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# Ultra Compact Super Tele

Hands-on with Nikon's AF-S NIKKOR 500mm f/5.6E PF ED VR

Text & Photography By Josh Miller

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As a wildlife and landscape photographer who likes to hike, when Nikon announced its new AF-S NIKKOR 500mm f/5.6E PF ED VR lens, I was immediately excited by the idea of having a long lens that was far more portable than my current 500mm f/4. Perhaps it could actually replace my 500mm f/4 entirely and lighten my pack substantially, so I jumped at the chance to review the lens during my recent eagle photography workshop in Alaska. Obviously my standards would be pretty high if this lens was going to replace my trusty 500mm f/4. The lens arrived early enough that I also had a chance to take it out and photograph some bears around Lake Tahoe in California the week before I left for Alaska.

Anyone can geek out and look up the specs of the new lens online; I was far more interested in how it handled in real-world situations I come across regularly in the field. The first thing I noticed was just how light and well balanced it was on my Nikon D5 and D850. It felt more like a 70-200mm f/2.8 than a 500mm. I found myself slinging it over my shoulder and forgetting it was a 500mm. It took a little getting used to because more than once I pulled it up as an eagle flew by and was expecting it to be my usual over-the-shoulder 70-200mm. Because it was so lightweight, I was able to handhold the lens and track flying eagles far easier than with my larger, tripod-mounted 500mm. One of my clients actually found he liked shooting the new 500mm f/5.6 more than his 600mm f/4 because his hit/tracking rate was so much higher.

After shooting for 10 days in rain and snow, the lens had no issues. In fact, I felt just as confident being out in the rain getting soaked as I do with my 500mm f/4. While the hood tends to be a bit troublesome mounting in reverse for travel, it is still far better than the silly screw-knob version of the hood of its big brother.

In good light, I found the autofocus performance to be on par with its larger sibling as it consistently nailed focus while mounted to my D5. As expected, I did find it was a little slower to acquire focus when it got really dark due to less light reaching the AF system, but it was still plenty fast for flying eagles even against complicated backgrounds. When I borrowed an AF-S NIKKOR 200-500mm f/5.6E ED VR from a client for a couple hours as a comparison, I found the fixed 500mm f/5.6E PF ED VR was clearly faster at acquiring initial focus and kept up with moving subjects better than the zoom. I also found the 500mm f/5.6E PF ED VR to be way easier to handhold, as it's far better balanced both on the tripod and in the hand than the 200-500mm. The new 500mm is a way more professional-level lens in terms of build quality as well. I was a bit worried when it started to snow and I was using the borrowed zoom, but I didn't even think about it when shooting the 500mm f/5.6E PF ED VR.

In terms of sharpness differences

between the 500mm f/4 and the 500mm f/5.6E PF ED VR, it was hard to tell much of a difference. I am sure with a bunch of Google searching you can find lab tests that show the f/4 version is better (it ought to be for the price), but working in the field I couldn't see any real noticeable difference. A few times it almost seemed like the new f/5.6 was actually sharper than my f/4 when stopped down to f/5.6, but it wasn't enough to be conclusive.

The \$6,700 question for me was, "Can the 500mm f/5.6E PF ED VR replace my trusty f/4 to save me some money and a lot of weight?" While the weight saving is huge, every time the light started to fall, I found myself reaching for the f/4 lens because of the extra stop of light. Yes, with the high ISO abilities of today's modern cameras, this is less of an issue, but I still found that extra stop of light to be a big help. There were several great shooting situations where I found myself at ISO 6400 at f/4, where I would have been at 12800 with the f/5.6 lens. If the goal is to shoot as much as possible, even when the light fades, that extra stop of light was sure nice. That being said, southeast Alaska tends to be overcast or rainy or snowy, so I was shooting in low light conditions most of my trip.

Related to this, the other issue I found with the 500mm f/5.6E PF ED VR was that once I put a 1.4x teleconverter on the lens, I was already at f/8, and typically I like to also stop down a bit with a converter. Thus, I was shooting between f/8 to f/11, which made the lens basically useless for birds-in-flight shots in low light, though I got some nice perched images at slower shutter speeds with the mirror locked up. If you plan to use a teleconverter much with your long lens, this is a big consideration. You're probably just better off doing a bigger crop in postproduction and skipping the converter entirely.

The real question is, now that Nikon has three different ways to reach 500mm, which one is the right choice for you? It may not be as obvious as you think. For me, while I was hoping the 500mm f/5.6E PF ED VR would replace my 500mm f/4 to lighten my pack and put some money back in the bank, I found for the situations I typically shoot, I just couldn't give up the

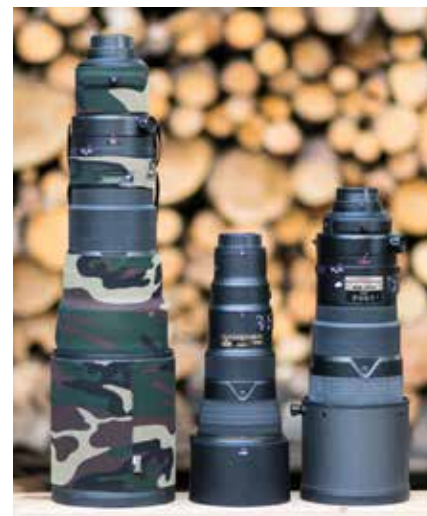


extra stop of light. However, aside from the stop of light, I didn't find any reason why I'd ever want to carry the heavier lens again. The 500mm f/5.6E PF ED VR is just as sharp and so much easier to use in the field, and has great auto-focus in everything but the lowest light situations. I rarely use teleconverters anymore because cropping tends to be a better choice, so that didn't bother me much, either. Comparing it with the 200-500mm, I found the 500mm f/5.6 the clear winner, but for the cost difference it perhaps isn't so cut and dry.

Obviously, cost comes into play in the decision process. If you can afford the AF-S NIKKOR 500mm f/4E FL ED VR, and don't mind suffering its burden as you travel, it remains the gold standard. The harder decision is between the AF-S NIKKOR 200-500mm f/5.6E ED VR and the AF-S NIKKOR 500mm f/5.6E PF ED VR. One is clearly better at 500mm, but

the other is one-third the cost, nearly as good and offers the flexibility of a zoom. While I loved the 500mm f/5.6 far more than the 200-500mm for shooting wildlife, I'd say that for many people the money saved by buying the 200-500mm might actually be a better choice if convenience and price are your primary concerns.

While most of my lenses are zooms, I personally don't mind giving up the zoom for a fixed long lens because 90 percent of the time I'd be shooting the 200-500mm at 500mm anyway, and I always wish I had more reach, not less. Oh, decisions, decisions. Clearly, Nikon has produced a real winner with the AF-S NIKKOR 500mm f/5.6E PF ED VR, and it will likely be a very popular lens for super-tele work, but really Nikon produced three winners and you can't go wrong with any of them. Now I just have to justify owning two 500mm lenses. **OP**



Compare the size difference between the AF-S NIKKOR 500mm f/4E FL ED VR (left), the new AF-S NIKKOR 500mm f/5.6E PF ED VR (middle) and an older-generation AF-S NIKKOR 300mm f/2.8G ED.

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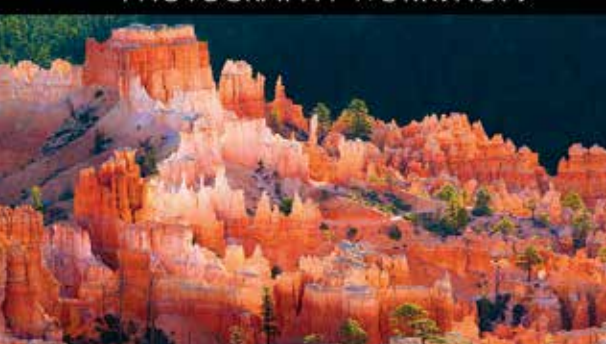
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