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TAKING IT ALL IN

LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHERS NEED A WIDE VARIETY OF LENSES TO CAPTURE NATURE'S SPLENDOR

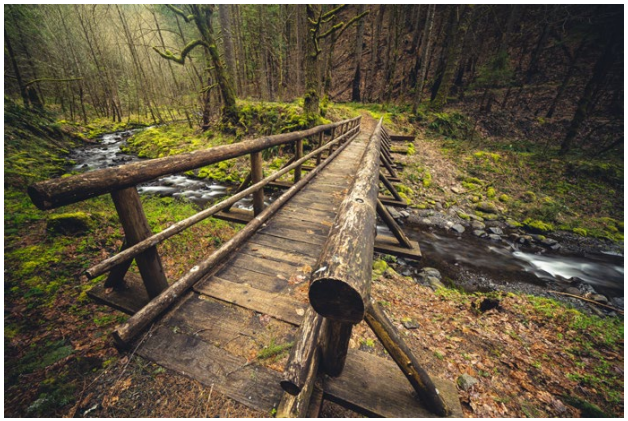
BY BRIAN MATIASH

One of my favorite things to do with my standard zoom lens is to take advantage of how close you can focus to your subject. While it isn't exactly macro photography, it does give me the opportunity to create some very compelling photos of subjects that would probably get totally overlooked.

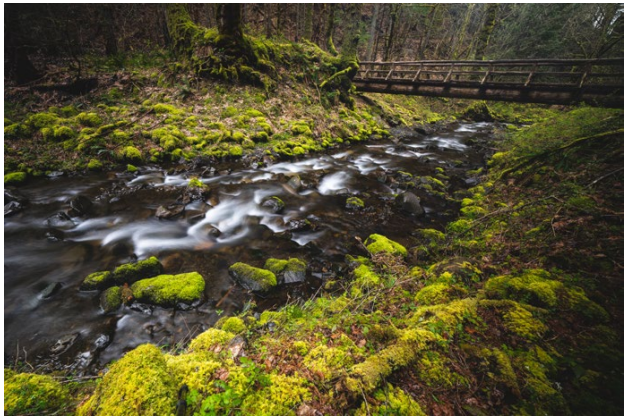
It's fair to say that landscape photography can mean different things to different people. What unifies us all is that we strive to share a piece of this amazing planet with each exposed frame, and when you render that down to a technical level, the lens you choose plays a critical role in that endeavor. Whether you use a super-wide focal length to capture an expansive vista or go tighter to showcase a blossoming fern, your lenses will help you figure out the visual story you're aiming to tell.

There are several ways to categorize lenses when thinking about which ones to use when photographing nature scenes. Perhaps one of the most obvious is whether the lens is a prime or a zoom. There's no shortage of discussions covering the benefits of one versus the other, and while they may each hold some merit, it will ultimately boil down to your preference (and budget).

A prime lens has a fixed focal length that requires you to "zoom with your feet," but one of the clear benefits is that it's typically smaller, lighter (especially the manual focus variety) and has a larger maximum aperture than zoom lenses. There are also a number of fantastic prime lenses that command lower prices than zoom lenses. The key limiting factor, though, is that you're fixed to a specific focal length. Your other option is to go with a zoom lens. The obvious benefit here is that your lens offers variable focal lengths, making it easier to include more or tighten up on the scene in front of you without moving. This benefit typically comes at the expense of being larger, heavier and with a smaller maximum aperture compared to prime lenses. For the purposes of this article, I'm going to focus on three primary categories of lenses: 1. Wide-angle lenses, 2. Standard lenses, and 3. Telephoto lenses.



One of my favorite things to do with landscape photography is to use an ultra-wide focal length—in this case, 12mm—and fill the frame with a dominant element. The distortion created gives the sense of something being much larger than it may be.



It's very important that I provide viewers with a clear path within my photos, especially when I'm using an ultra-wide focal length. I want to avoid the problem of confusing the viewer as to what the primary focal points are by establishing a clear sense of direction.

WIDE-ANGLE LENSES

If I had to wager a guess, I'd say that most landscape photographers veer toward the wider end of the focal length spectrum, and that makes sense. In a lot of cases, our aim is to convey the grandeur of the scene in front of us. Tall, sprawling trees and meandering mountain ranges often require wider focal lengths to "fit it all in." So, let's start there. Nowadays, there are a vast array of lens options that afford photographers with dizzyingly wide focal lengths. Whether your camera uses

LENS OPTIONS

WIDE-ANGLE LENSES

Admit it. There are many landscape scenes that are too grand to not be captured in a single frame. There are plenty of instances when you want to fit that giant mountain along with the sweeping tree line and that perfectly still lake into a single frame. This is where your wide-angle lens shines. When considering alternative lenses to the common 16-35mm lens, there are several worthy options to look at. One thing to consider with these alternative lenses is that you'll need to use proprietary filter systems custom-built for these particularly bulbous front elements.

PRIME LENS OPTIONS

ROKINON 14MM F2.8 IF ED UMC

This affordable manual-focus lens provides good image quality and sharpness, and is available in a variety of camera mounts.

Price: $500 **Website:** rokinon.com

ZEISS TOUIT 2.8/12

The quality of Zeiss glass is world famous, and this wide-angle APS-C lens for Sony or Fujifilm shooters lens is no exception. [Ed. Note: Matiash is a Zeiss Ambassador, but we completely agree with the quality of their lenses.] The lens has excellent edge-to-edge sharpness and the T* coating reduces flaring and ghosting.

Price: $1,000 **Website:** Zeiss.com

ZOOM LENS OPTIONS

SONY FE 12-24MM F4 G

Sony makes two wide-angle zooms, this 12-24mm and a G-Master 16-35mm. Although the G Master lens is better on paper, we like the 12-24mm for the uniquely wide (but not fish-eye) field of view, and the lack of distortion and flare, something that's pretty common at this super-wide focal length.

Price: $1,700 **Website:** Sony.com

NIKON AF-S NIKKOR 14-24MM F2.8G ED

The distinctive shape of this lens makes it easy to spot out in the field, and the optical quality makes it hard to beat. This is a legendary wide-angle lens.

Price: $1,900 **Website:** nikonusa.com

a cropped or full-frame sensor, odds are that you can find a lens that offers you a focal length as wide as 16mm or wider. That's *a lot* of space to cover.

Fortunately, there are a number of fantastic prime lenses that offer exceptionally wide focal lengths along with large, maximum apertures. While image quality will vary from manufacturer to manufacturer, it's fairly easy to find solidly built ultra-wide prime lenses between 14mm and 18mm and with max apertures of $f/2.8$ or faster. If lens weight is a chief concern, you'll certainly want to look at manual focus options, as those tend to weigh less.

I had mentioned that one of the most common lenses used within the wide-angle zoom lens category is the 16-35mm variety. Virtually every camera manufacturer has this type of lens. However, I've recently found myself going even wider with a 12-24mm lens, and the results have been impressive. The important point to remember is that the wider your focal length, the more important it is to direct your viewers through the frame. If you present a photo with no clear direction or anchor, your viewer will get lost, quickly lose interest and move on. Therefore, orchestration of what you choose to include, especially at wider focal lengths, is critical.

You may have noticed that I haven't touched on aperture much here, and that's with good reason. When I recently audited my landscape library, the clear majority of photos were taken using apertures ranging between $f/11$ and $f/16$, and that doesn't surprise me. In most of my wide-angle photos, my aim was to convey vast scenery, and while I often included a clear focal point, I didn't want drop focus by using a fast aperture. So, I'd argue that at wider focal lengths, having a fast aperture won't benefit you as often as you may think. Of course, there's one notable exception: night/astral photography. In that situation, having an ultra-wide and ultra-fast lens can be a massive boon, especially if your goal is to get pin-sharp stars.

STANDARD LENSES

Let's start by defining what the general focal range of a standard lens is. I loosely define this as a lens with a focal length between 24mm and 70mm. You're not quite ultra-wide, nor are you getting to that tight telephoto zoom area, but you are covering the general angle-of-view that we use to see with our own eyes, and that's an important point to bring up. If you're composing a landscape photo at a focal length that most closely covers our eyes' angle-of-view, it's that much more important to pique your viewers' attention.

In other words, if your goal is to share a landscape photo at a mid-focal range, do you think that composing it the way that we humans would perceive it ourselves if we were standing there makes the most sense? That is to say, don't just hold your camera (or position your tripod) so that it's at eye level—the way we typically perceive the world in front of us. Creatively composing your photos at these mid-focal ranges will do wonders with getting your viewers' attention.

Similar to the wide-angle lens category, the standard zoom lens category has a clear favorite range by photographers and manufacturers. That range is 24-70mm, and I'd wager that this particular lens is probably the most commonly owned lens out there. Virtually every manufacturer who makes zoom lenses has a 24-70mm offering. However, there's another alternative that gets you just as wide but allows you to zoom in much tighter. That lens is the 24-105mm standard zoom, and it has been a longtime favorite of mine. Aside from the extra 35mm of zoom afforded to users, the 24-105mm lens typically offers near-macro-style focal distance, allowing you to get really close to your subject.

TELEPHOTO LENSES

Now we find ourselves at the longer end of the focal length range and, in my opinion, the most fun class of lenses to use for landscape photography. In most cases, landscape photographers who work in

LENS OPTIONS

STANDARD LENSES

As far as standard prime lenses go, my choice will always be 35mm. It's an absolutely classic focal length and one that I find immensely enjoyable to use when practicing street photography. If I had to choose one zoom lens to take to a location that I had never been to, it would be a 24-105mm lens. Both sides of this focal range offer something for photographers to create unique and memorable photos. The 24mm is a great wide-angle focal length that allows you to capture your scene while minimizing barrel distortion, and the 90-105mm range is great if you're photographing a person in a forest, especially because it introduces some pleasing compression.

PRIME LENS OPTIONS

OLYMPUS M.ZUIKO ED 17MM F1.2 PRO

It's been nearly impossible to get a super-sharp wide-angle, wide-aperture lens in the Micro Four Thirds platform, as it's difficult to maintain edge-to-edge image quality in a lens that has such a wide aperture, but the engineers at Olympus have made it possible with this 17mm f1.2 PRO lens and the other lenses in the trio of PRO glass.

Price: $1,200 **Website:** getolympus.com

CANON EF 50MM F/1.4 USM

For the budget-minded Canon shooter still looking for great performance, the Canon EF 50mm f/1.4 USM fits nicely between the lower-end 50mm f/1.8 STM and the high-end EF 50mm f/1.2L USM (which is a great lens if you can afford it.) The image quality is excellent, yet it won't break the bank.

Price: $400 **Website:** usa.canon.com

FULL-RANGE ZOOM LENS OPTIONS

TAMRON 18-200MM F/3.5-6.3 DI III VC

With a full-frame equivalent of 28-310mm, this all-around travel lens is also a great choice at the wide end for landscape and great for capturing wildlife at the long end of the zoom. With vibration reduction and a number of elements designed to reduce aberrations, the compact lens is a great choice for mirrorless shooters, and it comes in both black and silver.

Price: $550 **Website:** tamron-usa.com

SIGMA 24-105MM F4 DG (OS)* HSM | ART

Another great all-around lens, the 24-105mm F4 DG HSM is part of the company's "Art" lens lineup, known for its excellent image quality at a price that's lower than you'd expect. The lens has image-stabilization and a nine-blade aperture for smooth background blur. The Hypersonic Motor (HSM) is fast and quiet, which makes this lens great for video use too.

Price: $900 **Website:** sigmaphoto.com

LENS OPTIONS

TELEPHOTO LENSES

Over the past year or so, I've found myself using telephoto lenses more and more because I find the resulting compositional opportunities quite rewarding. When you teeter at these longer focal lengths, you become more discerning about what you include in your frame and how everything is arranged. It becomes more about what you should exclude rather than how much you can include. Additionally, the sense of distance and scale of elements throughout the frame is very visually pleasing.

PRIME LENS OPTIONS

FUJIFILM XF90MMF2 R LM WR

You'd be hard pressed to find a nicer prime lens than this Fujifilm 90mm, and it's lightweight too. With 11 elements in eight groups and three ED elements, the small lens packs quite an imaging punch.

Price: $950 **Website:** fujifilim-x.com

ZOOM LENS OPTIONS

SONY FE 100-400MM F4.5-5.6 GM OSS

This G Master lens from Sony has a wide reach in the long telephoto range. I've used it to shoot everything from moon rises to distant mountains. It's also an incredible sports lens, giving it extra value for the versatile shooter.

Price: $2,500 **Website:** sony.com

CANON EF 100-400MM F/4.5-5.6L IS II USM

Canon's EF 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6L IS II USM is a legendary lens, found on the sidelines of most pro sporting events. It's also a great lens for capturing landscapes and wildlife, with super-speed AF and tack-sharp images.

Price: $2,200 **Website:** usa.canon.com

TAMRON SP 150-650MM F/5-6.3 DI VC USD G2

There's just about no more versatile super-telephoto than this Tamron, with a reach to 600mm and a locking-zoom mechanism that allows you to keep the lens set at a certain focal length. When you need to reach out and touch the landscape—or just about any other subject—this lens is for you.

Price: $1,400 **Website:** tamron-usa.com

the telephoto range use zoom lenses that cover the 70-200mm span but can also go well beyond. While the 70-200mm lens is certainly one of the most popular telephoto zoom lenses, I've come to love my 100-400mm lens. The extra focal length alone makes it worth having a slower, variable aperture over its 70-200mm sibling. Of course, these lenses tend to be larger and heavier and, at the expense of my own frustration, are painted white by the manufacturer.

The longer end of this focal range offers its own set of unique challenges and benefits. These longer focal lengths require you to be even more discerning with what you choose to compose in your frame. Whereas at 12mm, all you need to do is point your camera and virtually everything in front of you will be in frame, at 70mm and longer, identifying the key focal points in your frame becomes that much more important.

The benefits come with the added lens compression introduced at these longer focal lengths. At 16mm, it can be quite challenging to convey a sense of depth and distance when photographing a mountain range. You'll certainly be able to capture all of it, as well as what's in front of it, but the distance from the foreground to the background won't be as apparent. By using the longer focal length of telephoto zoom lenses, you may need to tighten up on what you include in the frame, but the relationship of distance between the foreground, middle-ground and background elements will be much clearer. An added benefit with lens compression at these longer focal lengths is that distortion tends to be eliminated almost completely when compared to wider focal lengths. DP

Brian Matiash is a professional landscape and travel photographer, published author and podcaster. He specializes in fusing photography with experiential storytelling and practical instruction to help others grow their creativity. He also co-hosts the "No Name Photo Show," one of the most popular photography podcasts in iTunes.