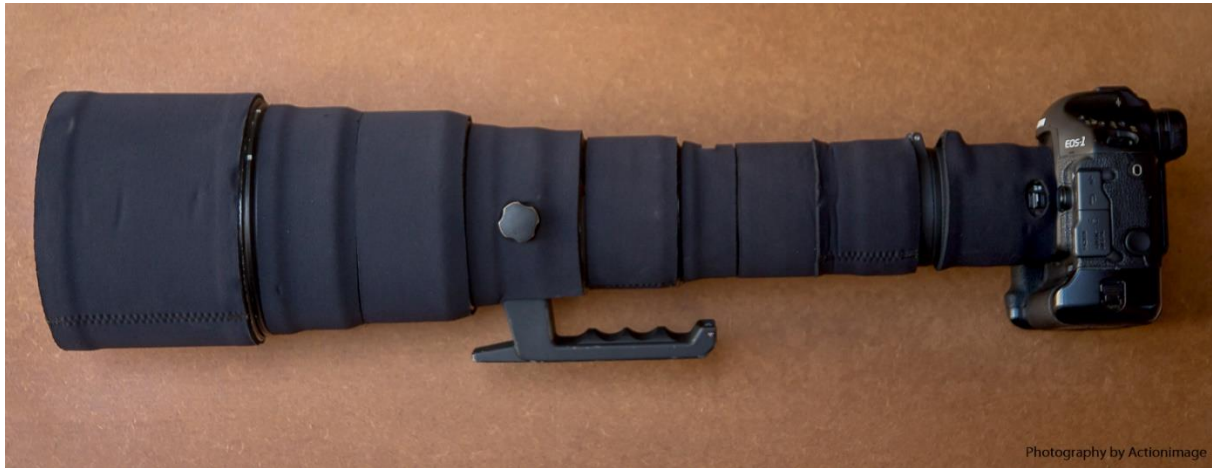


A field review on the Sigma EX 300-800mm F5.6 APO HSM

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(web: www.actionimage.co.za email: simondp@actionimage.co.za)



INTRODUCTION

It is not difficult to understand why this lens is affectionally nicknamed the “Sigmonster”. I’ve been using this lens for about 4 years already and whilst at first wondered about the practicality thereof, have come to really like it and it now forms an important part of my arsenal.

Make no mistake, I honestly think this lens is not for everyone. More so if you’re a petite person and with no-one around to carry it for you; Weighing in at almost 6 kg without a body attached and at more than half a meter long this lens can be quite an intimidating prospect.

The main specifications are listed below:

Dimensions	156.5 x 541.5 mm
Weight	5,87 kg
Filter size	46 mm (drop-in)
Construction	18 Elements in 16 groups
Angle of view	8.2° - 3.1°
Diaphragm blades	9
Minimum focus distance	6 m
Maximum magnification	1 : 6.9
F-stop range	f5.6 – f32
Lens mount	Canon EF (also Nikon F (FX) and Sigma SA bayonet mount)

Accessories	Tripod collar, lens hood, carry bag.
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Basic Specifications and Switches

Fortunately, the lens was designed with internal zoom and internal focus which also has full manual override. This helps to keep the balance of the lens and increases the portability. What you have in your hands is how it will stay irrespective of zoom setting and focus.

The lens hood is of the bayonet type with a knurled lock screw. A very sturdy tripod collar is permanently fitted to the lens. The external finish is of the matt black Zen type, quite durable, although on my copy which has seen some very hard and rough use prior to me taking delivery, the coating was showing signs of wear. Fitting a black Lenscoat ® helped a lot in protecting the lens and hiding the wear it was showing.

Focus mode switch AF/MF: Offers the standard auto focus (AF) and manual focus (MF) modes. An ultrasonic type focus motor that Sigma calls HSM (Hyper-Sonic Motor) for a fast and quiet AF function is standard for this lens. The HSM system does offer full time manual override.

The zoom scale is clearly marked and a distance scale is also provided.

A 46mm drop-in filter holder is fitted to the lens, close to the lens mount and easily reached to manipulate a polarising filter.

There is no Optical Stabiliser fitted to the lens, which is really a pity; a beast of a lens such as this could really do with an OS module. Perhaps the designers thought the lens will be used from a tripod exclusively.

Handling and Performance

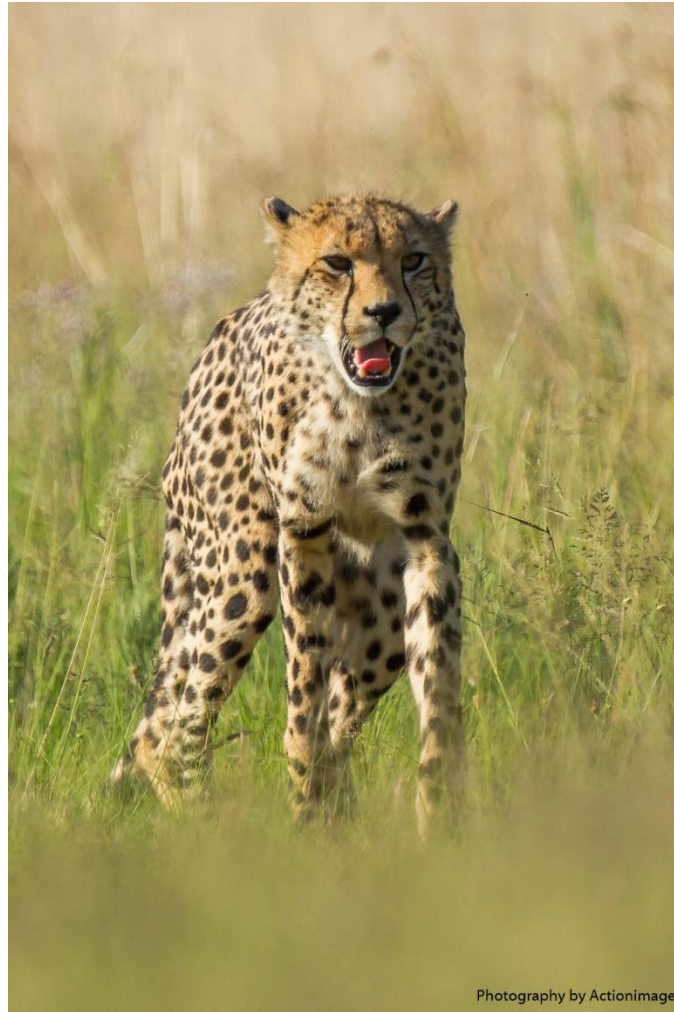
I don't own a tripod. For the first time in my life I thought of getting one, and a very sturdy one at that. But I didn't, instead I started by mounting it to my monopod with a tilt head using a long Arca Swiss plate mounted securely with two bolts to the foot of the tripod collar. From the monopod the balance of the lens is not too bad, slightly front heavy but nothing serious.

Handholding is most definitely not an option; sticking out in front of the camera by more than half a meter and with the weight of this beast you have to rival the Hulk in posture to swing this lens around without any form of support. In really good light which warranted a high shutter speed of 1/2000 or more, I did over the past couple of years grab some quick shots hand holding the lens, mostly because I couldn't deploy a monopod or use it from a bean bag when in my car. Whilst I'm not exactly petite I wouldn't want to hand hold this lens for any length of time on a regular basis.

I checked the calibration of the lens on my Canon EOS 1D MkIV and 1D X bodies and on my older Canon EOS 1D MkII and my niece's Canon EOS 60D; spot-on on all four.

NATURE PHOTOGRAPHY (BIRDING AND WILDLIFE)

I believe this lens was made for wildlife photography. In the wide open spaces we encounter in the nature reserves in Southern Africa it really comes into its own, the zooming power from 300 to 800 mm certainly helps to frame more distant animals and birds tightly in the frame, or reaching those smaller birds or taking nice tight head shots on birds closer to the camera. And when more dangerous game appears in the viewfinder, it is nice to know that you can stay well clear of them whilst capturing pleasing images at 800 mm as I did with the Cheetah pictured below.



Cheetah. Canon EOS 1D MkIV, 800 mm, 1/2500, f5.6, ISO 400, beanbag on door.

The 6 m minimum focus distance means you can capture very small birds with a nice frame filling image, whilst larger birds offer tightly framed head shots.

The image of the Cattle Egret was captured by reversing my SUV a little so that I could get to the 6m minimum distance and achieve sharp focus; this image is uncropped.

Keeping your distance from the subjects doesn't only apply for dangerous animals but also for those who shouldn't be disturbed during an important moment in their life-cycle, like breeding. As was the case with the Black-chested Snake Eagle arriving at the nest with a snack for the chick and female, just visible on top of the tree. Keeping my distance meant I didn't disturb them at their nest, feeding the chick and freely coming and going.

Taking photos of static or slow-moving animals are handled easily enough provided you have stable support such as a tripod, monopod or bean bag. I use the latter two, the bean bag on the door of my SUV, the monopod when on foot or in a hide if the layout allows for that. The monopod is usually in a belt pouch on my waist which makes for easier movement when following animals or birds and makes panning shots easier. Very seldom will I with nature photography put the monopod on the ground.



Photography by Actionimage

Cattle Egret. Canon EOS 1D MkIV, 800 mm (uncropped), 1/5000, f5.6, ISO 800, beanbag on door.



Photography by Actionimage

Black-chested Snake Eagle. Canon EOS 1D X, 800 mm, 1/4000, f5.6, ISO 400, beanbag on door.

The zoom range is handy when you are in a hide and an Elephant passes by really close to you, just over 6m away means a quick zoom out and you can still make something of the moment by concentrating on his eye. Had I been using a prime telephoto lens this image would have been impossible to capture.



The eye of the Elephant. Canon EOS 1D MkIV, 336mm (uncropped), 1/125, f8, ISO 1000, resting on windowsill of hide.

Panning shots on birds, even faster ones like the Pied Avocet below can be done provided they are not too close, and you have time to let the lens lock on and start tracking them. The frame is one of 6 which I managed on this fly-by, five of those came out sharp using the monopod in a belt pouch.

Don't expect an instant lock-on from the lens. Whilst auto focus is quiet and relatively fast, this lens doesn't snap into focus instantly, it takes a few tenths of a second to focus and achieve lock-on. It is still fast enough for most uses though. At times I've experienced it focussing all the way to infinity and then back until it catches a subject in the frame. To combat this, I tend to set the focus close to where I would expect to find my subject, which usually resulted in a faster pick-up and lock on. Note this happens irrespective of the body used, and more frequently in lower light conditions.



Photography by Actionimage

Pied Avocet. Canon EOS 1D MkIV, 687 mm, 1/2000, f8, ISO 800, monopod in belt pouch

MOTORSPORT



Photography by Actionimage

VW Cup. Canon EOS 1D MkII, 610 mm, 1/250, f32, ISO 400, monopod in belt pouch

I used the lens at a couple of motorsport events mounted on my monopod and using the belt pouch (see pic below) purely out of curiosity to see how it will fare with tracking fast and slower cars and motorbikes. What saved the lens was the fact that the longer zoom range and distance to subjects meant that the in-frame speed of the approaching cars are relatively slow which made it easier to track and focus on them. Faster cars closer to the lens, 300-400 mm were not handled as efficiently as those in the 500-800 mm zoom range. The in-frame speed of cars approaching at close distance resulted in a lower keeper rate, around 50% of images, where the 600-800 mm zoom could keep that ratio to about 80%. Compared to my Sigma 120-300 f2.8 lenses (OS and Sport) which will hit 95% on close range shots, and 80-90% when used with 2x Extender at 600mm.

Panning the cars and motorbikes generally yielded good results, provided I did my part by performing a smooth pan at slower shutter speeds, essential in achieving good results with any camera and lens combo. The bulk of the lens made panning not as easy as with a shorter, more compact lens, but nevertheless I managed to capture some nice shots.

Overall, when focussing could keep up, the results with motorsport were very good; sharp crisp images with nice bouquet and colours, as I expected it would be. For sure not my go-to lens for fast-paced action type photography but can be used in a pinch.



Yours truly with the Sigmonster in my belt pouch. The tightly framed superbike pictured below was captured at this time. Easy to compare with the Canon EF 300 f2.8 held by fellow tog Neil Phillipson. (Photo taken by a friend, cannot recall who exactly, sorry friend)



Photography by Actionimage

Superbike. Canon EOS 1D MkII, 610 mm (uncropped), 1/320, f16, ISO 400, monopod in belt pouch



Photography by Actionimage

Classic racing - Canon EOS 1D MkIV, 572 mm (uncropped), 1/320, f10, ISO 200, monopod in belt pouch



Extreme Supercars – Tandem Ferrari's. Canon EOS 1D MkII, 500 mm (uncropped), 1/640, f9, ISO 200, monopod in belt pouch

CRICKET

Earlier in this review I made the statement that this lens was designed for the wildlife photographer. I would like to amend that – it was also designed for the Cricket photographer. I really like using mine to cover cricket matches, the long focal length easily helps to reach the batsmen in the middle of the pitch for tight framed shots, or zoom out a little without moving to include more of the scene such as including the wicket keeper standing up to the stumps.

Zooming out was exactly what I did to wait for that special moment when top bowler Dale Steyn made the South African record his own, taking wicket number 422 to pass Shaun Pollock's 10 year old record during the first session on day 1 of the Boxing Day test at Centurion, SA vs Pakistan, 26 December 2018.

Alternating between different ends of the pitch from the same position is easy with the Sigmonster, a slight change in zoom setting to accommodate both ends of the wicket is all that's required for tight framed shots of the batsmen. Reach at 800mm across the pitch for head-on shots of the bowlers is no effort using this lens.

Picking up the bowler running straight towards the camera is not a problem for the relatively slower AF of the lens, it will easily pick up, lock-on and track the running bowler. The sequence of Vernon Philander below are two shots from a four-frame sequence, all of which turned out sharply focused. Overall, I am really impressed by the performance of the lens when covering cricket. One however has to take note of the fact that f5.6 is the fastest aperture available, and in lower light conditions such as playing under stadium lights you will need to set higher ISO settings, in the range of 3200 to 4000 to ensure a fast enough shutter speed to freeze the action. Not all camera bodies will deliver acceptable and controllable digital noise levels at such high ISO settings.



Fakhar Zaman (Pakistan) caught by Dean Elgar from the bowling of Dale Steyn, which made Steyn the new SA test wicket record holder. Canon EOS 1D MkIV, 336 mm, 1/1600, f7.1, ISO 400, monopod on ground



Proteas batsman Dean Elgar in action. Canon EOS 1D MkIV, 610 mm, 1/1250, f6.3, ISO 800, monopod on ground



Proteas fast bowler Vernon Philander in action. Canon EOS 1D MkIV, 800 mm, 1/2000, f6.3, ISO 400, monopod on ground

Conclusion

The Sigma EX 300-800 f5.6 APO HSM is a strong performer for nature photography. This lens is aimed at the professional or serious enthusiast photographer who requires extra reach from his lens and a fast f5.6 (for the focal length) aperture.

For me the main lens when covering cricket.

Pro's

Zoom range
Optical quality
800 f5,6
Build quality

Con's

Slower AF than long, fast prime lenses
No OS
Heavy and bulky
Heavy and bulky

If you can handle the bulk of the Sigmonster you will not be disappointed with the results, used within its limitations and on the correct body under certain conditions. Dread the day this lens will have to go back to Sigma SA; I've learned to love it and use it.

Many thanks to TudorTech (011 803 2226) for providing the lens on review.