting the stalk fall off into blur. Remember, blur is your friend.

[Hannah's eye](#). This is creative photo where the post processing is solely driven by the limitations of the camera. The story is that my niece wanted me to photograph her eye, so I put on the Tamron Macro. The light was dim and I hardly ever use a tripod. Since I couldn't put her on a tripod either, I was faced with 2 things bobbing around, the camera and her face. The shot was 90mm at 1/100th shutter speed at ISO 1600 with the lens wide open at F2.8. The Pentax is not known for good results at high ISO, so I converted it to black and white, added some grain to hide the flaws, and let the far left side just blow out to base white. I liked the result. If you look closely in the pupil, you can see me taking the photo.

Hope this helps some. You can't go wrong with a Canon, Nikon, Pentax, Tamron, Tokina, or Sigma macro lens. Choose your focal length wisely and then watch the price. A Tamron at \$350 now is better than a Canon at \$550 a year from now, though most of them will have rebates from time to time.