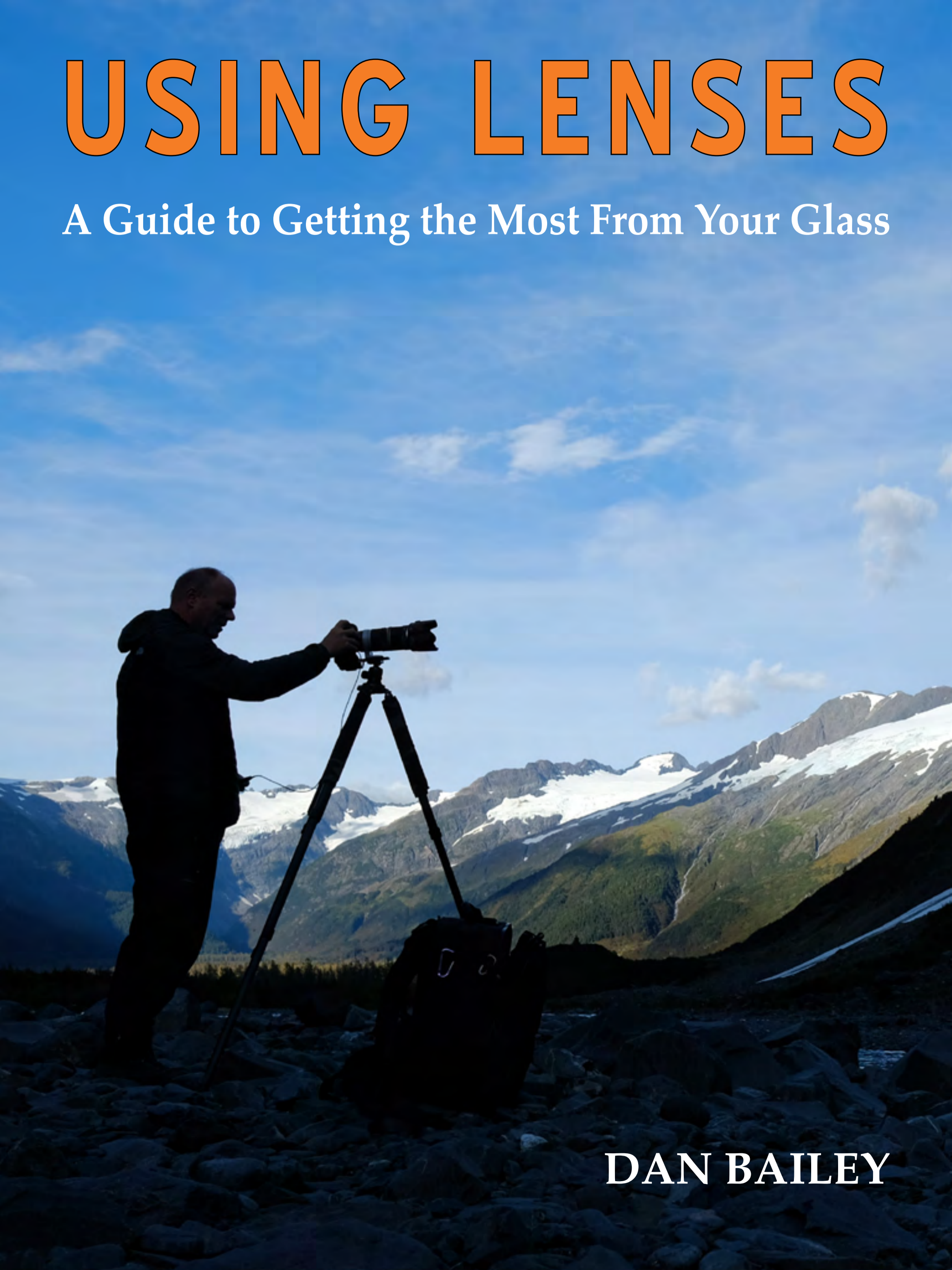


USING LENSES

A Guide to Getting the Most From Your Glass



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A Guide to Using Lenses

Lenses are your camera's eyes to the world and they determine the overall look of your imagery more than any other piece of equipment in your camera bag.

Think of them as compositional tools that allow you to frame the scene in a way that matches your own vision of the subject. Part of becoming a better photographer is learning how to identify which type of lens is best suited to your vision of the scene in front of you.

In this short reference guide, I'll show you how the four main types of lenses portray the world and give you tips for how to maximize your creative potential when using each type.

When using any kind of lens, keep this tip in mind: **Always think Front and Back.**

If you're ever in doubt about how to compose a scene, Think about what's in your **foreground** and what's in your **background**, and how they can play off of each other. If you break your scene down to these two elements and try to accentuate front and back, this will usually help you make a more simple and effective photograph.



Wide Angle Lenses



Wide angle lenses show a very broad view of the world, so we tend to think of them as being the ideal lens for shooting landscapes. They're also excellent choices for shooting environmental portraits and showing subjects in their environment.

Wide lenses don't magnify camera shake as much as longer focal length lenses, which allows you to shoot at slower shutter speeds. (Of course with a sturdy tripod, you can use as low a shutter speed as you wish.)

The range of wide angle lenses is typically any lens under 28mm for full frame cameras and under 20mm for APS-C and other crop sensor cameras. Essentially, the lower the number in mm, the wider the lens and the greater angle of view it offers.

Here are some compositional techniques for using wide angle lenses:



1. The Grand Scene - Sharp From Front to Back

Wide lenses typically have a very wide depth of field, so in addition to showing that broad view of a landscape or travel scene, you can hold focus on very close subject matter all the way to infinity. This brings your viewer's eye right into the frame and keeps their attention all the way through, from front to back as they explore all the elements of your scene.



2. Sense of Place

Wide angle lenses are also great for capturing subjects in their environment. By shooting close to your subject, and showing the area around them, you can accentuate your subjects and at the same time, give them a sense of place. They are the lens of choice when shooting in confined spaces, or when you can't back up any farther. Wide angle lenses allow you to create images that have a very three-dimensional look.





3. Accentuate Your Foreground

The closer you are, the more a wide angle lens will exaggerate your subject matter. You can use this to your advantage. By moving in close, you can accentuate a particular element and use that to anchor down your scene. In addition, this technique places you viewer right in the middle of the action and makes your viewer feel as if they're more intimately involved with the scene.

This technique is extremely effective when shooting both broad scenes and closer, environmental portraits and travel shots. Don't get too close, though, or you'll start to distort your subject. Experiment until you find that sweet spot.

Go one step further and reduce your depth of field. This will bring the viewer's eye right to your main subject and give them added prominence in the photograph.



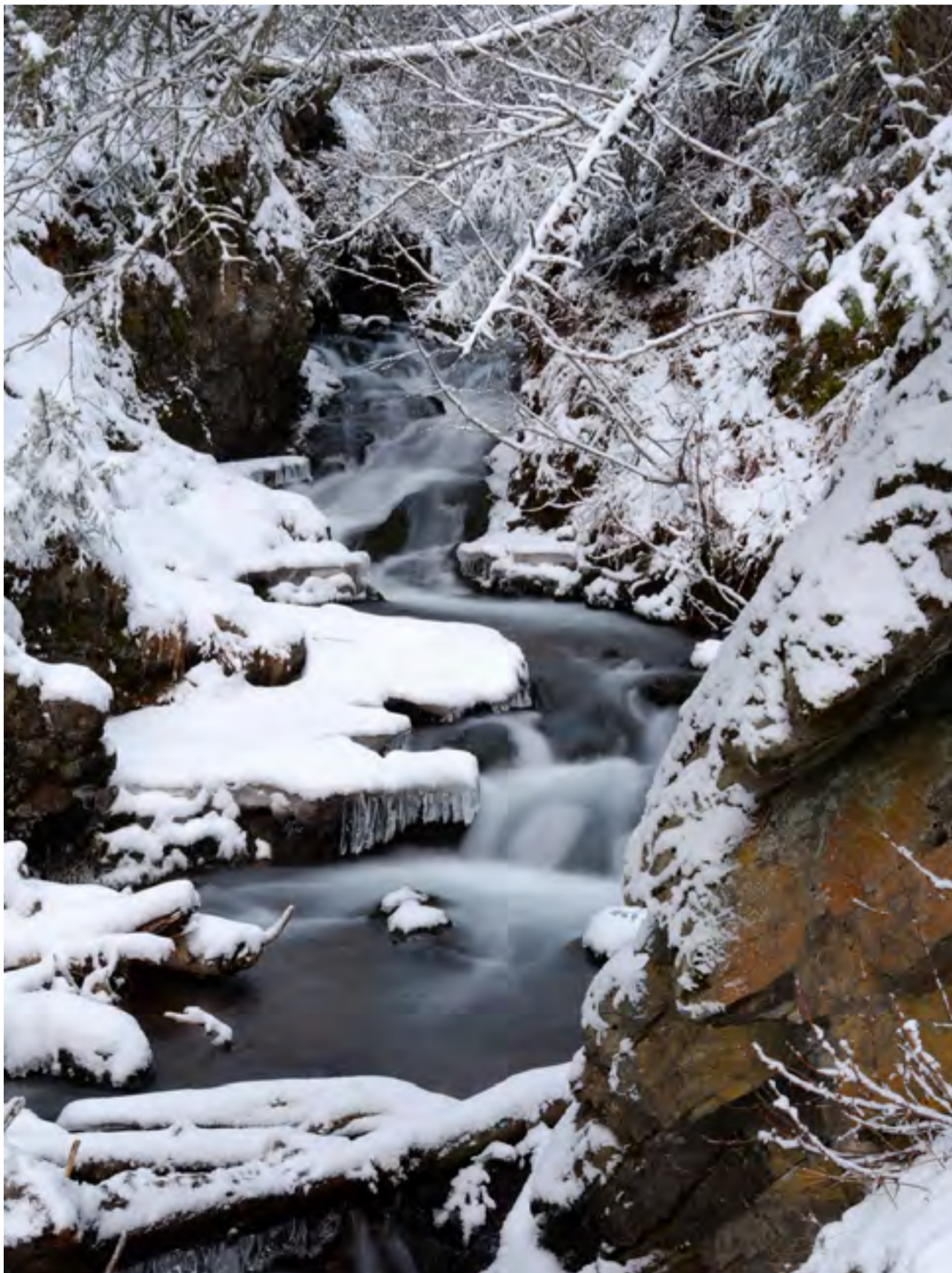


Normal Lenses



Normal lenses are called as such because they show a view that is similar to the angle and perspective of human vision. They show a view that matches what we are generally used to seeing, with little distortion or magnification. Before cameras started being packaged with zoom lenses, normal lenses were often the most commonly used lenses for beginning photographers.

These days, many cameras come with a zoom lens that includes the normal range, which generally falls between 35mm-70mm, but I encourage you to consider buying a fast, fixed normal lens, such as the 50mm f1.8 (full frame) or a 35mm f/1.8 or f/2 (APS-C). This, can be a worthwhile investment for the any photographer, because they're inexpensive, compact and extremely useful in low light situations.



1. Showing the Normal View

Use the normal lens when you want to show what's right in front of your eyes and you don't want the image to have a distorted or compressed look. In other words, when you want a "what you see is what you get" aspect to your photograph.





2. Stay Close

Up close, normal lenses have a very shallow depth of field, which makes them great for situations where you want to isolate your subjects. However, at greater distances, normal lenses begin to lose their effectiveness. When shooting subjects at infinity, subjects tend to lose their power. Experiment with your distances, but keep in mind that they're more effective when used relatively close, especially for portraits.



2. Abbreviate Your Subject

This is a good technique to use with any lens, but it works exceptionally well with normal lenses, especially when you're shooting close. Showing part of your subject gives your viewer something to think about when they look at your photo, because they'll imagine what lies outside of the borders of your frame. This can be just as important as what's inside your frame.





Telephoto Lenses



Telephoto lenses bring the subject closer and magnify the scene. The most common use of longer focal length lenses is shooting subjects that are farther away so that they don't look too small in the frame. I like to place telephoto lenses into two categories, short and long, as they each add a unique look to your images.

Short Telephoto

Typically falling in the range of 70mm-135mm, short telephoto lenses are extremely useful because they give you that slight compression and blurry background without taking it too far. Plus they're smaller, lighter and easier to carry when traveling.

My favorite short telephoto lenses are the Fuji XF90mm f/2 and the Nikon 85mm f1.8 and 105mm f/2.5. Even if you already have a zoom lens, I encourage you to think about getting a fast fixed short tele. You might not use it all the time, but it's a fantastic lens when you need it.



1. Head and Shoulders

Short teles are the ideal lenses for head and shoulders portraits because they slightly compress the relative perspective of the facial features in a pleasing way. They have a shallow depth of field, which allows you to blur the background and isolate your subject so that it is well defined against a gentle wash of color.



2. Across The Street

A short tele has a comfortable working distance, which helps to put your subjects at ease and makes it a great “across-the-street-lens” for shooting candid and other travel scenes. You can shoot photos of people from a safe distance without them being aware or without you being intrusive. They allow you to isolate subjects from the rest of the scene and feature one or more important elements in your images rather than just showing the entire scene.





2. Close Details

Short telephotos are good for landscapes, and action as well. Pick out a specific detail that's relatively close up and treat it like a nature portrait. Accentuate a very small part of your scene and show it against a clean background.



Long Telephoto

Long telephoto lenses, (135mm & up) bring you subjects even closer and add more compression to your scene. They allow you to shoot far away subjects and thus are good for wildlife, sports, and anything that is difficult to shoot up close.

They allow you to isolate your subjects even more with a very shallow depth of field and create images that show the specific details of the scene. The extreme compression and shallow depth of field effects of a long lens will really let you bring the background forward and make it a dominating backdrop behind your subjects.

When using telephoto lenses, your photographs become more about your subject directly, rather than how it relates to its surroundings, although sometimes it's very effective to include a second, out of focus element in the background.



1. Move in Really Close!

The number one benefit with a long telephoto is that you can bring in those distant scenes, as if you had a telescope on the front of your cameras. Reach out and let your viewer think they can almost touch those far away subjects. Fill the frame with drama and compelling subject matter.



2. Extreme Bokeh

The most creative benefit of long lenses is their extremely shallow depth of field. This lets you isolate your subject against a very blurry background, which makes your main element pop with extreme prominence. In your photos. This adds incredible drama and simplicity to portraits, wildlife and sports.

To increase impact, look for simple and/or shadowed backgrounds to help you subject stand out more, or add a secondary element to help flesh out the visual story of your scene.





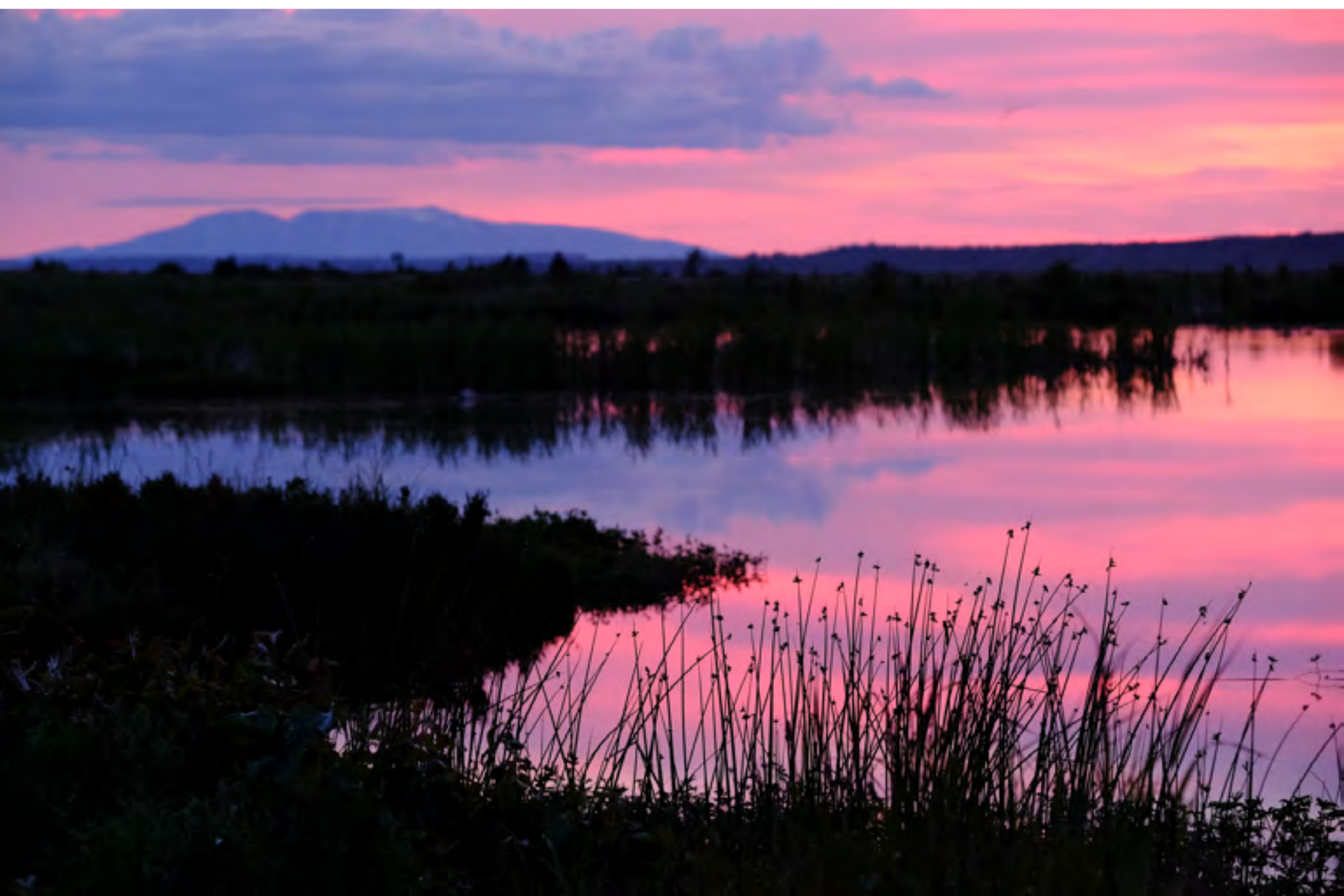
3. Eliminate The Foreground

Since long teles have such a shallow depth of field, anything that's not in your plane of focus will be blurry. This limitation works really when using the technique above. Blurry backgrounds typically look great, but more often than not, blurry foregrounds don't; they just look distracting. In most case, you'll want to eliminate and shoot over your foregrounds.

The exception if when you have a compelling element in front of you scene that you can "shoot through" as you're leading back to your main subject. This second element can give your subject added power, especially if helps tell the story of your scene. Remember, though, keep it simple, and when in doubt, leave that foreground out when using a long lens.







Zoom Lenses

When using zoom lenses, especially those with a greater range, sometimes it's difficult to know just how much to zoom in on your subject. The 'right' amount is very subjective, and it depends on the artistic style of the image that you're trying to produce.

If you're goal is to show the details of a scene, then zooming in all the way and filling the frame with your subject might be a good method towards creating an image that shows a small sample of the scene. Even just showing part of a subject can have a strong effect, because it allows your viewers to use their imaginations to mentally picture the rest of the scene.

On the other hand, if your goal is to show how your subject relates to its environment, then zooming out a bit so that you include some surrounding elements might be a good way to create an image that has a sense of place.

When taking photos with zoom lenses, remember to apply the same compositional and creative methods that you would with any other type of shot

Zooms vs. Primes

When buying any lens, especially telephoto lenses, faster is usually better. A fast lens allows for a greater diversity and more options with your subject matter and lighting conditions.

Generally, primes (single focal length lenses) are faster than zooms and usually smaller, but they obviously lack the diversity of zoom lenses. However, there is a trade off, fast telephotos, and especially fast zoom lenses are heavier and considerably more expensive.

My favorite fast telephoto is currently the Fuji 50-140 f/2.8. When I shot Nikon, it was the 70-200mm f/2.8 and 70-200mm f/4 VR. However, a f2.8 zoom lens is quite cumbersome, so when I want to go light, I make use of the Fuji 90mm f/2 and the Fuji 18-135. With Nikon, it was the 85mm f1.8 and 105mm f2.5, both of which are smaller and fast enough to use in low light. If a large fast zoom lens isn't in your budget, consider buying a short fixed telephoto.

My advice is always to buy the fastest lenses that can afford. By “afford,” I mean afford to buy as well as afford to carry. You might have the budget to buy a huge fast lens, but you may not want to lug it around the world.

On the other hand, perhaps that cost and weight is worth it because of the types of images you'll create with that big fast lens. At any rate, I'd always recommend buying at least one fast lens, more if you can 'afford' it. Do your research and outfit yourself with a system or a couple of systems that will work for you, depending on what you're shooting.

Your goal is to visualize how you want your images to look before even looking through the camera. As you take more photographs with different lenses, you'll begin to recognize the ways that each type will portray your scene and learn to intuitively reach for the right lens. This will make your compositional process that much more efficient.



About The Author

Dan Bailey has been a full time adventure, outdoor and travel photographer since 1996. His immersive, first person style of shooting often places him right alongside his subjects as he documents the unfolding scene and searches for the perfect convergence of light, background and moment.

He has written [six eBooks](#) and two print books: [Outdoor Action and Adventure Photography](#), published by Focal Press, and [Adventure Photography](#), a Falcon Guides title co-published by Backpacker Magazine. His blog was recently rated as one of the Top 100 Photography Blogs on the Planet.

An official Fujifilm X-Photographer, Dan's client list includes Outdoor Photographer Magazine, Alaska Airlines, Salsa Cycles, National Geographic Adventure, Outside, Patagonia, Outdoor Research, Backpacker Magazine and Coleman.

He regularly gives photo presentations and leads photography workshops throughout the year.

Dan currently lives in Anchorage, Alaska, where he spends his free time exploring gravel bars in his little yellow Cessna, hiking and skiing in the mountains and touring on his mountain bike.

Visit his website at danbaileyphoto.com

