Canon RF 1200mm f8 L IS USM

A field review

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Introduction

"You can photograph the tick on the butt of a buffalo at 2 km with that monster lens", also "Couldn't find a smaller lens?" Just some of the comments I received from passersby and other photographers when I appeared in public with the Canon RF 1200mm f8 L IS USM (hereafter referred to as the RF1200/8. Make no mistake, this is a huge lens, and handling it takes some doing. A quick overview of the basic specifications will highlight its size and bulk.

Basic Specifications

Focal length:	1200mm full frame
Lens Mount:	Canon RF
Aperture range:	f8 - f64
Construction:	Magnesium Alloy body, optically 26 elements in 18 groups, 9-bladed diaphragm
Angle of view:	01°45', 01°10', 02°05'
Size:	537mm x 168mm (length x diameter), 772mm length including lens hood
Weight:	3340 g

Minimum focus distance:	4.3 m
Image stabilising (IS):	4 stops
Filter size:	52 mm Drop-in
Weather sealing:	Dust and moisture resistant
Supplied with:	Front leather dust cap, rear dust cap, lens hood, soft carry case

For the full set of specifications please visit the official Canon SA Website:

https://www.canon.co.za/lenses/rf-1200mm-f8l-is-usm/specifications/

In the hand

Some years ago I had on loan from Sigma SA, for four years, the Sigma EX 300-800 f5.6 HSM lens. That was a huge beast weighing in at almost 6 kg, 554 mm long, bulky, difficult to handle but was rather good optically. Known as the Sigmonster amongst photographers, it was liked and hated at the same time, for its sheer bulk.

Size comparison - From L to R: Canon RF 800 f11, Canon RF 1200 f8, Sigma EX 500 f4.5

Now Canon is offering Canon EOS R series users a 1200mm lens, weighing almost half as much, and slightly shorter overall length with 400 mm extra reach. To me this sounds really interesting. I accept the fact that it is a stop slower, which is not a big deal for me. Even so, the RF1200/8 is a big lens requiring some preparation from the first time user. This lens will make your 600mm and 500mm f4 lenses seem really tiny in comparison. The photo above highlights this fact, the RF1200/8 in the middle, flanked by the RF 800/11 (in extended shooting mode) on the left, and my Sigma EX 500 f4.5 HSM on the right. Not difficult to be impressed by the size of this RF1200/8, and no wonder it draws attention from those around you.

With all of the above considered, I still found the RF1200/8 actually easy to use handheld and from a monopod or beanbag, depending on where I'm photographing from with the weight not such an issue for me.

Make no mistake, swinging this lens around in a car, even a bigger and roomier SUV like my Cayenne, takes some planning and careful movements not to bump the lens into anything, more so if you are the driver and photographer. The standard Lens Hood supplied with the lens, ET-160 (WIII) adds quite a bit to the overall length, but the optional Canon Lens Short Hood ET-160B is available as an optional extra which will help to make the RF1200/8 more manageable in confirmed spaces like the interior of a car/SUV, albeit at the loss of some flare protection. My test lens came with the original, longer lens hood.

The RF1200/8 offers various switches and rotating adjustment rings. I'll provide a brief description of each as some may not be familiar to all users.

Looking at the switches first, on the left side of the body, when viewing from the lens hood side, the following switch clusters are found:

Main cluster, from the top:

Image stabiliser mode selector switch – 1: full IS all axis, 2: panning mode, 3: same as 2 but only during exposure, used for erratically moving subjects

Image stabiliser switch – IS On/Off

Focus preset button – to set a focus distance , used in conjunction with the playback ring

Focus preset switch – to activate the preset function, with beep mode if required.

Manual focus speed switch – select 1, 2 or 3 where 1 is fastest and 3 is slowest and recommended for fine focussing actions.

On the rotating tripod collar:

Orientation Lock nut with a security slot hidden under the top cap

Strap mount

Switch gear closest to lens mount, from top:

Focus mode switch – select either AF, PF or MF. PF - Power Focus is used in conjunction with the control ring and is ideal for smooth focus transitions when doing videos (the focus preset switch must be set to Off)

Focus distance range selector switch – select between full range, 4.3m to 30m, or 30m to infinity.

From the lens hood side, one will find the following rotating and adjustment rings:

A narrow black strip, not rotating but housing the Lens Function buttons – for AF-stop, or customisable to different settings in the camera menu.

Playback ring – a narrow, white, heavy knurled ring, can turn slightly clockwise or anti-clockwise, with auto return to centre position. Used in conjunction with the preset focus button, or with the power focus setting to aid in smooth focus during video captures.

Focussing / Control ring – a wide, black rubberised adjustment ring. Used as a focus ring with the camera set to MF. Used as a control ring with the function allocated in the camera menu to perform the selected function. Note that some cameras do not support the switching function in the menus.

I would highly recommend the user consults the Owner's Manual for the lens as well as the camera for specifics in setting and operating the switch gear and control rings with related camera settings required.

In the field

First of all, the user needs to consider two very important aspects.

First is the extremely narrow angle of view. This makes it challenging to find a small bird in the viewfinder close to the camera. I was really struggling to achieve a fast subject acquisition at the short distances, even using both eyes open and compensating for the parallax offset. The same applies when trying to find birds in flight. Long distance is easier, but following erratic flight is also a little challenging. I did manage some however, with really nice end results. It will take practise to overcome this narrow field of view issue, and it did get better over time; practice makes perfect, or almost perfect.

Secondly – having a 1200mm lens does not mean you can photograph animals or birds at 100's of meters with pure clarity and sharpness. Atmospheric conditions play a huge role in how the end result will turn out. In sunny South Africa, and everywhere else on the planet where daytime temperatures hits 30◦ Celsius or more on a regular basis in summertime, there is the disadvantage of heat-haze, those shimmering layers of heated air closer to the ground which totally messes up the image sharpness. In wintertime the misty conditions so often experienced, with thick layers of mist affecting visibility from 20m will also affect the image quality and sharpness. Heat haze is less when photographing early morning or late afternoon or over bodies of water, like dams. Dusty conditions likewise also play a role and must be taken into consideration. Bottom line is to choose when you can use the 1200 mm capability at longer ranges. Ideally it is a short to medium range lens for maximum full frame, detailed captures.

This lens is obviously not your everyday portrait lens. I believe it was designed more for the wildlife / birding photographer where it offers the user a distinct advantage over the normal 500/600 mm lenses used by most. That advantage comes in the form of reach, which requires less cropping when photographing small birds at 8-10m from the camera. Consider the example below with the Laughing Dove on the roof of my neighbour's house: I used my EOS R6 and captured the same subject from the same distance with the RF1200/8, and my Sigma 120-300 f2.8 Sport with 2x Extender to provide 600mm and using the EF-RF adapter. The difference in subject size as captured in the frames are very obvious, but really when I cropped the 600mm image to appear to be the same size in-frame as the native 1200mm image, I am left with an image only 2635 x 1956 pixels in size from the original 5472 x 3648 pixels. Or to put it in another way, 5.15 MP remained from the original 20 MP image. You can understand what that will do for the pixel count and detail on the subject.

The lens can also be used for sports where tight framing is required, or where there is some distance involved, cricket comes to mind. Unfortunately there wasn't any sporting events in my area during the time I had the lens in my possession, so couldn't record any experiences in this regard.

@ 1200mm **@600mm**

Another advantage of using a extreme focal length lens in a nature environment, is that the photographer can keep his distance from dangerous game, like buffalo. I have been charged by buffalo before, driving slowly, not stopping at the sighting, through a regularly visited and popular nature reserve with two buffalo seemingly grazing peacefully about 20m from the dirt road I was on, they suddenly turned and charged straight at me. I accelerated and they missed the rear of my SUV by a couple of meters then proceeded to chase after my speeding car for 50m or so, before stopping. That incident leaves me wary of buffalo, and I prefer to keep my distance and not stop close to them. The RF1200/8 served me well in this regard, managing to capture the buffalo from a safe distance of about 40m. It was an early, rather chilly morning drive in the reserve, with clear air conditions. Ideal for longer distance captures with the RF1200/8

Buffalo. Canon EOS R6, RF 1200mm f8 L IS USM. 1/2000, f8, ISO 2000

Arrow-marked Babbler. Canon EOS R6, RF 1200 f8 L IS USM, 1/2500, f8, ISO 5000, FV mode, monopod in belt pouch

Canon EOS R6, RF 1200 f8 L IS USM, 1/2000, f8, ISO 1600, FV mode, handheld (Uncropped)

Keeping one's distance from dangerous game is one advantage of the RF1200/8, another is not disturbing shy and skittish birds. I managed to keep my distance of about 6m from a foraging Arrow-marked Babbler, not disturbing him in his feeding.

The same can be said for nesting birds which should never be disturbed at the nesting site. As discussed above with the Laughing dove example, one of the real advantages of the RF1200/8 is having the capability to capture tightly framed shots, full frame, in full detail and tightly framed not otherwise possible except for extensive cropping. The nest-building Southern-masked Weaver could be captured full frame from a safe 5.5.m distance without me disturbing him at all at the nesting site. Normally at this distance one would have the full bird, the nest, and the branch the nest is hanging from all in the frame.

Photographing birds in flight is possible with this lens, one just has to ensure that the subject is not too close. Longer distance makes it easier to pick up the bird in the viewfinder due to the extremely narrow angle of view, then track and photograph it as it approaches, or does a flypast. It does take a little more effort and concentration than when using a normal 500-600 mm type lens. The Sacred Ibis was captured using Animal detect, wide-area zone, Servo AF. Once I managed to locate the bird in the viewfinder, tracking was relatively easy, and focus easily kept the bird sharp in the full series of six frames.

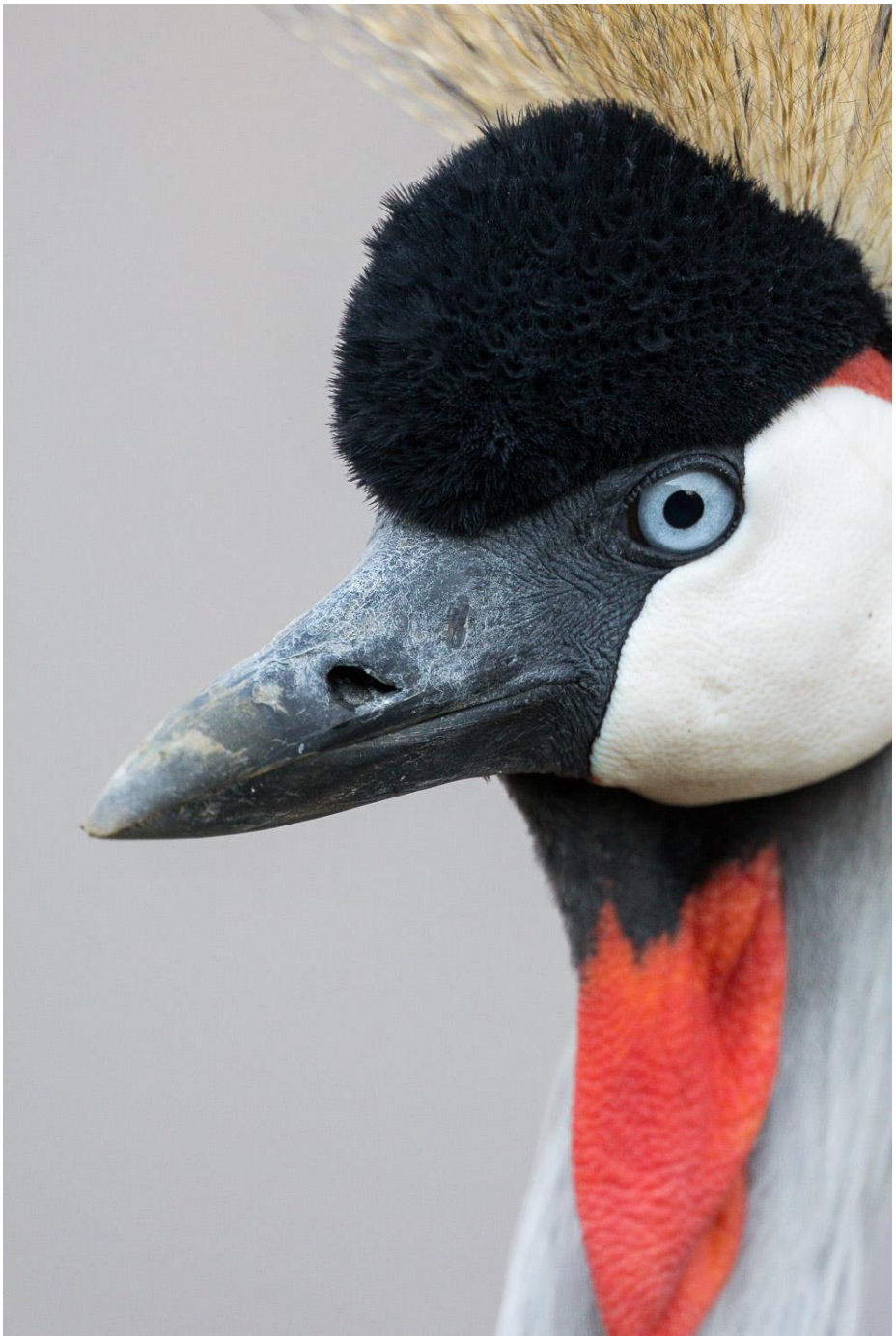
Sacred Ibis. Canon EOS R6, RF 1200 f8 L IS USM, 1/3200, f8, ISO 800

"Once in a blue moon" worked out for me, this time. Whilst I had the lens, the "blue moon" occurred 30-31 August 2023, and I obviously used the opportunity to capture the moon at 1200mm, with the intention to compare the image to ones captures with 500, 600 and 800mm lenses in the past.

Canon EOS R6, RF 1200 f8 L IS USM, 1/3200, f8, ISO 1600, -1.3 exp comp

I was impressed by the quality of the moon image captured. There is nothing like having a lot of pixels on a nearly full frame image, instead of a heavy cropped one.

One is not always able to get really close to birding subjects, even in birding sanctuaries to utilise the minimum focus distance of the lens in use. This invariably leads one to resort to cropping for the real in-your-face tight framed presentation of a birding head-shot. Cropping means less pixels and less detail and less opportunity for large prints. This is the one area where the RF1200/8 shines, even from a 5m distance you canget those absolutely frame filing and detailed images offered by the 120mm focal length and 4.3m minimum focus distance. The Grey Crowned Crane gave me exactly that opportunity, and the high quality optics delivered the goods. Quite a tricky shot to achive; the Crane constantly moves his head, up to look around, down to feed, up left and right, down …..you get the idea. Now combine that with the extremely narrow field of view and the slightest movement of his head and you have nothing in the viewfinder. The search starts all over again, and again. Had quite a few of the “less than ideal” captures, but a few of them did work out nicely.



Grey Crowned Crane, Canon EOS R6, RF 1200 f8 L IS USM, 1/1250, f8, ISO 4000

A final outing with the RF1200/8 I really tried to push my luck and attempted to catch fast moving birds filling the frame. A series of an African Purple Swamphen worked for me in that he flew low over the water, semi-running on it rather speedily, and for once I managed to quickly find him in the viewfinder, handholding the big lens. Framing was rather tight, initially about 15m distance and slightly closing and in two of the four shots of the series I either clipped the wingtips, or the toes. His change in speed also made it rather difficult, starting slower, then speeding up rapidly, difficult to keep him in the frame, almost moving out of it. The end result actually pleased me. The narrow angle of view made this a challenging series, but it all worked out well enough, with the splashing water doing a frame filling effect, linking the main subject to the left-hand side of the frame.

Canon EOS R6, RF1200mm f8 L IS USM, 1/2500, f8, ISO 800, uncropped.

What I liked about the RF1200/8:

Reach offered by 1200mm

Build quality

Optical quality

Fast AF

Weight quite acceptable for the overall bulk, handholding the lens is very possible

Customisable options

What I didn't like:

The price

The size when handling inside a vehicle without a gimbal door mount.

Not much else

Conclusion

I found the Canon RF 1200mm f8 L IS USM a real handful. But it delivers the goods in very sharp optics, very fast AF, 1200mm reach for small stuff close by, or bigger stuff a little further away. The user will have to adapt his technique when using this lens if not used to long telephoto lenses. It can

be a real eye-opener, but I thoroughly enjoyed the privilege I had in spending time with the RF1200/8. It is a very special lens indeed, I would recommend that if you can afford it, buy it. I would if I could.

Many thanks to **Roger Machin at Canon SA** for arranging the lens under review.

Feel free to ask questions, request more specific information etc on this review or any of the other items I have reviewed so far.

Drop me an email: simondp@actionimage.co.za

or

See link : http://actionimage.co.za/equipment_reviews.htm