

tools OF THE trade

The new Canon 500-mm telephoto lens

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WHEN I REVOLUTIONISED MY LIFE by moving to digital photography in 2004, I soon realised that lens quality was everything. Within a year, I upgraded from a Canon 300-mm F4 image-stabilised (IS) lens to a 500-mm F4 IS lens for what, at the time, seemed like a fairly exorbitant amount of money. I rationalised the purchase by thinking that while camera bodies evolve rapidly, a good lens will last a lifetime. And it certainly has served me well. Yet seven years later I found myself spending an outrageous amount for an update to the same lens. This review explains my decision, and reports my initial thoughts on my new acquisition.

Canon's EF500-mm f/4L IS II USM lens, to give it its official title, looks pretty similar to its predecessor. The technical geeks will tell you that the optics have been completely redesigned and improved by enhanced coatings, but for the user relatively little has changed. A power focus mode has been added, primarily for shooting videos, and fluorine coatings have been applied

to the end lenses to facilitate cleaning. The new lens cap is much more practical, and an attachment slot has been added for a security wire to stop someone running off with your investment (assuming you want to leave it anywhere for an extended period). The IS system has been enhanced to save the equivalent of four stops of shutter speed (up from two on the original

model), and a third IS mode has been added. Designed for shooting irregularly moving subjects, it only activates as the shutter is released, making it easier to track objects in motion. Other reviewers have found this innovation useful, and I have left my camera in this mode since it produced great results in my first session in the field.

But if those were the only changes, I'd still be using my old 500-mm lens. What really sells the new model is its reduced weight. After reading all the rave reviews, I went to inspect the lens at my local dealer. All I had to do was pick it up and I knew I was in trouble. The use of magnesium alloy and titanium for the lens body has shaved almost 700 grams (roughly 20 per cent) off the mass of the old lens. And although this might not sound like a lot, it makes a huge difference. I'd become used to lugging around

more than five kilograms of camera and lens, and reducing it to just over four kilograms makes a noticeable improvement. This is a lens you can hand hold comfortably, which makes photographing birds in flight much easier. The closer focusing distance (down from 4.5 to 3.7 metres) is another bonus.

The final selling point isn't immediately obvious, but it's probably the most powerful of all: image quality. It's difficult to believe, but the new lens really does deliver a higher proportion of crisp images than its predecessor. This is particularly evident when using the lens in conjunction with a 1.4 teleconverter. In the past I used a converter sparingly, because the proportion of acceptable images dropped off markedly when using one. However, the new lens coupled with the Mark III teleconverter produces sharp images almost every time. It has given me fresh incentive to go out and re-take images of all my local birds!

Other than the price, there's little to quibble about with the new lens. Previously, all the controls were placed together roughly a third of the way down the left side of the lens. In the new model, the focus mode and distance range switches have been moved close to the lens mount, which I find more awkward to access. I tend to change the focus range quite a bit, so this will take some getting used to. Perhaps my biggest concern pertains to robustness. The old 500-mm lens had a reassuring solidity – it felt as though you could use it as an offensive weapon and still take great shots afterwards. Canon is at pains to assure users that the new model is equally strong, and indeed boasts better dust- and drip-proofing. However, only time will tell whether it is as bulletproof as its predecessor.

The update to Canon's 500-mm lens was a long time coming to market. Announced in 2010, it was



IT LIVES UP TO THE HYPE ... IT REALLY IS SIGNIFICANTLY BETTER THAN THE OLD MODEL

BROWN-THROATED MARTIN

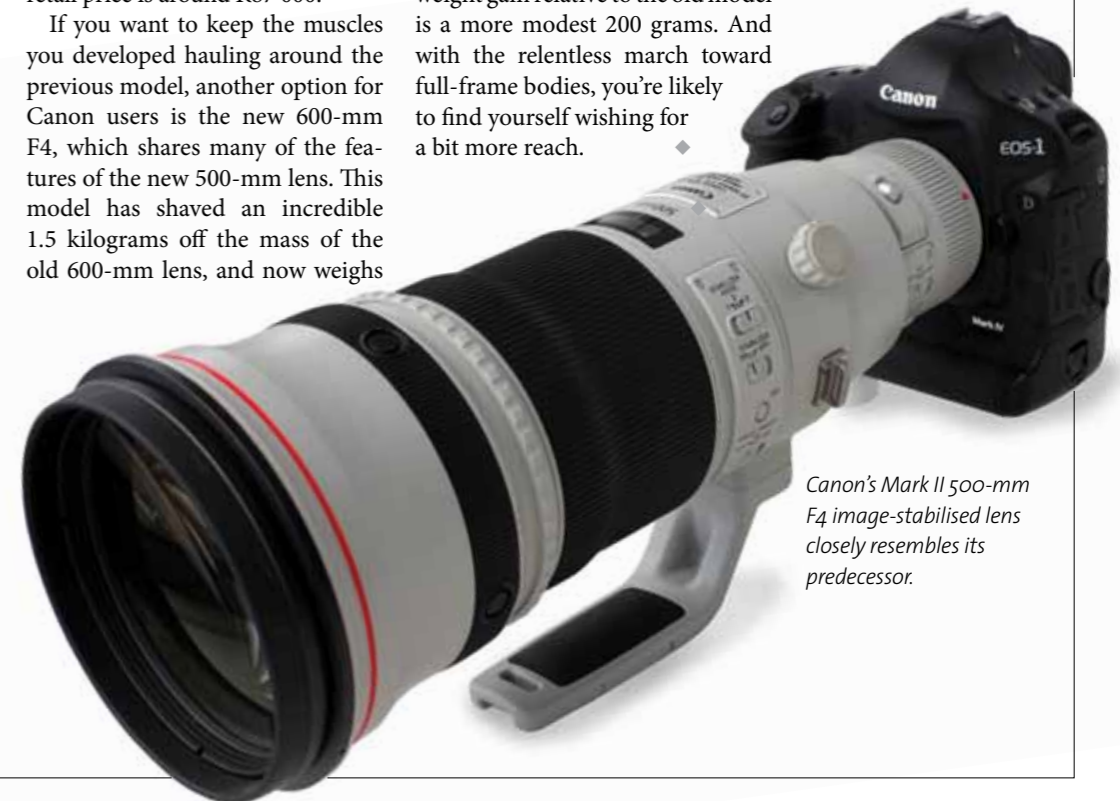
only released in mid-2012, but the wait has been worthwhile. It lives up to the hype; hard as it may be to believe, it really is significantly better than the old model. The bad news is that it's going to cost you a lot to add one to your arsenal: the current retail price is around R87 000.

If you want to keep the muscles you developed hauling around the previous model, another option for Canon users is the new 600-mm F4, which shares many of the features of the new 500-mm lens. This model has shaved an incredible 1.5 kilograms off the mass of the old 600-mm lens, and now weighs

only 50 grams more than the old 500-mm F4 lens. But the cost is even more eye-watering, at around R110 000.

Another popular option is the new 300-mm F2.8 lens, which is somewhat less expensive, but the weight gain relative to the old model is a more modest 200 grams. And with the relentless march toward full-frame bodies, you're likely to find yourself wishing for a bit more reach.

When photographing birds in flight you really appreciate the reduced weight of the new 500-mm lens.



Canon's Mark II 500-mm F4 image-stabilised lens closely resembles its predecessor.