

Warning!

Increasing Your Knowledge of Photography May be Hazardous to Your Pocket Book

By Mike McBride

My first camera real camera was a Fuji STX-1, a fully manual 35mm camera for which I had three lenses, 28mm, 50mm & 135mm. As I started learning photography with some reading but mostly hands-on, I started buying creative filters and I started to encounter situations where 28mm wasn't wide enough and others where 135mm wasn't long enough, but I hadn't yet developed lens envy to any real degree. That would come later with more knowledge. True, I had seen a 400mm f/11 lens that a friend owned and I think I wanted one, but I had no idea really what was out there or why I would want it.

Eventually, I started having problems with my lenses and my photographic interests took a break until 1990 when I bought my first auto focus 35mm SLR. Initially I had only one lens, a 28-85mm zoom. I knew I wanted a telephoto lens and I remember looking through a brochure that showed the full line of lenses. I was perplexed, why would anyone pay \$800 for a 300mm f/4 lens? It wasn't even a zoom! Truly confusing was the fact that there was a 300mm f/2.8 lens costing about \$3,000. Who in their right mind would spend that much on a lens when they had the obviously more versatile option of a 75-300mm f/4.5-5.6 lens for "only" \$450. Were they just trying to make the \$450 lens look like a screaming deal? Eventually I bought the 75-300mm zoom lens.

On my first trip to photograph wildlife in Yellowstone, I stood next to some of those photographers who had 300mm f/2.8 lenses and definitely felt outclassed. Even though lens envy started to set in, it wasn't until I began to learn about film grain, available light & shutter speed, and depth of field that I started to realize the advantages of a 300mm f/2.8 lens and not much more than a year after buying my 75-300mm auto focus zoom lens, I had tracked down a used Tamron 300mm f/2.8 MANUAL FOCUS lens for \$1,000. My 75-300mm would be destined to live out most of its days in my camera bag until I finally sold it in 2004.

Sometimes over the years I've been lucky. Some things I learned I wanted, I already had but didn't really understand them, like the depth of field preview button for instance. But the learning process continues and even though sixteen years have passed since that first costly lesson about lens speed, I find I still keep learning why I want something else I never knew I wanted.

This past Saturday I attended a one-day seminar put on by John and Barbara Gerlach. Last fall I had looked at the various options available in a macro lens. The focal length of the lens does not change the subject size, only your working distance and I could see the advantage of a little working distance. I knew I didn't want the 50mm lens for that reason so it came down to a choice between a 105mm costing about \$550 or 200mm costing \$1,350. Clearly, the 105mm seemed like the better deal (had I forgot my earlier lesson?). By the way, I bought an old manual focus 105mm macro lens for \$180 on eBay

that I haven't even used yet, but I will as soon as the flowers bloom. There is another advantage, besides working distance, which I learned on Saturday. The narrower angle of view of the 200mm lens not only gives you greater working distance, but it also includes a smaller portion of the distant background and can eliminate distracting variation and detail from the background. The 105mm does a decent job of this, but the 200mm does it better. Guess what, suddenly I want the 200mm f/4 macro. Dang! I better start saving my pennies. I won't even go into the other half dozen items I added to my wish list on Saturday.

So, what do you do? First of all, you buy what you can afford, but also compare features. If, for instance, you can buy a slightly more expensive lens that has a greater range of aperture settings, it may be worth it in the long run even if you're not sure you're going to need it. Secondly, use what you have. You can still take great pictures with most of today's cameras even if you've come to discover some limitations. If you're like me, though, it can be hard to live with limitations once you know about them. Lastly, be brave and learn anyway, but be prepared because knowledge will lead to a thinner wallet if you're serious about photography.