

Which Lenses Should I Take?

One of the most common questions that I am asked is, “Which lens or lenses should I take on my trip to...?” In fact, it is a question that I must ask myself before I leave on a photo assignment. It is a surprisingly difficult question to answer, since it is dependent on so many factors. Some of the items to be considered are:

- How am I getting to the shooting location?
- How will I be traveling around once I get on site?
- What are the subjects that I will be photographing?
- How close can I get to my subjects?
- What if something breaks?

And then, there are the two questions for which you really want the answers:

- Which lenses do I usually take?
- Yeah, but which lenses actually get used?

Below, I will comment on how these factors affect my decision of which lenses to include in my camera bag. I now have an additional aid in having made multiple expeditions to the same or similar locations. I have analyzed the images that I have selected as successful from these assignments and counted how often I used each lens for these photos. By graphing these data, I am able to assign the importance of including each lens in my gear, depending on destination. I share some of this information with you at the end of this note.

How am I getting to the shooting location?

In this age of heightened security, we are finding more and more restrictions placed upon the amount of baggage that we can take on board commercial aircraft. I want as much of my photo gear that I can carry in the cabin with me and not have it traveling around in the bowels of the airport in unlocked cases and bouncing around in the cargo hold of the aircraft.

Traveling by plane, you may have to bite the bullet and check your really big lenses like a 500mm f/4 or 600mm f/4. If you do, try to pack it securely, but make it inconspicuous. Nothing screams, “*I’m Valuable*” louder than a big unlocked Pelican case or a lens case emblazoned with “NIKON” or “CANON”.

Another option, that can actually make your travel easier, is to freight ship some or all of your equipment by FedEx, UPS, or one of the other major companies to and from your destination hotel. You will want to securely pack your equipment. Be sure to ship your gear far enough in advance so that it arrives just before or at the same time as you do. It is always a good idea to contact your hotel in advance to forewarn them of the pending arrival. The containers that you use to ship your camera gear are probably not appropriate for use in the field, so plan to ship or bring another field bag to use. You should use caution with this method when traveling to some of the more *exotic* parts of the world.

If you are traveling by car, train, or ship, you will have an easier time traveling with your equipment and getting what you need to and from your destination.

How will I be traveling around once I get on site?

Getting to the location may only be the first obstacle to overcome. If your expedition includes additional travel in and around your initial destination, you need to consider the amount and total weight of your equipment that you will be allowed or able to transport. Will you be traveling in small boats or canoes? Will you be transported in helicopters or small single-engine planes? Will you have to pack all your gear on your back or on pack animals?

What are the subjects that I will be photographing?

As photographers, we always want to be prepared to capture images of whatever or whomever we find of interest on an expedition. Of course, that is not always possible, otherwise we wouldn't have to ask these questions, we would always just take all our lenses.

Before packing for your expedition, decide which types of images are most important to you or your assignment. More questions: Do you need close-up or macro shots? Wide-angle? Telephotos? Will you be photographing landscapes? People? Wildlife?

If you have room, it is a good idea to take lenses that allows wide-angle shots, normal shots, and telephoto images. For wildlife, a longer telephoto lens is often desirable, but they tend to be big and heavy. We are lucky, nowadays, because wide-range zoom lenses are available to cover multiple ranges and still produce razor-sharp images.

If you are planning to do a lot of close-up work, consider taking a dedicated macro lens. If you only expect to take occasional extreme close-up images, a lightweight extension tube is a good choice.

Also consider how often you will encounter each type of subject. Do you really want to haul around a big lens weighing four or five kilograms (plus a tripod) if you only expect to need it for a couple of images?

How close can I get to my subjects?

So, do you really need a long telephoto lens? If you plan to photograph dangerous or skittish subjects, it may be essential. If your closest proximity to a polar bear is going to be a hundred meters, you will want a big telephoto. If you plan to photograph a penguin at five meters, a long telephoto is not really needed. If the penguin comes closer, your images just get better. If the polar bear gets closer, you may be lunch!

What if something breaks?

While most lenses are pretty rugged, especially the pro models, they are still mechanical devices and subject to failure. For each lens that you plan to take, evaluate the consequences if it fails during the trip. Another advantage of taking zoom lenses is that their ranges often abut or overlap and one may substitute for another that has broken. Remember, your legs work as a good zoom, too.

Which lenses do I usually take?

Whenever possible, I take a variety of lenses that cover a large range of focal lengths.

For most all assignments, I take:

- Wide-angle zoom lens, such as the Nikon 14-24mm f/2.8
- Normal zoom lens, such as the Nikon 24-70mm f/2.8
- Telephoto zoom lens, such as the Nikon 70-200mm f2.8
- High-power telephoto zoom lens, such as the Nikon 200-400mm f/4
- 1.7X teleconverter lens, which can increase the focal length of the telephoto lenses by a factor of 1.7 times
- Extension tube so that any of the lenses can focus closer than normal

For special assignments, I might take:

- Long telephoto lens, such as the Nikon 500mm f/4 or the Nikon 600mm f/4
- Dedicated macro lens, such as the Nikon 105mm f/2.8

Yeah, but which lenses actually get used?

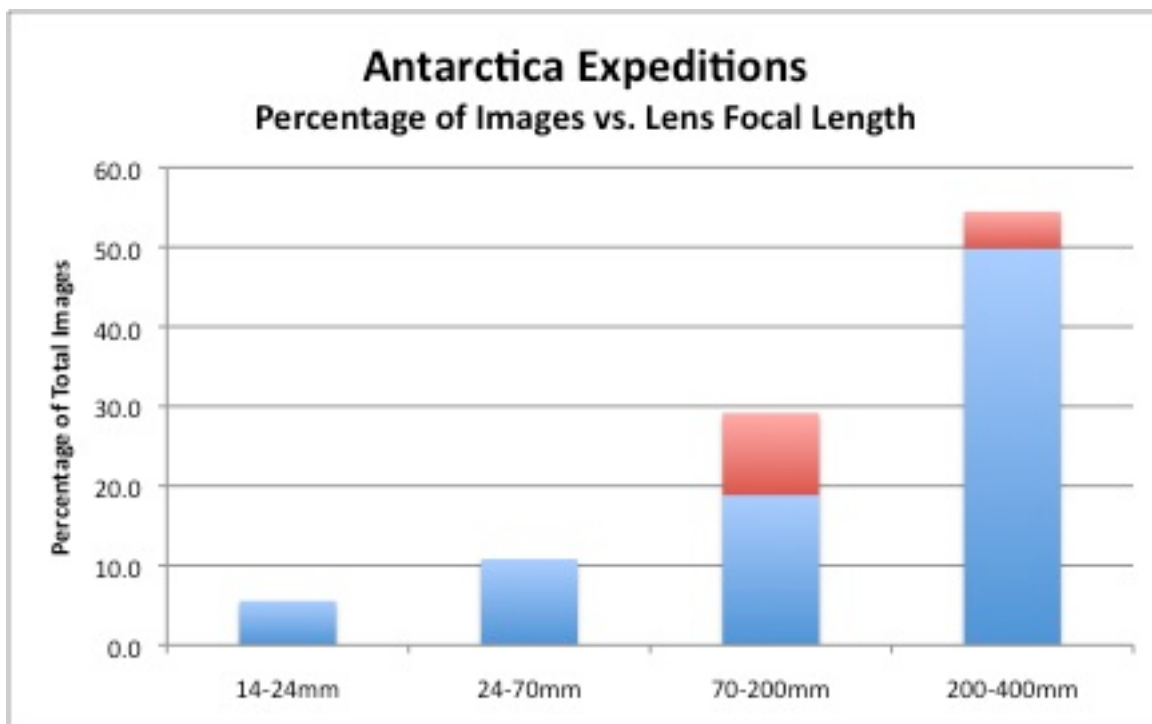
One of the great things about digital photography is that the camera faithfully records all the conditions under which the images are made. This includes information about the camera, lens, exposure, and can even include GPS data. All of these data are

extracted and entered into my database for the images that I select for my website. I have analyzed this information for some of my common destinations to see how many of these select images were made with each lens.

Antarctica Expeditions

I have been to the Antarctic Peninsula on five expeditions. These data below are the result of combining the statistics from all of the trips. My primary focus on photographing the location was to capture images of the wildlife and their environment. When photographing wildlife, I try to capture broad landscapes to get an overall feel for the location, medium landscapes that place the wildlife in their environment, closer shots that illustrate behavior, and tight close-ups to highlight unique characteristics and try to emotionally capture the viewers attention.

Antarctica provides a wide variety of photo subjects and shooting platforms. From shipboard, there are chances to photograph seabirds in flight, marine mammals in the sea, and vast panoramas of land and ice. From small boats, such as sea kayaks and Zodiacs, closer images of ice, marine mammals, seabirds, and penguins can be captured. On shore, there are lots of opportunities to photograph penguins, pinnipeds, and seabirds nesting and in flight.

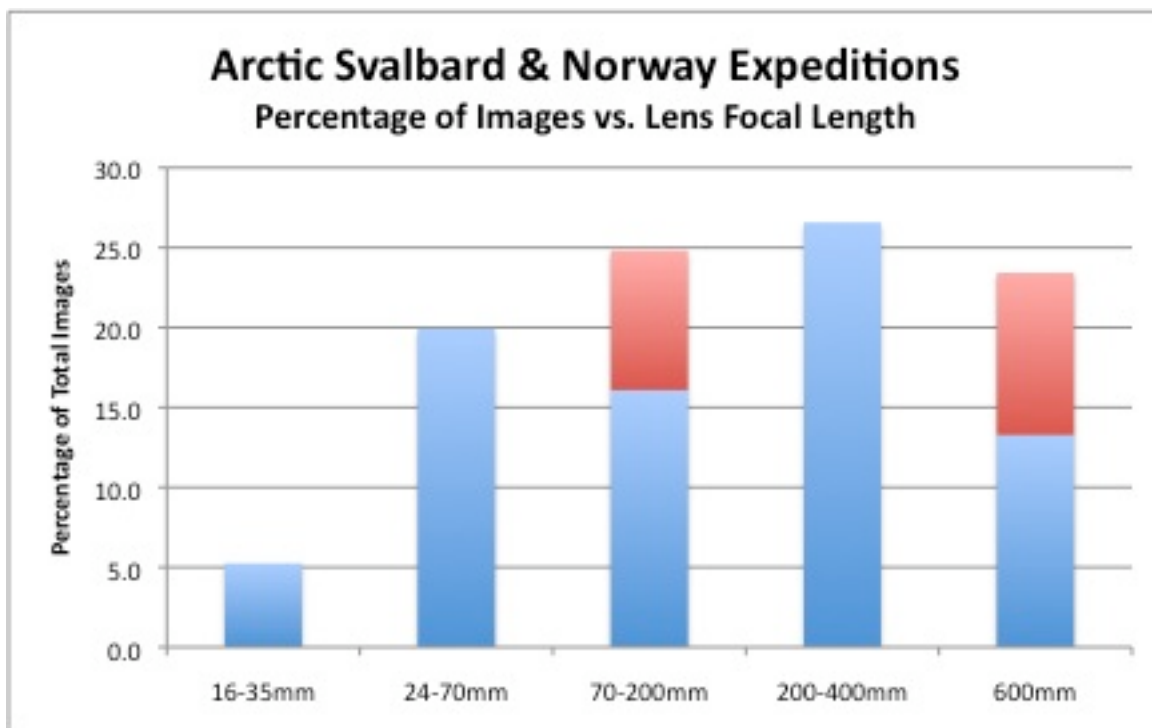


The blue bars show when the lens was used by itself. The red bars show when the same lens was used in conjunction with a 1.7X teleconverter to increase the focal length of the lens.

Arctic Svalbard and the Fjords of Coastal Norway Expeditions

My focus for the Arctic is similar to that for Antarctica, however the mixture of photo opportunities is different. Coastal Norway offers many more chances for unique landscapes. The wildlife in the Arctic is less approachable than in Antarctica, so I tend to add a very long telephoto to my lens arsenal. Polar bears and walrus do not mix well with fragile, tasty photographers. These differences are reflected in the graph of lenses used, which shows a more balanced use of all the lens focal lengths.

In Svalbard, a lot of the photography is made from shipboard and on land. Less time is spent in small boats, but when available, some great photo opportunities are presented. Along the coast of Norway, a lot of time is spent hiking on land and there are opportunities for some dramatic landscapes and detailed macro photography.

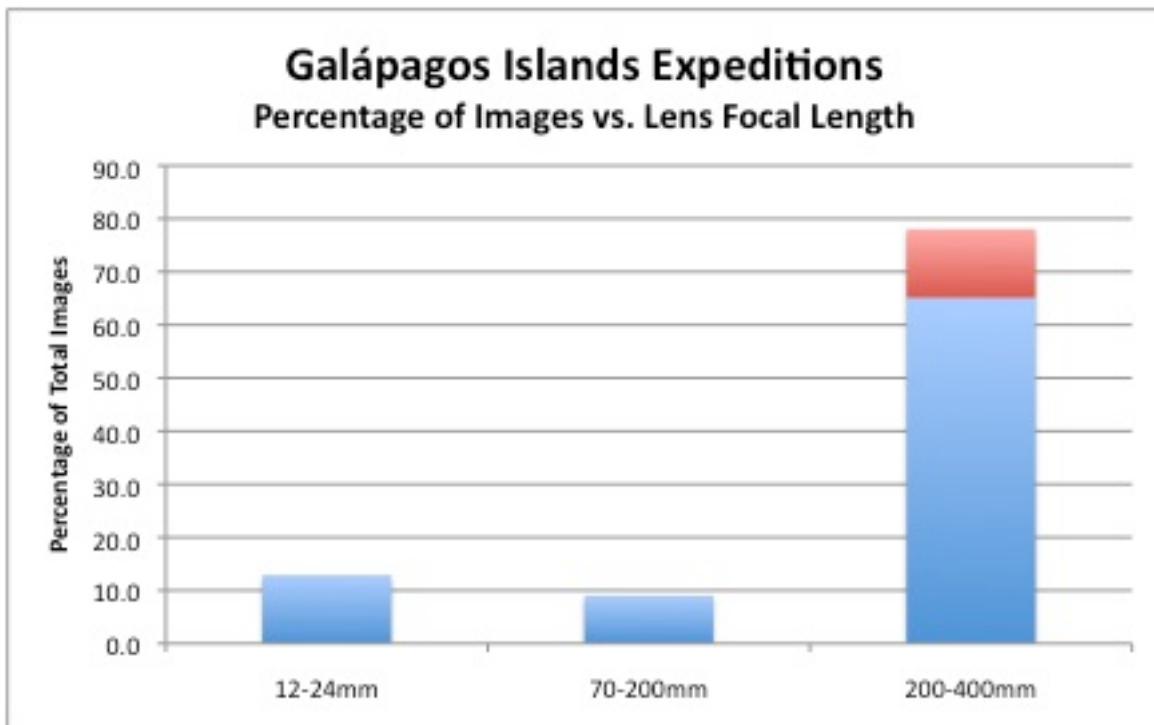


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Galápagos Islands Expeditions

The Galápagos Islands, 970 km west of the mainland coast of Ecuador, are another great location for the wildlife photographer. Like in the Antarctic, the Galápagos wildlife is very approachable. If I were to choose to leave home my favorite 200-400mm f/4 telephoto zoom lens, I could probably capture most of the same images using the 70-200mm lens with a 1.7X teleconverter and perhaps stepping a few feet closer to the subject.

Photography in the Galápagos is from ships, boats, the shore, and in the water. Some great photo opportunities are presented from Zodiacs of the small islets, seabirds, pinnipeds, turtles, and marine iguanas. A lot of time during daylight is available for photography on shore. The comfortable water temperatures mean that underwater photography is another venue to be explored.

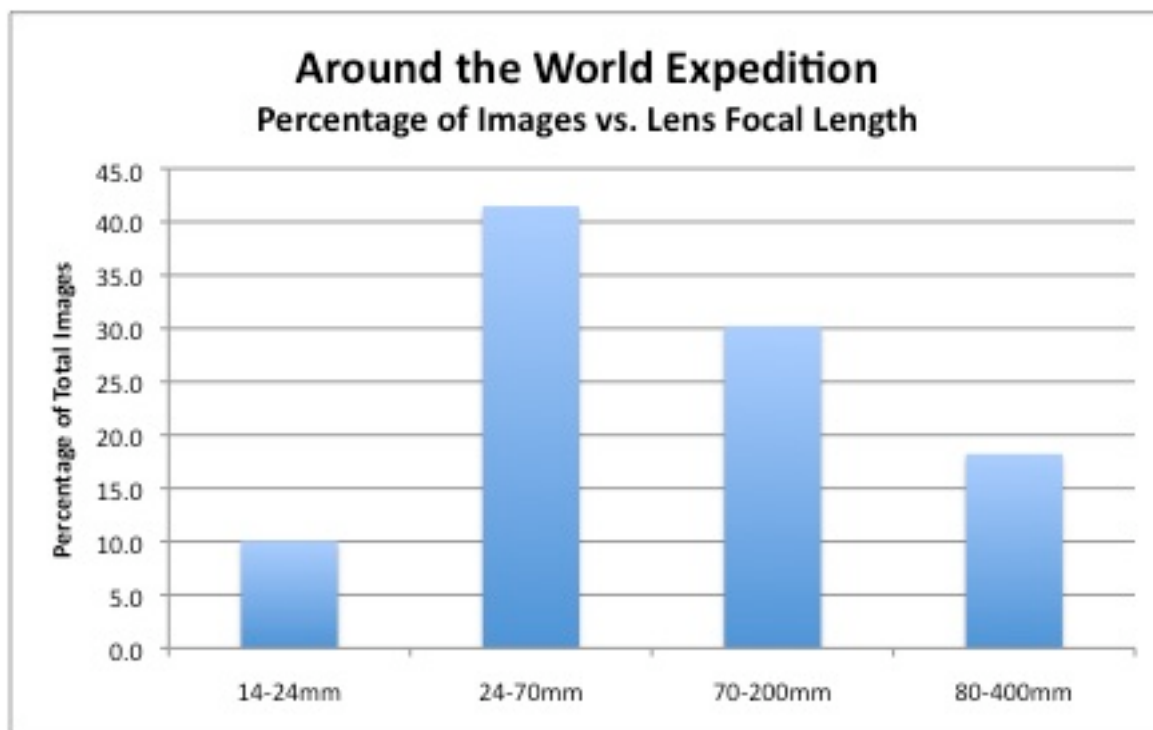


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Around the World Expedition

This was a trip organized through National Geographic Expeditions. The emphasis of this trip was visiting World Heritage Sites rather than my usual focus on wildlife photography. This meant that the photo subjects were more concentrated on landscapes, architecture, and people. This is reflected in the lens usage graph that shows a bias toward the “normal” lens range.

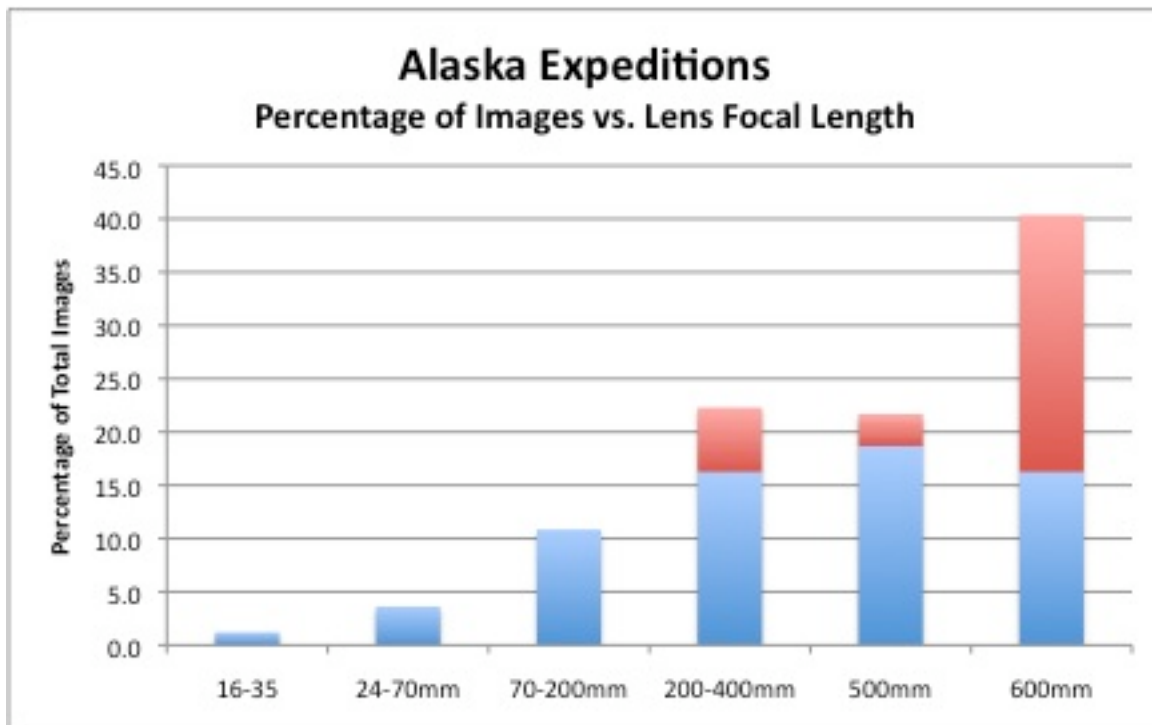
Nearly all of the photo opportunities on this expedition were on land. Although over 30,000 miles of air travel was required, nearly all of it was on a chartered Boeing 757 with very liberal baggage allowances. In addition, since the aircraft was reserved for our group exclusively, equipment not required at a particular location could be left safely on the plane.



Alaska Expeditions

This analysis of lens usage is based on a compilation of Alaskan expeditions primarily focused on photographing bald eagles and coastal brown bears. Some of these trips require travel on ferries and small aircraft, so it is often necessary to keep your total baggage limited in both size and weight.

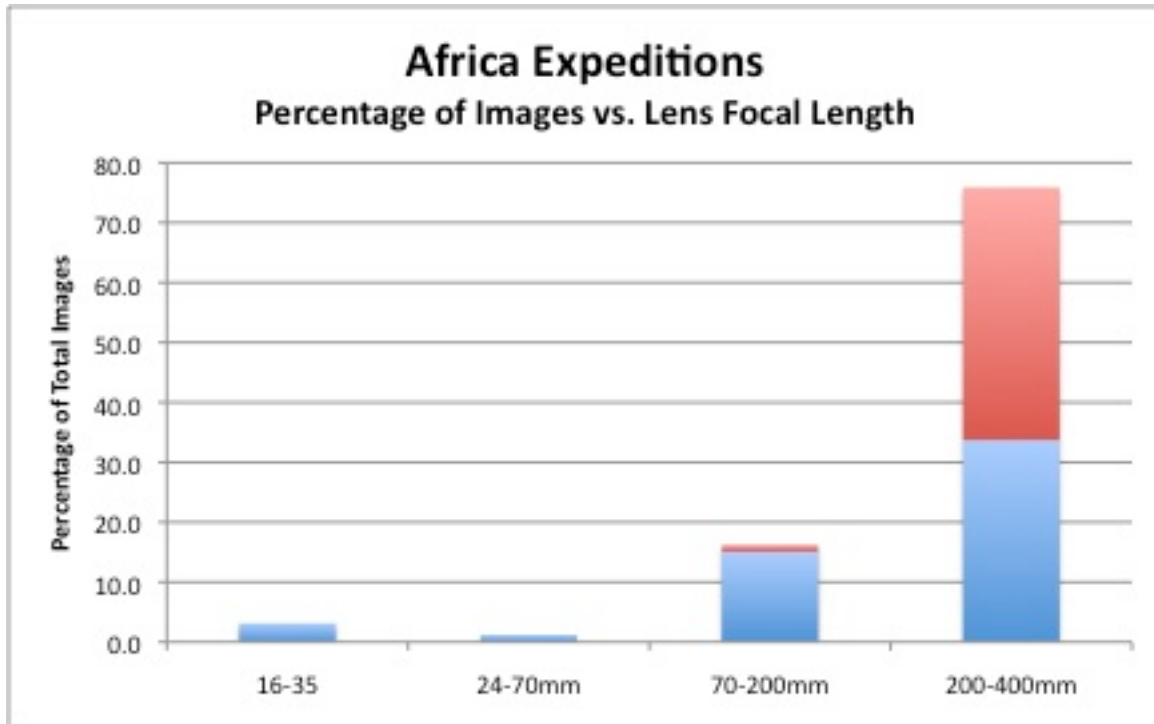
Since these data are a compilation of multiple trips, it includes several different lenses. I don't carry both the 500mm f/4 and 600mm f/4 on the same expedition. This chart will undergo further refinement as additional Alaskan expeditions are completed and cover additional subject matter, such as marine mammals and more landscapes.



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Africa Expeditions

This analysis of lens usage is based on a compilation of expeditions to Botswana and Zimbabwe. The primary focus of these trips was wildlife photography. The subject matter ranged from small birds to large mammal such as elephants, giraffe, and leopards. Access to the remote wilderness camps requires travel by small, single-engine aircraft, so it is usually necessary to camera gear and other baggage limited in both size and weight.



The blue bars show when the lens was used by itself. The red bars show when the same lens was used in conjunction with a 1.7X teleconverter to increase the focal length of the lens.

Remember: Don't worry too much whether you have every lens on every trip. There are plenty of photo opportunities for each lens in your bag. Look for the shots that are best captured with the lens that you have mounted on your camera. You will probably miss the shot while changing lenses, anyway.

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