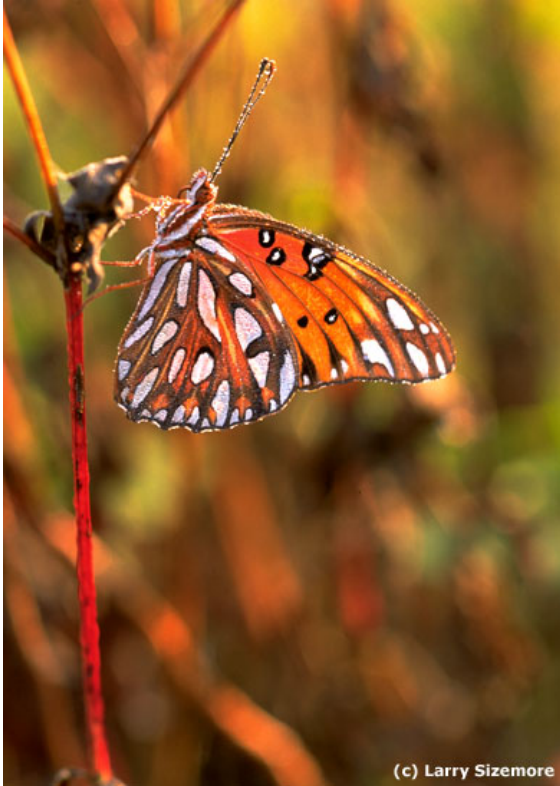


## Choosing a Tripod

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### Tripods, The Best Way to Improve Image Sharpness

A good tripod is often all that stands between a soft image and a tack sharp image. Choosing one should be done with



care.

### Size Matters

A tripod is too critical for sharp images to cut corners in terms of cost or in time spent shopping. A tripod needs to be stable enough to support your heaviest setup. Generally, heavier tripods offer better support than lighter ones and tubular legs are usually more sturdy than the flat design. The weak points of a tripod are where the leg sections join (the fewer sections, the better), and where the center column attaches to the legs. For this reason, extend the legs as much as possible and put something heavy on the tripod when testing it. Raising the center column reduces stability, so get a tripod that is tall enough to keep you from crouching while using the center column as little as possible. Jiggle the

setup and watch the end of the lens. You are looking for the least amount of lens movement and the quickest recovery (how long does it take the lens to stop jiggling). Generally, you will not find small or light tripods that stand up to the stability test. Once you have decided on the legs, it is time to choose the head that best meets your needs.

### The Pan-Tilt Heads

Pan-tilt heads usually offer three separate controls, one for panning left to right, one for tilting up and down, and one for rotating the camera to accommodate vertical and horizontal compositions. They are available in all sizes with the larger, heavier ones being more desirable for sharpest images. Pan-tilt heads offer precise control over each plane. In fact, some even offer rack and pinion precision geared movements. Pan-tilt heads are excellent for landscape, architectural, large format, and macro work. They also make good general purpose heads. The downside is that moving the camera position may require loosening and re-tightening three separate controls. If you need quick setup for rapidly changing scenes, consider a ball head instead.

### The Ball head

Ball heads are designed with a ball and socket that is capable of free movement when loosened. Generally, there is one knob to control the head, and a second knob to control friction. A well made head will move smoothly throughout the entire range of motion, and may be slotted to allow for full 180 degree movement. Frequently, ball heads are used for bird and wildlife photography. A great ball head will perform well under these shooting conditions where photographers sometimes leave the controls slightly loose with the friction set just tight enough to hold the camera steady, but loose enough to make smooth adjustments to moving subjects. The bigger the ball, the more likely it will be to behave this way. There are many cheap ball heads that will be likely to give you a black eye when you attempt smooth movements with slightly tightened controls. Excellent ball heads are not cheap. If you can't afford a good one,

stick with the pan-tilt. A good ball head can also serve as a general purpose head. To finish with our tripod selection, there are a few more considerations.

### **Other Tripod Considerations and Features**

**How low can it go?** Get a tripod that will allow for near ground level shooting without inverting the center column. To get right at ground level, you can attach a clamp to the leg and attach the head to the clamp.

**Leg fasteners:** Make sure that the legs clamp positively tight. When you test the tripod, put some top pressure on extended legs to see if they slip. Lever style clamps may loosen over time, while it is very easy to forget to tighten one of the screw in leg clamps.

**Feet:** Retractable spikes are nice for certain surfaces.

**Quick Release Heads:** I can't imagine not having quick release in the field. It allows you to quickly change camera bodies or lenses (with mounting collars). Again, check for positive connections that can't accidentally come loose.

**Weight:** Heavy tripods are more stable. However, heavy tripods that are left behind in the trunk of the car do little to help your images! Be realistic as you consider the tradeoff of weight. If choosing a light tripod will ensure its use, then get the lightest one that adequately supports your equipment. Applying pressure on the lens directly over the center column is a technique that some photographers have used successfully to increase stability. When shooting wildlife or sports, some photographers report adequate stability by holding the camera body tightly to the face while shooting.

