

Headlamps for Night Photography

Thomas Field, 2015 February

www.photocentric.net

I've had many different headlamps. They have evolved quite a bit over the years, and the prices have gone way down as performance improves.

My current favorites were \$15 each (now sold two-pack for \$35 with free shipping, search NewEgg.com for Cree 40432): 100 lumens, sensor (gesture on/off) mode, 3 Duracell AAA included, weighs 4 oz with batteries, water resistant, red mode, but not dimmable. This is an excellent light, very bright with a great zoom lens.

Or if you want a really powerful head-worn searchlight, how about this 1800-lumen rechargeable-lithium headlamp for \$16 (free shipping takes several weeks from China): Google SKU095107+2B+C from Banggood. The brightness is probably overstated, but I'll bet it's a monstrous beam (if that's what someone needs). I can't vouch for this product, but I've ordered many times from Banggood with no issues. Just be patient with the very slow delivery, and use PayPal (don't send your credit card number to China). Banggood sells many other headlamps including a 3-watt model for \$2.99 (yes, free shipping). REI sells headlamps up to \$500, wow!

For night photography, very bright lights aren't needed. I find a hands-free headlamp useful only when packing up, and when checking the ground to make sure I didn't leave something behind.

I never use a headlamp while photographing in deep darkness because they're way too bright (even when dimmed, or on the red setting). That much light spoils my night vision for the next 10 minutes, and can bounce into the scene where you don't want it (you may not notice until you're back home). I guess I could mostly cover the red LEDs with electrical tape to give an extra-dim mode. Along those lines, turn down the brightness on your camera LCD to the lowest setting.

Using headlamps in a group at night can be problematic. It's too easy to inadvertently pivot your head and utterly ruin someone else's hour-long night sequence (by shining the light into the scene or - worse - into their lens). Headlamps were banned entirely from a night photography workshop I attended many years ago, and that worked out great for everyone.

When shooting in the dark, a very dim light should be all that you need for operating the equipment. Your eyes are already dark-conditioned, so they don't need much light during the shoot. Some newer LED lights will slowly fade up in brightness, starting at the very dimmest setting – that's a wonderful feature. Hold the power button down when turning on, and release when it gets to sufficient

brightness. Some tiny keychain flashlights have this feature, and I keep one on my LCD loupe lanyard all the time.

Even when hiking, a headlamp isn't the best unless your hands are full. The light is sourced from near your eyes and therefore will be flat, similar to on-camera flash. There is no modeling of the topography. It's much more effective to carry your light low in your hand, where it will produce shadows behind obstacles on the ground (so you don't trip). If I have only a headlamp with me, I still carry it low in my hand when hiking.

Modern LEDs are very efficient and may not need big batteries like the older headlamps. I now prefer a headlamp where the batteries are inside the lamp assembly, not cabled to a separate battery pack on the back of the head strap.

Standard batteries (e.g., the little AAA type) are easily purchased anywhere (unlike coin cells), and you can use rechargeable NiMH AAA cells if you use the headlamp a lot. While I do like the top-of-the-head straps, they really aren't needed for today's featherweight lights with small batteries.

For the main lamp, I prefer a single LED in 1-watt or brighter (e.g., with those amazing CREE LEDs). Many new LED flashlights have a focusable lens that you can zoom from wide-angle to very narrow beam - far better than older LED lights. The narrow beam may even be enough to focus the camera on a mid-ground subject (manual focus with Live View!).

Definitely look for a tilt headlight. If you're working on something close, the headlamp needs to tilt way down to serve as a task light.

Some newer headlamps have a sensor for gesture-based on/off feature: wave your hand to turn it on or off. I find this turns on the light when I least expect it (e.g., swatting at a flying insect). Other features I hope never to need: blinking emergency S-O-S, or attention-grabbing strobe beacon.

Finally, look for O-ring type seals around the battery compartment door. The sealed headlamp may not be submersible, but a little rain shouldn't bother it.