



TALL TALES

long lenses

Canadian wildlife and nature photographer John E. Marriott shares photographic advice, tall tales, and beautiful pictures from his photography adventures in the Canadian wilds and beyond.

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Sigma 120-300mm f2.8 Lens Review

[Note: you won't find a bunch of technical jargon in this review, and you won't find a bunch of useless close-up zooms of some box or sign or whatever to show just how 'great' or 'terrible' this lens is. No charts, no side reviews from the Dalai Lama, no pics of the lens in 62 different shades of light, nada. In fact, all you're going to get is my opinion on whether the lens is sharp and whether it works well for me. That's it, that's all!]

Since it was first announced almost a year ago, I've been eagerly awaiting the release of the new Sigma 120-300MM F2.8 APO EX DG HSM OS lens in the hopes that it will let me finally close the gap a bit between my primary wildlife lens, my Canon 500mm f4, and my secondary lens, which has been a Canon 70-200 f2.8.

The difference between the focal lengths of these two lenses has always annoyed me, so much so that I've long considered switching to Nikon to get at the sexy-looking and performing 200-400 f4 telephoto zoom (if only it wasn't so expensive). I've lost track of how many times the difference between my 500 on my Canon 1D Mk IV camera body, with its 1.3x crop, and the 70-200 on my Canon 5D Mk II, which is full frame, has ticked me off. It means I drop from 650mm (13x zoom) with my primary lens to 200mm (4x zoom) with my secondary lens, and that has often left me less than enthused.

When Canon announced that they had their own version of the 200-400 on its way, I rejoiced. Then I saw the price tag. Just like Nikon's version, I couldn't get over the fact that I'd have to drop \$7500 for this lens when I already have a 500mm that's worth its weight in gold. As if that wasn't enough, Canon still doesn't have a timeline for when the new 200-400 may hit the shelves.

Enter the Sigma 120-300mm lens. When the Sigma Canada rep first told me about it and offered me a chance to shoot with it (I'm sponsored by Sigma Canada), I was excited. I'd heard good things about the older, lighter version that did not offer OS (optical stabilization), so I was cautiously optimistic that the new lens would fit the bill and give me exactly what I'm looking for in my secondary wildlife lens: a lens that is versatile (i.e. offers up a zoom rather than a fixed focal length), closes the gap closer to my 500 (300 accomplishes that), is very sharp, has good stabilization, and can focus fairly quickly and accurately.

Now I mentioned that I'm sponsored by Sigma Canada, so let me start this review with an interesting disclaimer: I have tried a number of Sigma lenses to date, but this is the first one I'm reviewing because it's the first one that has truly offered me something different and desirable that I have wanted as a wildlife photographer. I do really like the Sigma 12-24 f4.5-5.6 lens for its incredibly wide viewing angle, but I find I just don't use it that much for any wildlife applications. And I gave the Sigma 300mm f2.8 fixed telephoto a whirl, but I'd rather have a telephoto zoom as my secondary lens for the versatility it provides.

So when I finally got the box from Sigma three weeks ago, the day before I was about to leave for my grizzly bear photo tours in the Chilcotin in BC, I ripped it open and ooh-ed and aah-ed at the beautiful black beast inside. It was bigger and heavier than I had thought it would be, but it felt extremely solid, like a good quality product. And it didn't feel as heavy as advertised (it's listed at 10 lbs) when I put it on my 5D II and moved it about. Certainly far less wieldy than my 500 on the 1D IV, though of course heavier than the 70-200 on the 5D II.

That was about it in terms of available time I had for testing (and no, holding the lens up and pointing it at something in my house doesn't count as testing), so I loaded up the car and zipped off to do my grizzly trip. Since my grizzly

tours are fairly intensive, I still didn't get a chance to test out the new lens during the first week to make sure it was sharp, so I let it lay on the floor of my room for the week, taunting me with its' good looks and promise.

And then, my first 'break'. A plane delay on Day 7 opened up my afternoon, so I hauled out the 120-300 and hit the river in a kayak (you can read about my mis-adventures in said kayak on my Dear John Lowman post from a few days ago). There was no way I was going to attempt to lug the 500 and 1D IV along in the kayak, so instead I grabbed my new 'trial' secondary system, the Sigma 120-300 f2.8 on my Canon 5D II body, stuffed them inside my rain jacket, and took off.

Fortunately for me, I found an accommodating grizzly bear fairly quickly and was able to stay with it for almost an hour as I snapped off shot after shot after shot with the new camera-lens combo. It felt easy to use, the autofocus seemed to lock on quickly, and the camera didn't weigh me down as I flitted about on the water in the kayak. I was particularly impressed with the optical stabilization, which seemed even better than on my Canon lenses. Anyways, 495 shots later, it got too dark to photograph, so I kayaked a kilometer back to the lodge.

That night I took my first look at the new lens' files. My first reaction? "Wow!" Sharp, sharp, sharp, and sharp. Lovely colours and great bokeh (if you have no idea what that is, keep it that way!) -- I was thrilled, to say the least.

From that first day onwards, the Sigma 120-300mm f2.8 slowly took over from my Canon 70-200mm f2.8 to the point where I didn't even take the 70-200 out on the final two days of the tours. The Sigma was sharp at f2.8, 3.2, and beyond, and ridiculously accurate even in low light (which was a minor miracle in itself, as the Canon 5D II does not feature a particularly strong autofocus system).

And while I have yet to test it with a teleconverter and I didn't give it a hard run through the paces on action stuff, the fact remains that this is now going to be my new go-to secondary lens, replacing the 70-200 f2.8. At \$3,150, it's less than half the price of the upcoming 200-400 f4, and it offers a full extra stop of light to play with. Plus, I found the autofocus to be fairly fast (though not as fast as the Canon 70-200 f2.8) and the stabilization to be a step above that of the Canon 70-200 f2.8 (even though the 70-200 is smaller and lighter).

Take a look at the images and let me know what you think:



Grizzly bear - handheld Sigma 120-300mm f2.8 lens at 300mm, ISO 1250, 1/800th, f4, -2/3rds exp comp.



Grizzly bear - handheld Sigma 120-300mm f2.8 lens at 206mm, ISO 1600, 1/500th, f2.8, +2/3rds exp comp.



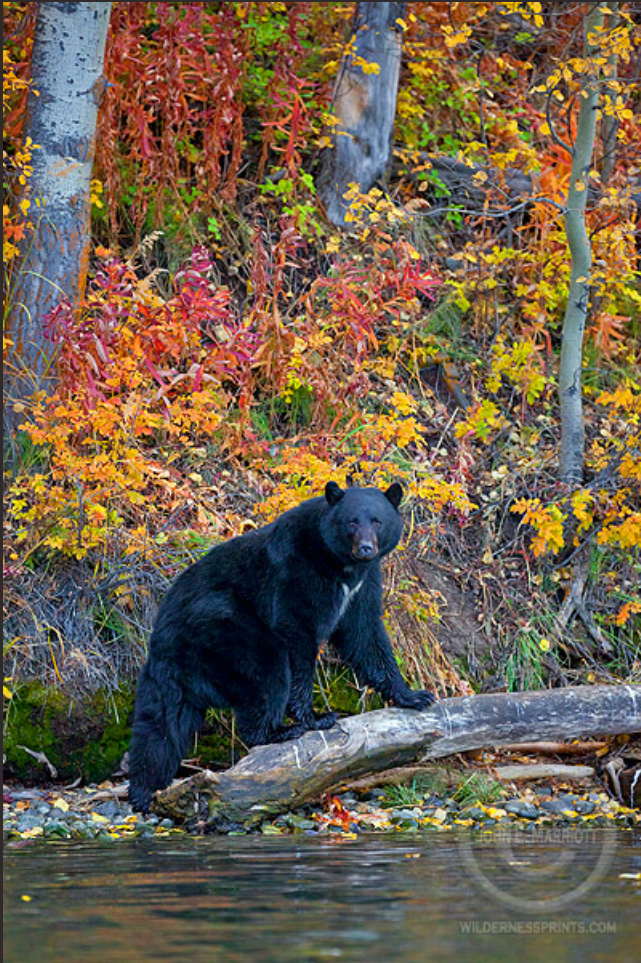
Grizzly family - handheld Sigma 120-300mm f2.8 lens at 300mm, ISO 1250, 1/400th, f2.8



Grizzly bear - handheld Sigma 120-300mm f2.8 lens at 300mm, ISO 1000, 1/500th, f5, -2/3rds exp comp.



Grizzly bear - handheld Sigma 120-300mm f2.8 lens at 300mm, ISO 1250, 1/320th, f4.5, -2/3rds exp comp.



Black bear - handheld Sigma 120-300mm f2.8 lens at 235mm, ISO 1600, 1/1000th, f2.8, -1 exp comp.



Unedited 100% view of black bear file (21 MP) from Lightroom 3 w/ default sharpening, no noise reduction

All in all, I was extremely impressed with Sigma's latest offering. I would highly recommend this lens to anyone looking for a good, sharp lens that offers a telephoto range from 120-300mm, particularly given that it's sharp wide open at f2.8.

Happy shooting!

John