

Close-up lenses & accessories

Having used close-up lens attachments, macro tubes, and macro lenses over the years, I can say with some certainty that, if I shot close-up every day for the rest of my life, magnifying small insects, frogs, reptiles and flowers, I would not even begin to run out of subjects. If you want more adventure, there is a whole other world beneath the sea that offers three lifetimes of challenge to a close-up photographer.

There are a number of different ways to tool up for macro work and, depending on your price range, each has a specific benefit. I have discussed them on these pages. For more information on the technique of close-up work have a look at Chapter 5, *Developing Technique and Style*.

Naturally enough, the greater array of close-up attachments, lenses and extension rings apply only to the SLR interchangeable lenses systems. Compact cameras, which are restricted to rangefinder viewing, do not have threads for the attachment of close-up attachments, especially on zoom lenses, but it is possible to use close-up filters attached to the camera body or to a tripod. Digital cameras that have the LCD viewing system may have adapters that enable close-up, even wide-angle and telephoto, attachments to be fitted.

Macro and macro photography are terms that may be used to mean the same thing: extreme close-up photography. Some define a macro lens as magnifying to a ratio of 1:1 (where the size of the subject matches the size of the image on the film), and a micro lens as enlarging to greater than 1:1. However, some lens manufacturers use "macro" where others use "micro".



Auto extension rings/tubes

A set of extension rings, or tubes, is a good way to start close-up photography. They are light and therefore portable for fieldwork and are an ideal choice if you do not have a macro lens. I use extension rings with a long lens – say, a 300-500 mm – for photographing shy reptiles from an increased working distance. You will need to check before purchase, but modern SLR extension rings do enable you to retain automatic diaphragm and metering coupling when attached.

Benefit: The primary benefit of extension rings/tubes is that they provide a low price alternative to buying a macro lens for close-up work. They are a real advantage when you wish to focus closer than your telephoto lens will allow.



Bellows units

Bellows units are for macro photography. Their primary benefit is that they enable you to magnify your subject considerably more than is possible by any other means. A bellows unit attached to your SLR and a standard 50 mm lens will take you close enough to fill the frame with the eye of a needle; that is, around 8x magnification. A twist of the knob enables you to vary the lens extension at will, producing frame-filling photographs of minute subjects. Just imagine what you could achieve photographing nature with a unit like this. If you are looking for something that is out of the ordinary, bellows photography could be just the one for you.



Close-up attachment lenses

Close-up attachment, or accessory, lenses, used mostly for macro photography, can be purchased for most lenses as they are little more than a filter with a magnifying glass. Do not expect that the results will be as crisp as those images shot with lenses designed specifically for close-ups. The attachment lenses are better used with longer focal length lenses to enable even greater magnification. Lenses between 80 mm and 150 mm would be perfect. Lenses can be used in combination.

Benefits: Highly portable, easy to use and low entry low cost.



A Cairns Birdwing Butterfly in flight [200 mm macro, balanced fill-in flash].



A tiny beetle makes a meal of a lily petal [105 mm macro].

Macro lenses

Even though many modern lenses have the ability to focus close up, you will never get the magnification or the optical quality of a macro lens that has been specifically designed for the purpose of macro photography. If you are interested in nature, with a passion for photographing frogs, reptiles, flowers or insects, you have three primary choices: 60, 105 or 200 mm macros. These focal lengths may vary slightly depending on the brand. As you are likely to be using electronic flash (see page 66) with your macro lens, I recommend that you purchase the longest focal length of the highest quality you can afford. If you are unsure about how often you will use it, I would suggest starting with either extension rings/tubes or close-up attachment lenses until you are sure that you can justify your purchase. If you wish to focus even closer than your dedicated macro lenses will allow, you can still use them with extension rings/tubes which increase magnification even further. Some manufacturers also supply reverse lens couplers, which enable you to reverse your lens, having the effect of dramatically increasing magnification.



105 mm macro lens

Nikon 70-180 mm macro zoom lens



60 mm macro lens

Nikon 200 mm macro lens



How is your back?

If you are planning to do a lot of close-up photography and your back is just not what it used to be, you could consider a macro lens with a long focal length, something around 200 mm. Apart from giving a much softer background (see page 136), you will find that, in comparison with a shorter focal length (55-65 mm), the pressure on your back is considerably less. The photographers at work shown here are both photographing a flower of approximately the same size. The shot at left shows a 200 mm macro in action; the photographer at right is using a 55 mm. I will let the images speak for themselves.

